

Edward Humes on the High Cost of Transportation

Small Consumer Choices Have Big Impacts

by Randy Kambic



Edward Humes investigates the origins and impacts of the expensive and complex process that brings us everyday products and items in his new book *Door to Door: The Magnificent, Maddening, Mysterious World of Transportation*. His latest work, which also covers our love affair with cars, is popularizing the eco-conscious term, “transportation footprint”. Aligned with this, he recommends a move to driverless cars to save lives and fuel.

In an earlier book, *Garbology: Our Dirty Love Affair with Trash*, the Pulitzer Prize-winning, Southern California journalist examined the causes and effects of waste. Solutions are showcased by how institutions and families are consciously reducing their wasteful ways.

What are some everyday impacts of the “door-to-door machine” you write about?

Transportation is embedded in our lives, both in our personal things and our travel. It can take 30,000 miles to get our morning coffee to the kitchen, with another 165,000 miles attached to all the components of the coffee pot, water, energy and packaging—a worldwide mix involving trains, planes, boats and trucks. Unprecedented amounts of transportation are embedded in everything we do and touch, with many hidden costs to our environment, economy and traffic.

Take the world of online retailing. That “buy it now” button seems so convenient, but it’s also a traffic jam generator. Each click births a new truck trip. What used to be a single truckload of goods delivered efficiently to a store or mall now demands hundreds of single-item deliveries to far-flung homes.

Which transportation footprint surprised you the most in researching *Door to Door*?

The smartphone is a paradox, in that it has reduced our

transportation footprint in some ways because of all the separate devices it has replaced, from navigation in cars to calculators to cameras. Phones also empower a transportation-free option for online banking and bill paying, eliminating all sorts of trips in the physical world.

On the flip side, making and assembling smartphone components requires a lot of back-and-forth transport between many countries because no one can make the whole “widget”.

With its many raw materials, rare earth minerals and manufactured components, we’re talking about an overall transportation footprint for one phone that’s equivalent to a round trip to the moon; a phone that users will trade in for a newer model in just a few years.

What’s a particularly negative impact of the huge distances involved in today’s movement of goods?

Cargo container ships create immense amounts of pollution. About 6,000 container ships worldwide ship 90 percent of consumer goods. Natural Resources Defense Council data show that the smog and particulate emissions from just 160 of these vessels equal that of all of the cars in the world. If the cargo fleet were a country, its carbon emissions would exceed Germany’s, the world’s fourth-largest economy, according to the European Commission. Cargo ship carbon emissions are projected to rise to about 18 percent of the global total in the next 25 years if our appetite for goods continues to grow at current rates.

What are the consequences of the U.S. ranking 16th worldwide in infrastructure quality?

Americans are under the illusion that we pay high taxes to build and maintain roads, bridges and rails. However, as a

portion of our gross domestic product, we invest about one-fifth of what China does and the poor results are apparent. We have a \$3.6 trillion backlog in needed modernization. This drags down the economy and increases harmful emissions through shipping delays and rush-hour jams, as well as raising road safety concerns.

How can we each lessen our "transportation footprint"?

We have power as individuals, families and communities to make a difference. Americans walk less than almost any other people on Earth. A Los Angeles study showed that half of its residents' daily trips are less than three miles, with many under one mile, which is crazy. Using alternative transportation

for just 10 percent of those trips would have major positive impacts.

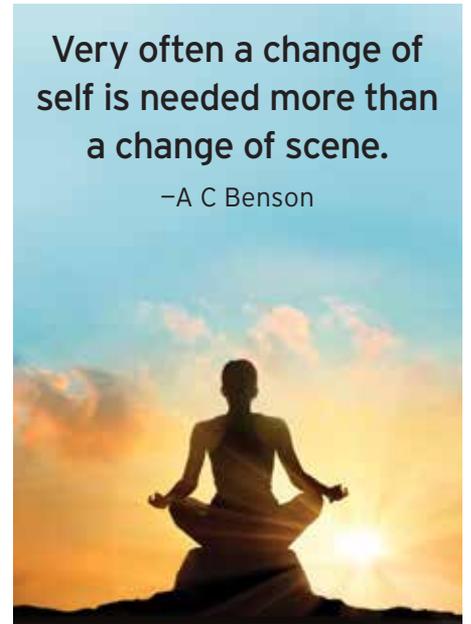
Far fewer children walk or bike to school than in the recent past, even as we face a youth obesity crisis. We can also adjust when and how we drive; half the cars on the road during rush hour are not job-related. Driving at other times would ease traffic for everyone and reduce traffic jams, emissions and crashes.

All of this is something we could easily change—and that many other countries have changed—with substantial health, economic and traffic benefits.

Randy Kambic is a freelance editor and writer in Estero, FL, and a regular contributor to Natural Awakenings.

Very often a change of self is needed more than a change of scene.

—A C Benson



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