



What you can do about Peak Oil and Petrol Prices

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Topic: [Demand/Consumption](#)

This is a guest post from James Ward, with [ASPO Australia](#) in Adelaide.

What can I do about Peak Oil?

First and foremost, cut car use.

Why? It's simple. Cars use the most oil. The 1 litre of fuel needed to move you and your shopping just 10km by car could get 100kg of freight almost 200km by truck, or 3000km by train.



If we try to keep our car use up by foregoing other luxuries, (a) we damage the economy (reduced consumer confidence and all that), and (b) we don't actually reduce much demand for oil, because the lion's share of the demand still comes from our car use. So as long as we keep driving, the oil price will keep rising, until one day we find we've actually wiped out the economy – and everyone finds themselves, quite literally, driving on a road to nowhere.

Once you realise that the vast majority of people are not in the “new car” market, you realise that hybrids and plug-ins are not going to fix the problem. It's actually worse than that, because it seems the people driving the greatest distances are the ones without a great deal of money, living in the outer suburbs and towns. So the inner-urban middle classes can feel good driving the 2km to the organic café in a Prius or riding on a nice tram, while the outer suburbs revert to Mad Max as there is no alternative to the car and the car is too expensive to drive.

Or so we have all been led to believe.

In actual fact, for three quarters of the world's population, cars have never been affordable and probably never will. It is a worthwhile (albeit humbling) experience to discover that the countries we have so condescendingly called “developing” or “Third World” may in fact hold the long-term answers to our socioeconomically diverse transport crisis. A mental trip to virtually any part of Asia reveals the dominant modes of transport: foot, bicycle, scooter, motorbike, car-pool, and mass-transit.

Car Pooling

For anyone with a bent for physics, it is a no-brainer. Lugging around 2 tonnes of metal with a frontal area of some two square metres just to shift one 60-100kg person is about the least efficient mode of transport imaginable, with the possible exception of the Space Shuttle. Fortunately, that 2 tonne vehicle usually comes equipped with multiple seats and every seat you fill with a passenger cuts the per-person fuel consumption. Staring out of a bus window this week, my father counted 100 cars zooming past (10% SUVs), and of the 100 there were just seven with more than one person on board. So there's a good deal of low hanging fruit to be picked there, without the need to rush out and buy anything – just getting to know one's neighbours and colleagues, and learning to live with fixed commuting times. Car-pooling gets the thumbs up as a cheap & easy way to cut fuel bills in half, thirds or quarters.

The Bicycle

Next up is the humble bicycle. Bikes are about the cheapest vehicle to buy – in fact a secondhand bike is cheaper than a pair of shoes, so why bother walking? Okay, barefooted cycling aside, the nice thing about bikes is that they run on whatever fuel you do – and given most of us eat more than we need, there's ample energy left over to work the pedals. When used in place of a car, it is almost impossible for a bicycle not to pay itself off in the first couple of years, because every kilometre cycled saves 10-15 cents on fuel. Clock up just 20km a week and your annual savings in dollars hit triple digits. And in the good old days, people thought nothing of cycling 20km each way to work every day, so let's get some perspective. A great advantage of bikes is that they give people access to public transport that doesn't pass near their house – very important in outer suburbs and towns where the population is dispersed widely around transport hubs.



One you start talking about longer distances, bikes lose their appeal big time. But these days ("these days" being about 1940 onwards) there are efficient electric and petrol motors available for \$1000-\$2000 that attach to a standard pushbike – expect 1-1.5L/100km from a petrol version, and for the electric one perhaps 10-20 cents of electricity per 100km. The latter aren't so great for long distances but if you're travelling 10-15km each way they're superb. The pay-back time for a moped is slower than a bike, but if it allows you to knock out a reasonable number of car miles (say 50+ km per week) it can still pay for itself within a couple of years.

So, mopeds would be a feasible solution for people at the bottom of the pyramid, were it not for the Australian Government doing its best to stand in the way of the adoption of this simple technology – by banning any more than 200 watts of power assistance on bicycles. For reference, 200W is about a twelfth of a hairdryer. May they be cursed for their obstinacy.

Scooters and Motorbikes

Those who want to abide by The Law can go down the path of scooters and motorbikes. Sometimes the fuel economy isn't all it's cracked up to be (expect around 3L/100km from a 50cc scooter and 4L/100km from a 250cc motorbike) but at \$2000-5000 these are still far more affordable to your average Joe "outer suburbs" Bloggs than a brand spanking new hybrid or turbo-diesel car. However, in a textbook case of flatlining supply against surging demand, the South Australian Government has responded to rising demand for motorbike licences by simply raising the price to some \$500 – thereby pricing out the people who need it the most. Fortunately 50cc scooters only require a car licence.

Between car-pooling, bikes, mopeds, scooters and motorbikes, we all have affordable ways to dramatically cut our car use without demanding that governments build an electrified railway past every one of our houses. By promoting these alternatives to car use, we may allow something resembling a functional economy and happy society to survive beyond Peak Oil.

You can download the complete "What you can do about it" article by James Ward from the [ASPO Australia](http://www.aspoaustralia.com) website.



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