

The Daily Gleaner

Green Matters for the Daily Gleaner

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By Brian McCain

The End of Speed

Oil prices are back over \$100 a barrel. Gas prices are back in territory we haven't seen in a few years, and the recent increases certainly aren't going to be the end of it.

Right now, we live in a globalized society, fuelled by cheap energy and speed. We live in a world where it makes economic sense to grow trees here, ship the wood to China to be manufactured, and then shipped back to us as a finished product.

While this practice has never been environmentally sustainable, it is going to start becoming economically unsustainable. Many people talk about how the result of energy price increases is that the world is going to get a lot more local – and I think that is true; however, I also think it means that the world is going to get a whole lot slower.

The reason I believe this comes down to some simple physics.

The energy needed to transport goods depends on three main things: the mass of the goods, the distance being transported, and the speed at which they are moved. Reducing any of these three things can reduce the amount of energy we use.

So rising energy prices means it is going to get really expensive to ship heavy things, at high speeds, over long distances. And while our infrastructure is currently setup so that we are incredibly reliant on global trade, not everything we move needs to get there fast.

Slowing down our material goods transportation is likely to emphasize even more that we live in a world where much of our global exchange no longer needs to happen through traditional transportation channels. Our data networks will continue to allow us to exchange information and services globally on a seemingly instantaneous basis. Entertainment such as music, movies and books are becoming rarer in physical form and no longer require 'transportation' at all.

One of the most interesting examples of the impact of speed on sustainability came from a study looking at high speed rail in the UK. High speed rail was (and still is) meant to save us from the environmental perils of air travel. The government was (and still is) looking at pouring billions into this new high speed mass transit system. Keeping in mind that high speed rail uses more energy than traditional rail and car travel (due to its speed), here are some survey results that were buried deep inside a government study promoting the development of high speed rail.

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Of the passengers expected to use the new railway, 57% would otherwise have travelled by conventional train, 27% wouldn't have travelled at all, 8% would have gone by car, and 8% by air. That means that 92% of all high speed rail users would have switched from a less polluting alternative to high speed rail.

This idea of going slower can also be applied locally, and I think should (and hopefully will) have deep impacts on the way we design our communities and cities. We need to move away from a city model that demands speed – where people live in suburban residential only areas, businesses and industries in other areas, and sprawling shopping complexes in yet a different part of the city. Developing diverse, multipurpose zones, where people can live, work and shop in close proximity means that speed is no longer a necessity. It is called 'slow-transit development'. Developing up instead of out can help us achieve this.

Global trade has been around for centuries, and is going to continue to be an important part of our society. However, in the material world I think it will happen slower, and so we need to start looking at development that will be less reliant on fast transportation. Going slower doesn't have to be a step backwards – it might actually make our communities a little more liveable.

Brian McCain is Executive Director of The Gaia Project, a New Brunswick based charity focusing on project based sustainability education. If you'd like to support these efforts, please visit www.thegaiaproject.ca or call 1-877-442-4136.