Washington Post 2000 "Car-Free Nation" Interview with Jan Lundberg - Relevant Today

Contributed by David Wallis
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We can sometimes best perceive our present and future by comparing our perception during the past. Here's the Washington Post's reluctant interview of an activist, conducted nearly nine years ago.
To avoid contaminating its editorial or news sections, the newspaper stuck this free-lance interview and Alliance for a Paving Moratorium photo into the Travel section. Photo by Auto-Free Times volunteer Rob Ammerman. -ed.

THE WORD ON . . .

A Car-Free Nation

Anti-auto activist Jan Lundberg is the founder of the Alliance for a Paving Moratorium. David Wallis spoke with Lundberg from his office in Arcata, Calif.

[FINAL Edition]

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Q: For many years you worked as an oil industry analyst. At what moment did you have an epiphany?

A: In late 1987, I was doing a market survey at a Baltimore gas station. I looked up at the huge gas station sign and the prices and said to myself, "I hate this . . ."

Q: Protesters recently closed down gas stations across Europe. Are you troubled by the fact that they demand lower petrol prices rather than alternative fuel sources?

A: Both trouble me. Switching fuels does not solve the problem of petroleum dependence. There's no handy substitute to keep the massive fleet of motor vehicles running on the planet because oil is necessary for the tires, the plastic, the asphalt, the manufacturing of vehicles. . . . Most of the air pollution associated with motor vehicles is not out of the tailpipe, but from the mining and manufacturing of vehicles. It is good to reduce emissions, but other issues remain: Would you like to get run over by a perfectly clean- emitting vehicle? Would you like to sit in traffic for hours in cars running on different fuels?

Q: A writer in the magazine that you edit, Auto-Free Times, argues that people living on lightly trafficked streets are "more friendly, pleasant and cooperative." Can you back that up?

A: A study by the University of California found that the less traffic there is, the more people you know and the more friends you have.

Q: Does that ring true?

A: Definitely. I haven't owned a car since 1989. Speeding is an illusion that you are saving time; the more machines that you surround yourself with, the less time you have to do what you want to do: think, rest, exercise and smell the roses.

Q: Okay, President-elect Lundberg, describe your first 100 days in office.

A: Promote car-free city centers like they have in Europe. Wean the people off petroleum as soon as possible to the extent we can. . . . Stop road construction and maintain the ones we have. . . . Other initiatives include de-paving much of our city landscape for parks and food gardens, and reinvesting money from road-building into renewable-energy rail systems, more bikeways and establishing sail[boat]-transport networks to replace ferries.

Q: If you had your way, how would we travel in the year 2050?

A: Walking, canoes, sailboats, bikes and animal power once again. If we're lucky, we'll have infrastructure set up for trains powered by wind and solar energy.

Q: Your prescriptions would likely reduce travel. Are you concerned about the loss of cross-cultural understanding that result from travel?

A: Yes, but what we have now is a monoculture of corporate franchises around the world; we're losing cultural diversity because of so much jet travel and communication. There would be more cultural richness with local-based trade and transport. Remember what Charles Kuralt said? "Now, with the interstate highway system, you can go from one end of the country to the other without seeing anything."

Q: What would you do with all the obsolete SUVs?

A: Monuments to remind us of profligate consumption of the petroleum age.

Q: Do you admit that in a culture obsessed with automobiles your movement might face a bumpy road?

A: Yes, it is an uphill climb to point out that we are running out of oil and that cars are deadly and that sprawl is destroying the farmland and wildlife habitat. People are generally brainwashed to what they are told by institutions like government and the workplace.

Q: Don't forget the media.

A: Advertising convinces folks that possessing items of wealth gives them some sort of psychological security; they think that they can't get a girlfriend, or wife, or husband unless they seem respectable and drive a shiny new car.

Q: Ever miss a drive down a winding country road?

A: I don't miss driving because I feel nervous in a car. If you haven't been doing it in a long time, the speed of driving is nerve- wracking. You're not used to taking your life in your hands. When I'm in a car . . . I start to break out in a sweat.

--David Wallis

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