

Social image boosts sport utility sales

National campaigns promote consumer education about SUV pollution and other environmental consequences

Aaron Shakra
Pulse Reporter

According to the International Earth Day Web site, "All individuals and institutions have a mutual responsibility to act as Trustees of Earth, seeking the choices in ecology, economics and ethics that will eliminate pollution, poverty and violence, foster peaceful progress, awaken the wonder of life, and realize the best potential for the future of the human adventure." From this, it's reasonable to raise the question: How do sport utility vehicles fit into this picture?

According to "The SUV InfoLink," a Web site with factual information and statistics about SUVs, driving one will, on average, put two to three times more pollution into the air than a car. Whereas in the 1970s, sport utility vehicles were used primarily for farming and commercial work, today they account for one of every four new vehicles sold.

Sociology Professor Val Burris said SUVs can be looked at from a variety of sociological perspectives, from political to social to militaristic.

"They are clearly a status thing," Burris said. "I'm annoyed by them — but I'm also annoyed by the political reaction to them."

He noted that it's difficult to consider the pollution problem by merely looking at it from a driver-

side perspective.

"Pollution is caused by corporations and their government lackeys," he said. "It individualizes blame to go after the drivers of vehicles and feel so self-righteous about it."

Two campaigns aim to increase awareness of the impact SUVs have on environmental and the socio-political concerns. Last year, "The Detroit Project," co-founded by political activist Arianna Huffington, launched an ad campaign linking SUVs with terrorism.

The second campaign, "What Would Jesus Drive?" links the issues with religion, trying to persuade people that transportation is a moral choice because pollution affects the world.

Burris said SUVs are sometimes associated with military and police vehicles.

"(SUVs) are what the military and death squads around the world use as vehicles," Burris said, when interviewed in February. "Whatever armored vehicle gets the most press footage in the next war on Iraq, they'll be marketing in America, just like the last time we invaded."

Burris said AM General introduced a consumer version of the Hummer in 1992, due to the notoriety it received in the Gulf War and partially at the behest of Arnold Schwarzenegger.

A salesperson for Kendall Lexus of Eugene, who preferred to remain unnamed, said while SUVs are considered family vehicles, there is a fad aspect for some purchasers. He said that while he was not comfortable



Adam Amato Emerald

SUVs, once used primarily for farming and commercial work, now account for one of every four new vehicles sold. According to the "The SUV InfoLink," SUVs put two to three times more pollution into the air than a car.

speculating on other people's mindsets, he saw a general trend forming.

"It's kind of like a hula hoop in a way; some people absolutely want to have one," he said. "I have no idea why Americans are so in love with these things — it's the craze. The thing is, you're not going to be able to stop the demand of the consumer. People are going to spend their money. That's just the natural law of supply and demand. That's the way the world works. What form that takes is going to be directed by the mass will of the people."

Portland resident Jesse Vella said he bought his SUV with his girlfriend because he was able to receive an \$8,000 employee discount off the retail price. He ended up paying \$27,000, and said he is now disgust-

ed with the vehicle.

"No, we are not satisfied, because it is too expensive and is a product of the American attitude," Vella said. "With the current gas prices, we spend \$50 a week in gas, not to mention \$400-a-month car payment. It has been a lead weight around our necks. We are currently trying to get out of it."

Psychology graduate student Chuck Tate, who specializes in the area of social psychology, said social desirability and impression management are two key factors in being unable to make people aware of the potential problems in owning, purchasing or even wanting an SUV. He connected these problems to the dynamics of advertisers' portrayal of the vehicles as hip and

fashionable. Tate said this is endemic of a larger problem.

"It's a lot of social positioning," he said. "That's why it's hard to frame SUVs as a vice. If everyone's doing it, it can't be bad."

Tate suggested approaching consumers about SUVs in a way that allows them to reason and evaluate on their own.

"When (SUVs) stop looking good in the conversation, that's when you get negative reactions," he said. "Trying to frame something pleasurable as bad is not going to work. Get them to think about the process of what's going on."

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Solar power might brighten the future

The University generates solar power at the EMU and will use photovoltaic cells at the new business complex

Ali Shaughnessy
Environment/Science/Technology Reporter

Sunlight in Eugene is almost unseen during the winter. When summer hits, however, Eugene sees the same amount of sunlight as the rest of the nation.

It was because of the energy that sunlight can produce that prompted University students Jocelyn Eisenberg and Ben Gates to submit a proposal to the ASUO Executive in May 2001 during a contest titled "100,000 Bucks for Ducks." Eisenberg and Gates had a vision to use the money to cover the EMU roof with at least 300 solar panels to promote environmental sustainability.

While only three panels now sit on the EMU, a far cry from 300, Eisenberg said those three panels produce three kilowatts, which is enough to run a medium-size household. Eisenberg added she is hoping to fund another 17 by the end of this summer and said she needs support from the EMU Board to accomplish her goals.

"Let's get the whole student union and EMU committed to getting this second part to happen," she said. "I would love to see the next thing happen, and not get lost or forgotten."

Dr. Frank Vignola, a senior research associate in the physics department, said solar panels basically take sunlight and turn it into electricity by breaking down solar cells.

"Solar cells are like car batteries," he said. "Instead of having chemical reactions, they have the sun and the sun supplies the energy."

Vignola also said using energy from resources such as the sun or wind is extremely important because fossil



Mark McCambridge Emerald

The three solar panels that sit on top of the EMU collectively produce three kilowatts, which is enough to run a medium-size household. The Lillis Business Complex will use photovoltaic panels to harness the sun's energy.

fuels are scarce, and because burning fuels such as oil or natural gas add to "climate global change."

"Solar energy is a sustainable energy source," he said. "The sun's not going to run out for a few billion years."

Christopher Dymond, an energy analyst with the Oregon Office of Energy, agreed with Vignola, adding solar equipment needs to be installed now. He said that it is valuable to get solar panels in front of the public to show the panels' effectiveness.

"We need to install today for there to be a viable, mature market in the next 15 years," he said. "Every solar electric system is important."

Soon, the EMU will not be the only building on campus that is conserving the use of fossil fuels, such as oil and natural gas, by using solar energy. The Charles H. Lundquist College of Business is working on construction for the Lillis Business Complex, which will be 50 percent more energy efficient than state code requires. Along

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Dr. Frank Vignola
senior research associate
physics department

with sensors that turn off lights, external shades and light shelves to regulate temperature and lighting that will adjust to daylight levels, photovoltaic panels will be installed. Photovoltaic panels work along the same line as solar panels, using the sun to produce clean solar energy.

Business school Dean Phil Romero said in a statement that the curriculum of the school reflects the values of the Pacific Northwest business community.

"One of the strongest of those values is the recognition of the preciousness of our natural environment and the need to protect those resources," he said.

Contact the reporter at alishaughnessy@dailymerald.com.

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Scofield said the function of ECD is to bring environmental issues to the community level — addressing how development affects the environment and finding practical, environment-friendly alternatives to design and energy consumption in urban development.

"I want it to be about more than making a daisy chain. We should be thinking about these issues 365 days a year."

Kit Douglass
OSPIRG
campus organizer

Kit Douglass, campus organizer for the OSPIRG, said she hoped this year's Earth Day would bring more attention to legislation she said is being gutted by the current administration. Douglass, one of the key organizers of the Earth Day activities held on campus today, said she hopes to urge students and others to make Earth Day every day.

"I want it to be about more than making a daisy chain," Douglass said. "We should be thinking about these issues 365 days a year."

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