Cycling — the green option

by Aaron Cosbey

Perhaps the most environmentally unfriendly thing the average Canadian citizen can do is own and drive a car.

That's right: in terms of really making a difference, the top of the New Year's resolutions list is not to buy recycled fashion clothing, biodegradable electric can-openers or "green" laundry bleach. It is to stop driving.

Cars emit a very nasty mix of gases, which includes stratospheric ozone (indirectly created), nitrous oxides, carbon dioxide (global warming), and sulfur oxides (acid rain).

The staggering number of cars worldwide (400 million in 1990) means these substances accumulate rapidly. Even clean-burning cars produce 20 pounds of CO_2 for every gallon of gas they burn, making automobiles the world's biggest single source of greenhouse gases.

Oil is also a factor. Even though the ratio of miles per gallon continues to improve, the benefit is cancelled out by increased car use.

World oil consumption topped one trillion litres this year — eight times what it was forty years ago, and is still increasing.

This means increased drilling, increased shipping and, of course, increased spilling, of oil. However contrary to popular belief crippled tankers are not the major spillers of oil. In the U.S. alone, do-it-yourself mechanics dump out an Exxon Valdez worth of used oil every two and half weeks.

Another side effect of the car culture is the tire dump. Millions of tires a year end up in these depots, waiting for someone to figure out what to do with them, or some pyromaniac to come turn them into a toxic firestorm.

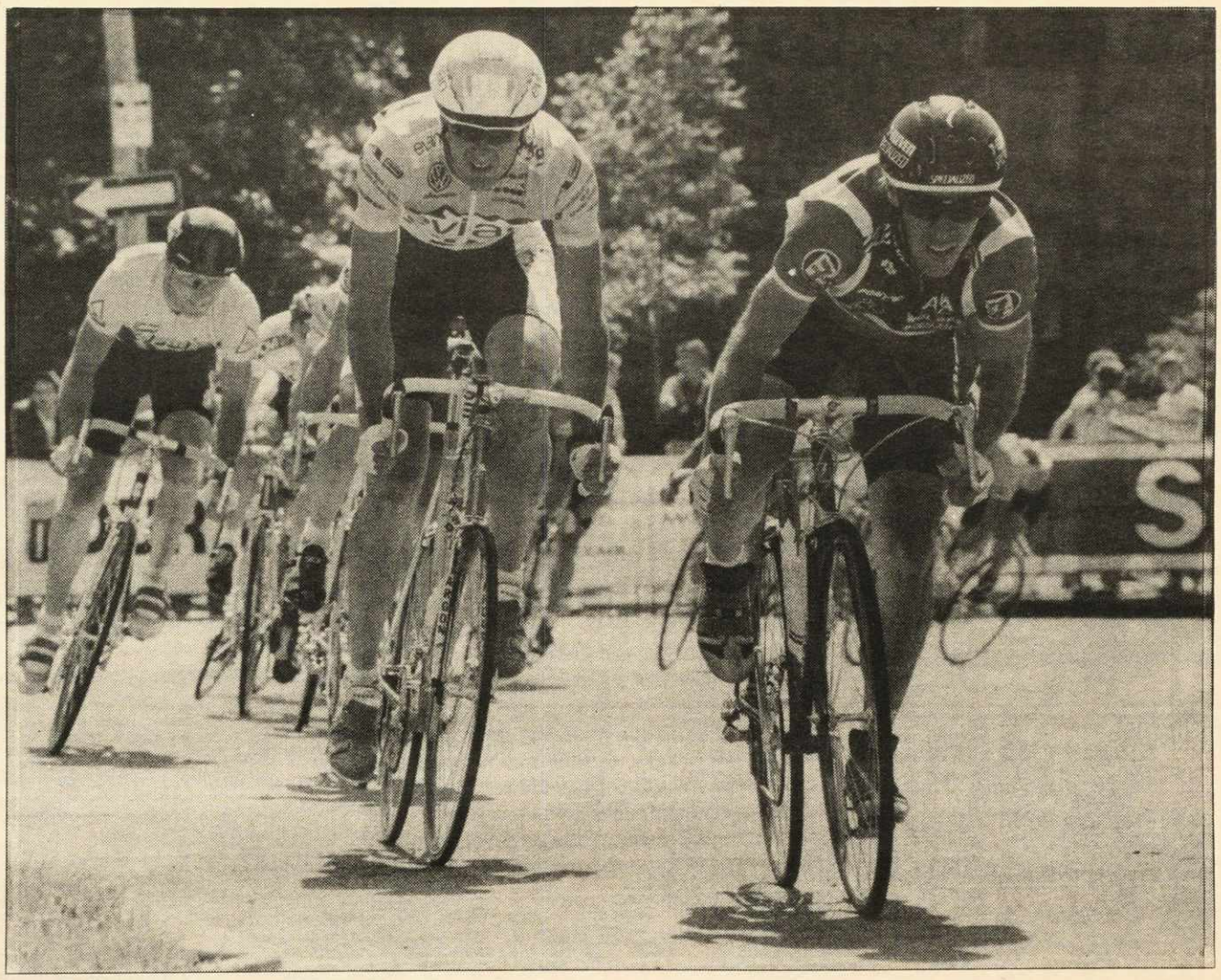
This year's fire in Ontario released millions of pounds of toxic chemicals into the air and 250,000 gallons of oil into the ground.

