

by Dieter Steiner

A look at official Swiss transportation policy reveals an amazing fact: It bases its activities and measures on the assumption that practically everybody drives a car. There is lots of talk about sustainable development, but the only issues addressed are improvements in technical efficiency like lowering fuel consumption and air pollution, and encouraging people to travel more often by public transport than by car.

The much more fundamental question regarding people's motives in whether to own a car and the possibilities of influencing such motives have never been addressed. This, however, is very decisive with respect to people's mobility behaviour: Statistical data show that a person living in a carfree household drives on average only about one-fifth of the kilometres driven by someone in a car-owning household, suggesting that "carfree" does not mean that one never drives or sits in a car, but simply that one does not own a car personally. This person will compensate by using public transport more often, but overall this still means that the mobility-generated yearly external costs will be lower by an estimated CHF 1,000 (EUR 670) per year.

Actually, the extent of car ownership in Swiss households has only surfaced with the mobility microcensus of the Federal Agency for Statistics conducted now every five years. It turns out that 20% of all households (about one million people) and up to 40% of households in large cities are carfree. The bad news, however, is that this percentage is shrinking. It is all the more urgent, then, that we look at this segment of the population and develop ideas about how to support carfree lifestyles.

In December 2004 we founded the Club of the Carfree People of Switzerland (Club der Autofreien der Schweiz, abbreviation CAS). Presently we have around 700 members. It is our goal to give carfree people an identity and a voice and to advertise the carfree lifestyle. Carfree living is much more sustainable: Giving up your car can reduce your CO<sub>2</sub> emissions by 30%.

But it is economically beneficial as well. Suppose you have a family with two teenage children and two cars: By getting rid of the vehicles, you can save up to CHF 12,000 (EUR 8,000) per year without reducing mobility. There is a dense public transportation network in Switzerland and you can buy a general pass for the whole year.

So far, the authorities have occasionally given bonuses to car-owning people for driving



*CAS president Beat von Scarpatetti demonstrates that being carfree does not mean never sitting in a car!*

less or for driving in a less damaging way. Recently, Zurich car owners who deposited their licence plates for a month received free public transport for that period. And last year, the Swiss Federal Office of Energy announced that people buying a car with an energy-saving label on a randomly selected day would get a discount.

In our view, of course, such strategies are wrong; it is the carfree people who should be rewarded. Since they are a lesser burden on society, CAS hopes to obtain for its members, in the long run, discounts from city governments, transport and tourist organisations, and insurance companies.

That may prove to be difficult. Still, last year we obtained free day-passes for the first 150 CAS members, donated by the transport organisation of northwestern Switzerland. And this year seven ecologically minded hotels have agreed to give CAS members a 10% discount during a particular time of the year.

Some years ago, a survey showed that a change in one's personal situation was the most important reason for getting rid of their car. But about one-third of the respondents said living without a car was a lifestyle preference and a conscious decision. Only a few people became carfree for purely environmental reasons.

Our philosophy is not so much one of condemning car addiction but rather of advertising the attractiveness of carfree lifestyles so more people will make this conscious decision to go carfree. They do not have to worry about parking spaces, car repairs and insurance. They can use the money they save for more sensible purposes.

They do not strain their nerves while trying to drive through town. They have additional leisure time when they travel by public transport. And, of course, they are less prone to become victims of an accident.

We have two active working groups, one for public relations and fundraising and one for documentation and lobbying. Presently, the first group is planning and holding street events for advertising purposes. One such event took place in Grenchen, a city in northwestern Switzerland, where in early May we had our general assembly. Grenchen is one of a small number of cities from which we received a positive response last year when we sent out letters to about 40 mayors, trying to arouse their interest in our activities. We now can look forward to developing some cooperative scheme with the authorities of this city. The second working group is compiling a collection of profiles of people living carfree under a variety of circumstances.

At the Towards Carfree Cities conference in Budapest last year we became a member of the World Carfree Network. To join forces across borders is important, as the transportation problem is a global one. We in the industrialised countries are responsible for having developed an extremely resource-wasting way of life. Hopefully we are now also capable of setting an example and showing that simplifying our lives is healthier for us and for our planet. ♻

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