

## Commentary

# Hidden cost of driving a Prius

## **Totaling all the energy expended, from design to junkyard, a Hummer may be a better bargain.**

By James L. Martin

When it comes to protecting the environment, senior citizens should concentrate more on the total energy consumed in building and operating a car than its fuel efficiency - no matter how impressive the statistics appear on the window sticker at the showroom.

A prime example is Toyota's Prius, a compact hybrid that's beloved by ardent environmentalists and that fetches premium prices because it gets nearly 50 miles-per-gallon in combined highway/city driving.

Yet, new data have emerged that show the Prius may not be quite as eco-friendly as first assumed - if you pencil in the environmental negatives of producing it in the first place.

Like most hybrids, the Prius relies on two engines - one, a conventional 76-horsepower gasoline power plant, and a second, battery-powered, that kicks in 67 more horses. Most of the gas is consumed as the car goes from 0 to 30, according to alarmed Canadian environmentalists, who say Toyota's touting of the car's green appeal leaves out a few pertinent and disturbing facts.

The nickel for the battery, for instance, is mined in Sudbury, Ontario, and smelted at nearby Nickel Centre, just north of the province's massive Georgian Bay.

Toyota buys about 1,000 tons of nickel from the facility each year, ships the nickel to Wales for refining, then to China, where it's manufactured into nickel foam, and then onto Toyota's battery plant in Japan.

That alone creates a globe-trotting trail of carbon emissions that ought to seriously concern everyone involved in the fight against global warming. All told, the start-to-finish journey travels more than 10,000 miles - mostly by container ship, but also by diesel locomotive.

But it's not just the clouds of greenhouse gases generated by all that smelting, refining,

manufacturing and transporting that worries green activists. The 1,250-foot-tall smokestack that spews huge puffs of sulphur dioxide at the Sudbury mine and smelter operation has left a large swath of the surrounding area looking like a surrealistic scene from the depths of hell.

On the perimeter of the area, skeletons of trees and bushes stand like ghostly sentinels guarding a sprawling wasteland. Astronauts in training for NASA actually have practiced driving moon buggies on the suburban Sudbury tract because it's considered a duplicate of the Moon's landscape.

"The acid rain around Sudbury was so bad it destroyed all the plants, and the soil slid down off the hillside," David Martin, Greenpeace's energy coordinator in Canada, told the London Daily Mail.

"The solution they came up with was the Superstack. The idea was to dilute pollution, but all it did was spread the fallout across northern Ontario," Martin told the British newspaper, adding that Sudbury remains "a major environmental and health problem. The environmental cost of producing that car battery is pretty high."

A "Dust to Dust" study by CNW Marketing Research of Bandon, Ore., shows the overall eco-costs of automotive hybrids may be even higher.

Released last December, the study tabulated all data on the energy necessary to plan, build, sell, drive and dispose of a vehicle from drawing board to junkyard, including such items as plant-to-dealer fuel costs, distances driven, electricity usage per pound of material in each vehicle, and hundreds of other variables.

To put the data into understandable terms for consumers, CNW translated it into a "dollars per lifetime mile" figure, or the energy cost per mile driven. When looked at from that perspective, the Prius and other hybrids quickly morphed from fuel-sippers into energy-guzzlers.

The Prius registered an energy-cost average of \$3.25 per mile driven over its expected life span of 100,000 miles. Ironically, a Hummer, the brooding giant that has become the bête noir of the green movement, did much better, with an energy-cost average of \$1.95 over its expected life span of 300,000 miles. And its crash protection makes it far safer than the tiny Prius.

Such information should be of major concern to senior citizens - especially those on a fixed budget.

If seniors need a small gas-sipping car for city travel, however, the undisputed champion is Toyota's own gasoline-powered subcompact, the Scion xB, whose energy cost averaged a negligible 48 cents for each mile traveled over its lifetime.

Fully armed with all the facts, seniors may want to zip down to their nearest Toyota

dealer and trade in their Priuses for Scion xBs. That would be the equivalent of reducing their energy footprint from a size 24D to about a size 5A. In the case of global warming, one small step for man may turn out to be a giant leap for mankind.

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James L. Martin ([JMartin@60plus.org](mailto:JMartin@60plus.org)) is president of the 60 Plus Association, a national nonpartisan senior citizen organization based in Arlington, Va.