

Cyclists and Environmentalists: Friends or Foes?

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Bicycles are perfect vehicles for urban commutes, they produce no noise and no air pollution and they occupy little space. As transportation is now emerging as one of the most serious sources of greenhouse emissions and it devastates more and more land, the bicycle will be of more and more interest to environmentalists.

The sustainable society - the ultimate goal of environmentalist - is the cycling society, as the bicycle is one of very few man-made devices that expand human capabilities with no or very little environmental impact. In this sense, the cyclists advocates and environmental advocates are very obvious allies.

Yet in practice, there may be problems in co-operation. When we think of cities and the urban cycling advocacy, very often we may come across a situation when a cycleway or other cycling facility is constructed at the expense of greenery or pedestrian areas. This may cause disagreements and conflicts between cycling advocates and environmentalists. Good practise here would be probably traffic calming or re-allocation of existing road space so that more safe space is allocated for soft mobility at no environmental cost. This would improve conditions for cycling and at the same time could discourage some people from driving a car - not to mention significantly lower costs.

Yet in my opinion, most urban cyclists are "environment-friendly" by default, even if they ride on cycleways that were built on former greenery. A more serious problem may arise with mass recreational cycling. This often involves vast amounts of mountain bikes with knobbly tires in protected wilderness areas. While some will argue that recreational cycling does promote "cycling in general", and in this way contributes to a more sustainable transport behaviour patterns, other point out that often mountain bicycles destroy vulnerable soils on mountain slopes and may disturb wild animals.

For instance, cycling is banned in most of the Tatra Mountains National Park in Poland - just to protect vulnerable soils and wild animals that may be scared by silent and fast - moving vehicles (paragliding is forbidden there for the same reason in parts of the Tatra National Park, too). There has been an ongoing conflict between recreational cyclists (non-organised) and the National Park.

One point is worth noticing when we talk about recreational cycling: very often it is associated with the car culture and excessive car use in wilderness areas, where bicycles are transported on the car roof. A good cause for co-operation between environmentalists and recreational cyclists

would be to provide train services (or buses) to carry bicycles to such areas or to construct safe cycle routes that would allow "weekend cyclists" spend weekends on their bicycles without the need to use a car. A good practice would also involve creating bicycle trails that avoid the most precious areas.

One conclusion may be drawn here: if the bicycle becomes just one more item to be purchased and enjoyed by the consumerist society, it will most likely lead to a conflict between environmentalists and (at least some) cyclists. If it is used wisely, and helps the modal shift from cars to less polluting transport modes, cyclists and environmentalists should become allies and join efforts to give the bicycle a proper place it deserves in our culture, mentality and policies.