This Green Life

A Journal of Sorts

DREAM CAR **April 2004**

Unlike most Americans, I'd rather not drive. Maybe it's because I live in Manhattan, where the traffic is awful, the parking worse and public transportation by far the best choice. Half the time, I don't need transportation anyway. In the city, it's often easier and faster to walk.

That said, I do own a car. Not a particularly exciting one. Neither new nor powerful, it accelerates to 60 at a very old-fashioned rate, topping out at 85 mph. The fuel economy isn't great either, but I drive so rarely, it hardly makes a difference.

Why such an uninspiring model? It's a family hand-me-down that we got for free. There have been three such gifts over the years, and I'm truly grateful for all of them, but lately I've been wishing that we had the excuse (or need) to buy a car of our own. Then, we could get one of those half gas, half electric wonders called hybrids, or HEVS (hybrid electric vehicles).

Maybe it's just vanity. If I am what I drive, as the car companies would have me believe, I don't want to be the hundred-year-old internal combustion engine. I want to be the best, latest and smartest thing on wheels. Right now, that's the hybrid -- the cleanest, most efficient, quietest, most convenient vehicle available for the passenger market.

Hybrids combine a small gasoline engine with a battery-powered electric motor, which provides extra power when the car accelerates or climbs hills. The electric motor also kicks in when the car cruises at low speeds, and in some hybrids, the car can start accelerating purely on electric power. The engine turns off when the car comes to a stop, then restarts automatically when the accelerator is pressed. Hybrids also capture and convert energy from braking that would otherwise be wasted. These various features can result in up to double the mileage of conventional cars, as well as lower smog-forming emissions.

That's not to say that hybrids are anywhere near as clean as pure electric vehicles. However, they have one great advantage for consumers: they do not need to be plugged in. Simply driving the car recharges the battery.

Currently, you can choose among three hybrids -- the Toyota Prius, Honda Insight and Honda Civic Hybrid -- all excellent cars. And the number's about to grow. Mid-sized, luxury and SUV hybrids are due out later this year and next.

As you probably know, hybrids have developed quite a cachet among the Hollywood set -- Cameron Diaz, Meryl Streep and NRDC board member Leonardo DiCaprio come to mind. Don't let that persuade you that hybrids are out of your class. The cars tend to be surprisingly reasonable,

Sheryl Eisenberg, a long-time advisor to NRDC, posts a new This Green Life every month. Sheryl makes her home in Tribeca (NYC), where—along with her children, Sophie and Gabby, and husband, Peter—she tries to put her environmental principles into practice. No fooling.

. . .

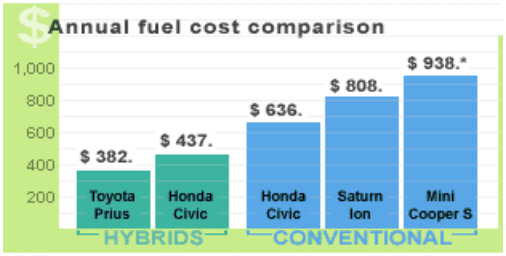
Neighborhood signs (at left). In New York, parking's notoriously difficult, and driving isn't much better.

There she is -- the car of my dreams. While the purple's pure fantasy, the car is a real Toyota Prius, Motor Trend Magazine's "2004 Car of the Year." Commenting on the choice, editor-in-chief Kevin Smith said, "The Prius is a capable, comfortable, fun-to-drive car that just happens to get spectacular fuel economy. It also provides a promising look at a future where extreme fuel-efficiency, ultra-low emissions, and exceptional performance will happily coexist."

In other words, the Prius isn't just a great hybrid, it's a great car.

with current models averaging around $20,000. You can even get a federal tax deduction of up to $1,500, plus sales tax waivers in some states.

And, of course, hybrids are much cheaper to operate than conventional cars. The calculator at fueleconomy.gov shows that the annual fuel costs for my family would be $500-600 lower if we drove a hybrid, assuming we traveled 15,000 miles a year.



All I can say is thank goodness we don't. With savings like that, I'd have no choice but to look our gift horse in the mouth.

—Sheryl Eisenberg

BETTER CONVENTIONAL CARS

If you're in the market for a new car, keep in mind that even among conventional vehicles, fuel economy and emissions vary widely. The best cars incorporate many of the same efficient features found in hybrids, such as:

- Aerodynamic design.

- Lightweight materials, like aluminum and high-strength steel.

- Automatic shut-off at stop lights and instant restart when the accelerator is pressed.

- Five- and six-gear transmissions.

- Continuously variable transmissions (CVT), which do away with gears altogether.

- Four-valve cylinders and variable valve timing.

To ensure you get an efficient model, do your homework on the web. Use the EPA and ACEEE links I've provided to check out your chosen car's ratings.

Emissions and Fuel Economy. The terms are confusing. Cars that are said to be low in emissions release fewer smog-producing gases because of pollution control devices, such as catalytic converters, in the car. However, they still may emit plenty of CO2, the primary greenhouse gas responsible for global warming. That's because there's a direct relationship between the amount of gas burned and the amount of CO2 released -- 20 pounds per gallon. For that reason, it's important to get a car that's not only clean, but gets good mileage.

Driving Well. Whatever kind of car you drive, you'll improve your mileage and lower your emissions if you:

1) Avoid quick starts and gunning the engine.

2) Minimize use of the air conditioner and heater.

3) Remove unnecessary cargo that adds weight to the car.

4) Keep your tires properly inflated.

5) Get regular tune-ups.

6) Keep your car in the garage if you have one.

7) Plan and consolidate your trips.

At the gas pump, avoid "topping off" the tank to prevent spilling gasoline that pollutes the air when it evaporates.

Sheryl Eisenberg is a web developer and writer. With her firm, Mixit Productions (http://www.mixitproductions.com), she brought NRDC online in 1996, designed NRDC's first websites, and continues to develop special web features for NRDC. She created and, for several years, wrote the Union of Concerned Scientists' green living column, *Greentips*, and has designed and contributed content to many non-profit sites.

ONLINE RESOURCES

NRDC: Break the Chain - http://www.nrdc.org/breakthechain/
DOE: Hybrid Cars - http://www.fueleconomy.gov/feg/hybrid_sbs.shtml
HOW STUFF WORKS: How Hybrid Cars Work - http://auto.howstuffworks.com/hybrid-car.htm
EPA: 2004 Cars Sorted by Rating - http://www.epa.gov/greenvehicles/cars-rank-04.htm
MOTOR TREND: 2004 Car of the Year - http://www.motortrend.com/roadtests/alternative/112_031120_coy/
ACEEE: Highlights of the Model Year - http://www.greenercars.com/bestof.html
GREEN CAR JOURNAL: Building a Market for Green Vehicles- http://www.greencar.com/a_market_for_green_vehicles.cfm

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