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FOLDING BICYCLES - ARE THEY WORTH FIGHTING FOR?

ADVANTAGES

For the user:

- theft prevention
- intermodality with other vehicles
- weather independence
- reduced storage space

For cycling activism:

- major cycling drawbacks eliminated (see above)
- converting car-drivers and public transport users to cycling (partially)
- enlarging market for normal bicycles too
- in less cycle-friendly countries, breaking the vicious circle: the authorities saying there is no need for facilities because noone cycles, and since there are no facilities, noone cycles

DISADVANTAGES

For the user:

- weight (too heavy)
- price (too high)
- quality (unstable, slow, except the best ones)

For cycling activism:

- intermodal cycling infrastructure (parkings, transporting facilities) maybe neglected by the authorities because of the existence of folding bicycles
- if pushed to decide about their increasing number, transport companies may even ban folding bicycles from their vehicles because of lack of space

Balance (according to me): positive

We can convince authorities that folding bicycles will not replace normal bicycles, that the currently claimed facilities are still necessary. Transport companies will actually gain customers through folders and will therefore allow them and offer facilities.

Proposed action:

Technical improvement

- Scientific research seeking new techniques for riding efficiency, for faster folding, as well as for the reduction of weight and folded size should be officially encouraged or even sponsored from public funds.

Improving availability

- Mass-production and wide distribution of folders should be organized, if necessary through government measures. Currently there are not enough folders produced, and they are way too expensive to become truly attractive to masses.

Informing people

- Carefully planned promotional campaigns should be organised to make people aware of the advantages of folding bicycles and to allow test-riding them.

Folding bicycle usage Internet survey*

Quick analysis of 112 responses

Folding bicycles make cycling possible for people who do not cycle

7 people stated they took up cycling for the first time or again after a long time thanks to the folding bicycle. 6 of them have become regular cyclists with it. All of them are coming from places where cycling is not very developed (United States, United Kingdom, Hamburg in Germany).

Intermodality fully exploited

106 people claimed to transport their folding bicycles on other vehicles.

Mass usage of folding bicycles is a recent phenomenon

56 out of the 112 people started to use a folding bicycle in 1997 or later.

Target group for promotion: car drivers

50 people have reported having used a car on the itineraries where they cycle today.

A lack of general knowledge

Only 5 people pretend to have first heard about folding bicycles in the mass media (TV, newspapers). All the others either saw one in the street or at a friend's, or heard about them in cycling activist groups, or read something in a specialized cycling magazine. We need to get the information through to average people.

You have to try it to believe it

59 people claim that they would not have bought their folding bicycle if they had not had the chance to try them out first. People are usually unaware and have misconceptions about the riding quality of a folding bicycle.

Prices are too high

At the moment of purchase, 52 people found the price of their bicycle too high, 57 reasonable, and only 1 found it cheap. On the contrary, folding bicycles should be easily accessible, cheap items, so that the price does not represent a drawback for so many people.

The bicycles are too heavy

Only 7 people considered their bicycles as easily carryable hand luggage that does not bother them at all. 81 do carry it but they find that uncomfortable. 20 found it too heavy to carry so that they use the folded mode only in order to put the bicycle into another vehicle or to store it at home. Whereas folding bicycles should be light enough to be carried around as a handbag.

* The survey was carried out on the Internet from May 1 till June 8 2000. The questionnaire can be read at the address <http://www.protrade.matav.hu/folders.htm> The survey was announced on major folding bicycle user discussion lists on the Internet (Brompton, Moulton) and to the European Cyclists' Federation's member organizations. 112 respondents have filled out the complete version of the questionnaire, and 14 the short version. These latter have not been taken into account in the calculation of the current results, but they will be later in the framework of a more detailed analysis.