Finally, consider the resources that go into producing and maintaining cars and roadways. Tens of millions of cars are manufactured every year, and the U.S. alone maintains more than three million miles of paved roadway. The cost of this production, in terms of steel, rubber and plastic consumed, and the sheer volume of non-renewable energy used, is staggering.

What are the alternatives? Two obvious ones are walking, which is the "greenest" choice, and public transportation, which is a much more efficient use of resources than driving, but still has some of the problems discussed above.

The best all-around alternative may be the bicycle; it's environmentally friendly, it's fast (for innercity trips), it's good exercise, and it's cheap.

Contrary to popular belief, it can be used all year round, too. For the low-down on winter bike riding and maintenance, check out the Campus Environmental Action Group's Winter Bike Maintenance Workshop, November 28 at 6:30, S.U.B. room 224.



Dal photo: Angel Figueroa

The popularity of recreational bicycling has also boosted the Canadian competitive cycling scene. Yvan Waddell (L) and Steve Bauer (R) are two of Canada's most prominent cycling stars. And it sure beats driving.

Food not private but a global concern

by Aaron Cosbey

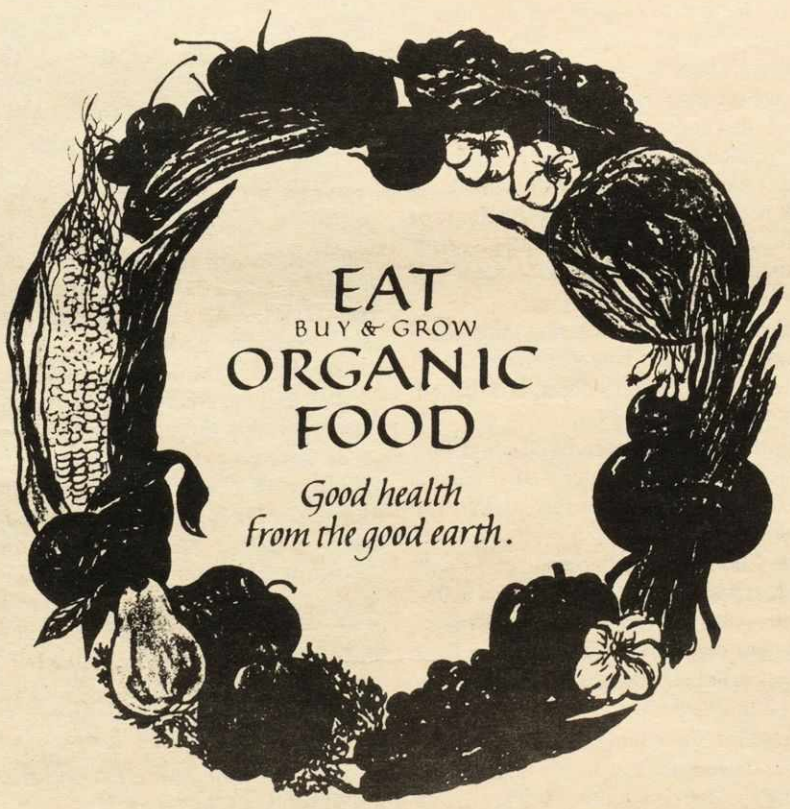
These days our every habit becomes the object of eco-inspection; from how we wash our clothes to how we wrap our lunch, we are urged to consider the environmental consequences of more and more aspects of our lives.

So far, the private pleasure of eating has more or less escaped scrutiny, but it turns out that even this is an environmentally important behaviour. The production of meat puts an inordinate amount of pressure on the Earth's eco-systems.

Sixteen pounds of vegetables protein go into the production of one pound of meat protein. The grain and soybeans now being fed to livestock in the U.S. could feed 1.3 billion people, but instead it goes to producing enough meat to feed only a fraction of that. This wouldn't be so bad, if all the extra farming effort were environmentally benign, but it isn't. Some problems:

Fertilizers: Increased run-off of excess fertilizers causes eutrophication of aquatic eco-systems (i.e. — fish die from lack of oxygen).

Pesticides: These stable nasties accumulate in eco-systems, building up to harmful levels in animals high on the food chain.



Water: Fresh water supplies are scarce, and getting scarcer (thus, the heated Oldman Dam controversy in Alberta). The amount of it needed to produce one cow is sufficient to float a destroyer. More than half of all water used in the U.S. is used for livestock production.

Soil: To date, the U.S. has lost about 75 per cent of its topsoil, and it's going fast. Canada is in the same boat. Eighty-five per cent of that loss has been directly attributed to the raising of livestock.

Fossil Fuels: A meat-free diet uses up only one fifth of the fossil fuels a meat diet uses. If the whole world ate as much meat as we do, the world's known oil reserves would last another 13 years. Of course, excess fossil fuel use pollutes the atmosphere and intensifies the greenhouse effect.

Tropical Rainforest: The U.S. annually imports 200 million pounds of beef from countries that are subsidizing destruction of their rainforests for ranchland. Since most of that land is poor pasture — only usable for a few years — clearing is continuous. This leads to the rough calculation — every quarter pound burger is responsible for the consumption of about 55 square feet of tropical rainforest.

The point is, the true cost of meat-eating is too high. If you are interested in cutting down, but think veggies are boring, pick up *The Moosewood Cookbook*, or *The Vegetarian Epicure*; supper will never be the same.

For info on vegetarian nutrition, see *Diet for a New America*, or *Laurel's Kitchen*. The stats used in this article are from *Diet for a Small Planet*, and Canada Earthsave Foundation.