Green up your act

Chances are, your carbon footprint is already small thanks to cycling, but you can become an even greener rider

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As a cyclist, your green credentials are glowing like the school report of the teacher's pet who, all term, has known the answer to every question. You emit zero pollutants, you gloat, and the impact of your carbon output is not so much a footprint as a cleat-sized dimple. It's very easy to develop a holier-than-thou attitude, then, especially when you face the daily prospect of dicing with thoughtless Clarkson-esque types in their fume-belching 4x4s.

But riding a bike, though beneficial, is only one step towards addressing the planet's problems. There are countless ways to become more environmentally and ethically responsible — with a view to making the world a fairer and less contaminated place. So, what can you do today to become a greener cyclist?

Eat less meat

Yes, that's right — cutting down your intake of meat is the single most effective step you can take to reduce your impact on the environment. Leaving aside the animal welfare question, a 2006 UN study found that the rearing of animals produces more greenhouse gases than all of the world's transportation combined. What's more, most of us can afford to cut down on nuggets and burgers; the average UK consumer eats 25-50 per cent more animal protein than recommended by World Health Organisation guidelines. Of course, as a cyclist you can't afford to skimp on protein and minerals, but you can get plenty of these elsewhere, think beans, pulses, nuts, wholegrains and veg.

Ride to work

Bicycles emit zero carbon, which is just one reason why cycling to work makes a positive difference. It also reduces urban air pollution, keeps you fit, and means you don't have to waste time sitting in traffic jams. If you pedal to work, you can also avoid paying tax on a new bike and equipment by taking advantage of the Government's Ride to Work Scheme (subject to your employer's participation). Visit www.cyclescheme.co.uk for more details.

Buy second-hand

Buying a second-hand bike or simply maintaining your current one and keeping it for longer is better for the environment than buying new, in that it reduces demand for raw materials and, in turn, cuts down the emission of pollutants related to the processing of those materials. At the risk of committing cycling-journalism heresy, it's fair to say that the technological improvements to a particular model of bike aren't exactly dramatic from one year to the next. Making do (and mending here and there) makes sense from an economic as well as an environmental perspective. The classifieds section of *Cycling Weekly* regularly boasts a veritable feast of lightly used, bargain-priced metal: www.cyclingweekly.co.uk/buyandsell.

Ditch the disposables

There is a lot of horribly excessive disposable packaging associated with cycling kit and the energy-boosting snacks we rely on. The manufacturers are getting better, but you have a responsibility as a rider too. Where possible, avoid using plastic bags and disposable food containers, and opt for reusable kit. At the very least, fold up any empty packets — such as used energy gels — and slip them into a pocket to dispose of later rather than tossing them onto the verge.

Car-share to events

Sometimes the simplest tips are the best… And what could be simpler and more sensible than sharing the driving to and from cycling races or events? If you're a member of a club, it's not often you'll be the only one going to a particular ride at the weekend. Need a bigger bike carrier? No problem — you can split the cost. Jumping into one vehicle rather than driving independently halves your emissions, helps reduce traffic congestion and makes it easier to find a space in event car parks — and also means you can have a good pre-race chat to keep the nerves under control.

Holiday responsibly

It's all very well going on a far-flung cycling adventure, but how will you know, when you get there, whether or not your guides are being paid a fair rate? What's more, will you be confident that the land they direct you to tear across on an mtb is not a sensitive habitat of rare fauna and flora? The specialist agent Responsible Travel (www.responsibletravel.com/cycling) does the legwork for you by vetting holiday operators for their environmental and ethical policies. Better still, the link above takes you to a whole section of the site dedicated to cycling trips, from weekends in the Lake District to epic rides in Borneo.

Recycle your tyres
Your tyres are the biggest consumable part on your bike. When you throw away an old set, you're getting rid of a sizeable chunk of reusable materials. Sadly, this isn't something many tyre companies seem particularly bothered about… with the exception of German firm Bohle (Schwalbe tyres), which does have a recycling programme. Some dealers, such as London's Bicycle Magic (www.bicyclemagic.com), offer to take used tyres for recycling. Alternatively, send your worn-out hoops to Tyre Belt (www.tyrebelt.co.uk), which makes cyclist-chic waist-wear out of them.

Wear eco-friendly kit
A lot of cycling clothing is made from man-made materials that aren't particularly eco-friendly in terms of their manufacture or biodegradability. Recycling old kit is a smart step, as is buying good-quality gear in the first place — it lasts longer, so isn't as wasteful. Spanish cycling brand Spiuk (www.spiuk.co.uk) has started using an eco-friendly fabric called Biophyl, derived from renewable raw materials. Meanwhile, Welsh company Howies (www.howies.co.uk) prides itself on making BMX'er-style clothing that lasts for years, using high-quality materials such as organic cotton. Howies also donates one per cent of its turnover to "grass-roots environmental and social projects".

Recycle your bike
Think twice before scrapping any bike. You may think your old winter training steed has seen the end of its useful life, but the chances are millions of people in less prosperous parts of the world would disagree. The charity Re-Cycle ships unwanted bikes to regions of Africa where they can be given a second lease of life providing vital transportation for people living in remote communities. Many of these people are used to having to walk for several hours every day, just getting to school or market and back, so the liberating potential of bicycles is huge. To find out more, go to www.re-cycle.org.

Cold comfort
You probably have a room in your house where you don't spend much actual living time. Perhaps you call it a 'utility room' but it's more accurately a useless room used to store old cycling kit that "might come in handy one day". Well, here's an idea — turn it into a cold room. It's a straightforward concept; turn off the room's radiators, clear it out and, viola, you have a cool mini-gym in which to do your indoor training. The money you save on heating bills you can spend on a new turbo-trainer.

