

A Sustainable Environment: Our Obligation to Protect God's Gift

by
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Save Energy With Cars – Not SUVs

In my last two articles, I showed concern for the possible overshooting of the carrying capacity of the environment. I also mentioned that if the entire world population required the same ecological footprint as we Americans, we would need five planet earths to support this population. What is the reason for this and what can we do to reduce the impact?

One major contribution to this environmental problem is the large use of non-renewable energy sources. Americans account for about four percent of the world population but we consume over 40 percent of the world's gasoline. A major contribution to this huge consumption of gasoline is America's love affair with sport utility vehicles (SUVs). These vehicles consume more gasoline than passenger cars primarily because they are trucks and not cars. They are larger and heavier with large engines. Most auto manufacturers consist of two major divisions, one that assembles cars and the other that assembles trucks. The American companies are virtually breaking even selling cars, but their truck divisions are very profitable. Why? In general terms, if you buy a \$30,000 car, it costs almost \$30,000 to manufacture that car. If you buy a \$30,000 SUV, the manufacturer probably took a \$16,000 truck and added \$4,000 to convert it to passenger vehicle (SUV), yielding a \$10,000 profit. The margins on SUVs are substantial.

In order to reduce the consumption of gas, the government set gradually increasing Corporate Automobile Fuel Economy (CAFE) standards that the manufacturers were to meet or pay a penalty. Currently, that standard is 27.5 miles per gallon, but it has not been difficult to meet the standard because SUVs don't count. It is an automobile standard and SUVs are trucks. The government has also imposed a gas-guzzler tax on cars that get less than 22.5 miles per gallon. However, the gas-guzzler tax does not apply to SUVs, again because they are not cars. Despite the technological improvements in cars to reduce gas consumption, our average fuel consumption for passenger vehicles (including SUVs) is less than it was in 1980. Emissions from cars are less than that of SUVs, because truck standards are less stringent than car standards.

Another reason for unusually high sales of SUVs is a tax incentive for trucks. Corporate buyers of vehicles can obtain tax credits for their trucks, and that includes trucks (SUVs) as big as a Hummer or as small as Chrysler's PT Cruiser. Yes, the PT Cruiser is a "truck".

What about safety? Recent rollover tests showed that the SUVs have a much greater probability of rolling over than a car. The guardrails on highways were set at a height to match the center of gravity of an automobile so that it would not flip over the guardrail.

Unfortunately, these guardrails are too low for SUVs, which would have a tendency to go over a guardrail.

Fortunately, the auto companies are doing something about these gas-guzzling passenger vehicles. Led by the foreign (mostly Japanese) companies, the new SUVs are being manufactured on car bodies, which result in a smoother ride and better gas consumption – but they still ride high. They are now lowering the center of gravity with a new class of models called the “crossover”, which resembles the old station wagon. In addition, Toyota and Honda have been producing hybrid automobiles that are powered by gas and electricity. Other companies, including American, have since developed their own hybrids.

We are going in the right direction, but it may not be enough. And despite the better gas consumption of SUVs, I still don’t like them because driving behind a SUV is like driving behind a moving wall. Just personal.

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