Sweatless feet
Walking or running is the next best thing to riding your bike; travelling on foot keeps up your fitness and the only carbon emitted is the tiny amount you breathe out. Remain true to your ethical standards by buying fair-trade trainers, guaranteed not to have been made in a sweat shop, from the likes of Veja (www.veja.fr) and Ethletic (www.fairdealtrading.com). If you want to run, the greenest 'proper running shoe' we could find is Brooks' part-recycled and biodegradable Green Silence (www.brooksrunning.com).

Go further on electric
Unless you're exceptionally fit, riding 10 miles or more to work every day may seem like an overwhelming prospect. But there is no need to give up on two-wheelers or resort to carbon-emitting transport. What you need is an e-bike. E-bikes are, essentially, bicycles with batteries. You can ride either under your own steam, pedalling as per usual, or using electric power. The funkiest-looking e-bike we've seen so far is the Ultra Motor A2B Hybrid (www.ultramotor.com/uk), which has a lithium-ion power-pack that stores enough power to cover 30 miles (claimed), and is good for 15.5mph (the maximum legal speed for an e-bike). One downside — it's considerably heavier than a normal road bike, at 23.7kg.

Harness your power
OK, this isn't a feasible suggestion just yet, but we predict it won't be long before you'll be able to harness your training energy to power your home. In fact, one product already on sale in the US promises to extract enough electricity from pedalling force to run small appliances. The Pedal-a-Watt device (www.econvergence.net) looks similar to a regular turbo-trainer but generates electrical energy that can be stored in an optional power pack. According to the distributor, it pumps out 300W at 12-25v depending how hard you pedal — and two hours of cycling is enough to power a large TV for two hours.

Explore home shores
Taking a holiday at home — trendily referred to as 'staycations' — is a very simple way to avoid flying, thus preventing your carbon footprint from reaching abominable snowman proportions. There is no shortage of spectacular cycling destinations in Blighty, and plenty of bike-friendly accommodation. OK, so our weather isn't the most reliable, but in summertime the conditions here are often more pleasant for prolonged cycling than the blistering heat on the Continent. The operator Skedaddle (www.skedaddle.co.uk) offers a wide range of guided and self-guided tours.

Ditch the detergent
If you ride a bike several times each week, you'll know the ensuing sweaty kit constitutes a lot of dirty laundry to wash. Regular detergents — powder, liquid, two-in-one or whatever — are bad news, environmentally speaking. They are made from non-renewable raw materials, supplied in wasteful packaging, and are not particularly biodegradable. However, there are greener alternatives on offer. The first is a detergent-free option called Eco Balls (www.ecozone.com), which, it is claimed, clean clothes by ionising oxygen and activating water molecules — and one set lasts for hundreds of washes. The second is Ecover (www.ecover.com), a range of washing products that use only renewable, biodegradable raw materials, in reusable packaging.

Squeaklessly clean

Most of the chain lubes and cleaning potions marketed for bicycles are full of petroleum-based chemicals that are potentially harmful to the environment. But there is another way, thanks in large part to a small British company. Kent-based Green Oil (www.green-oil.net) makes lubricants using only naturally occurring oils and plant extracts. As a result, its concoctions are biodegradable, non-irritant, CFC- and Teflon-free, and aren't tested on animals. What's more, all Green Oil products are supplied in fully recyclable packaging.

Cycle for a cause

Friends and family can be surprisingly generous when you tell them you are going to put yourself through a hideously painful feat for the sake of a good cause. And there's no shortage of worthy charities out there, always on the lookout for active types who take pleasure in setting themselves awe-inspiring challenges. There are also lots of organised charity rides, such as the British Heart Foundation series, to which you can turn up and take part without having to mastermind the logistics.

Green lights

Admittedly, battery-powered bike lights are a lot more energy-efficient than they used to be. Still, eco-purists try to avoid non-renewable power altogether, if they can. The brightest means of doing so is by using wind-up and/or solar-powered lights. You won't find either of the above types bright enough for use as headlights, but they do provide ample light for increasing your visibility to others. Check out www.nigelsecostore.com.

Charge on solar

Why is it that your mobile phone battery always runs flat during your long ride? You cycle the rest of the route worried that you're going to miss a crucial call or, worse, buckle a wheel and get stranded without any means of communication. What you didn't realise, perhaps, was that the sun's rays provide enough energy to recharge small devices like phones and MP3 players. All you need is a solar charger, such as the clever little unit from Solio (www.solio.com), which turns an hour's worth of sunshine into 10 minutes' talk time.

Keep it local

When seeking refreshment on a long ride, opt for a local pub or independent store rather than a franchise outlet of a large corporation. Keeping alive local economies means people are not forced to travel long distances to buy essential goods — and prevents the spread of choice-diminishing monopolies. Independent businesses are also more likely than chains to source their products locally, which equates to fewer 'food miles' and lower overall carbon emissions.

Follow the pandas

Lovely as they are, exotic materials like carbon and titanium are non-renewable, non-biodegradable, and processing them requires huge amounts of heat energy. This may come as a surprise, but there is a viable alternative material from which bikes can be constructed — the panda's favourite, bamboo. According to Bike Bamboo (www.bikebamboo.com), it's the ideal material, with the requisite combination of strength, light weight and rigidity. Frame joints are sealed using hemp, and the completed road bike frame weighs just 1.8kg. There is even a charitable project (www.bamboobike.org) that is trying to develop the production of bamboo bikes in parts of sub-Saharan Africa, where the plant is a native species and where most people cannot afford conventional bicycles. **End**