

My bike & I - Tony Juniper

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Friend of the Earth's executive director chats to LC about his first bike, his perfect day on two wheels and cycling's role in preserving the environment.

Do you remember your very first time on a bike?

Yes, I vividly remember the triumph of staying upright for the first time on two wheels. For some reason, I was as a young child very nervous about going it alone without stabilisers and the feeling of liberation and possibilities that came with that first time on a proper bike was wonderful.

Can you tell us about your first bike?

My first proper bike was a red Triang. I think I must have been about eight when I got it. They were small wheeled things, a bit like Moultons but more basic and for children. My parents bought it for me and I remember it transforming my life. Even as a small child I was an avid naturalist and that bike opened up previously undreamt of horizons. The river Thames and its amazing wildlife was for the first time within my own personal range and so were woodlands and swamps that I previously could not reach. Getting that bike was a moment of real liberation.

What do you ride these days?

I now have three bikes (or at least two of my own and one shared one). The shared one is the newest and I have to say is one of our most prized household possessions. It is a Bakfiets long cargo bike. If you've not seen one of these, they are an amazing Dutch bike with a huge wooden cargo bay on the front. This can carry a vast amount of shopping and or several children and our dog. It has wonderful top quality brakes and gears and even has lights that come on automatically when it gets dark. The looks we get when out on this eye-catching machine remind me of the time when I first bought a Brompton back in 1991: people stare, take on board the unique spectacle they are witnessing, and then they say, 'what a fantastic idea'. I do think these things will catch on, especially as oil prices rise. It's another way of minimising car use. We use it to bulky stuff like the week's food shopping and to move logs and so on. I still ride a Brompton nearly every day for work in London and I still after 16 years (I'm on my third one now) find it as indispensable as ever. As a daily commuter it really transforms the quality and reliability of my schedule. It's amazing how many are now on the train each day. From one or two, there are now dozens. My third bike is a standard sit up and beg type of thing. I use that one for getting around Cambridge where I live.

Where do you enjoy riding?

I mostly ride for work and doing errands. I still enjoy it, even though I don't get to do the off road or more relaxed holiday cycling that I have done in the past. I cycle mostly around Cambridge and London, although my Brompton is very well travelled, having done a turn in most UK cities that I have visited over the years. I'm sure I'd be so much fatter if I didn't get a good go on my bike each day.

Where in London do you enjoy cycling the most?

I get around central London a lot and have over the years worked out quite a lot of different routes that keep me away from cars as much as possible. I'm not sure I have any particular favourite routes, although cycling around the City and Westminster can be nice –so much nicer than being entombed on the tube.

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What's the best thing about being a cyclist?

There are so many things I love about cycling that it is hard to know what is best. I think it is the sense of freedom and self-sufficiency it brings. No fuel needed, no timetables to worry about, guaranteed arrival times. It's great. It's surely also the most sustainable transport, and for an environmental campaigner, that comes high up too. I also value cycling for keeping me reasonably fit. I find it almost impossible to set aside time for trips to the gym or swimming pool and getting on the bike keeps me in shape.

Do you consider yourself a good cyclist, and why?

I've been cycling around London and Cambridge for 20 years and before that spent nearly the same time cycling around Oxford, where I grew up. In that time I've not had a major crash or injury, and to my knowledge I haven't caused any accidents either. I did get knocked off a motorbike a couple of times, but when it comes to pedal power, I've been safe so far (touch wood). I am really careful, use a mirror, reflective strips – when it's dark I'm lit up like a Christmas tree – and I wear a helmet for London cycling. I generally ride very defensively. I think I'm not bad, but like anyone probably could get better.

Any pet hates when it comes to cycling?

The over-revving of diesel powered vans and trucks behind me when I'm on a bike really gets me mad. People charging around urban areas between traffic queues in low gear with engines thrashing some clapped out old toxic tin box sums up the futility of much driving in town.

What's your idea of a perfect day on two wheels?

Sunshine, birdsong, no cars.

What needs to be done to ensure Londoners make the most of cycling as a mode of transport?

The Government really needs to start taking cycling seriously as a major future transport mode. We've had various official commitments to make cycling more attractive but to call what we have seen so far as inadequate, unambitious and deeply uninspiring is to put it far too politely. Despite the lip service, we have more cars than ever before and as a result increased carbon dioxide emissions from transport. Hopefully things will change, if not only for environmental reasons then perhaps we will see some more done because of increased oil prices and the problems we now face because of obesity. Proper segregated cycle lanes strike me as the key. A trip to The Netherlands and Denmark demonstrates why. There are also proper cycle parking facilities at stations. Here in the UK, cycle parking at rail stations is more often than not a complete joke. At Cambridge station, cyclists can spend 10 minutes some mornings trying to find somewhere to put their bike. There is only a small area set aside for cycles, compared to the vast concrete acres available for parking cars. Cycling rates are far higher in some other countries because cyclists are encouraged to use their bikes through proper and safe facilities and the same would of course be true here. The main difference is our deeply un-green government and its lack of imagination.

You've been the public face of Friends of the Earth for six years. What will you miss about it when you stand down in 2008?

I'm not sure yet. I think it will depend on what I do next and how much of my new role will be like what I do now. I think probably it will be the rare passion that is shared by such a lovely group of people working together. There are so many brilliant things about Friends of the Earth that in different ways I am bound to miss all of it, but conscious that after 18 years (six as director) it is time for a change, I have decided to move on and seek out new challenges.

Friends of the Earth has set new benchmarks as far as a campaigning organisation is concerned. Do you have any advice for cyclists campaigning for better cycling facilities or working to promote cycling?

Getting people involved is often the critical factor that gets campaigns to succeed. If you can show

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decision makers that people are on your side, then very often they will go the right way. This can be done with public meetings, petitions and demonstrations and so on. Media coverage is also vital in getting support for new ideas. If you can sustain broadcast and newspaper interest for an idea then you are far more likely to get what you want. There are lots of ways to do this, but the key is to have some media-savvy people who know how to get things reported. Direct action also has its place, but needs to be done thoughtfully and above all safely.

What challenges still face the environmental movement? What role can cyclists play in this?

I think the main challenge we face now is to get the culture changes that will underpin shifts in lifestyles. The politicians increasingly talk about green issues, and so do the corporations, but the thing that needs to move further now is public attitudes. I think the companies and political parties are ready to move but will only do so if they see public demand. Cycling is one of the most visible and practical things that most of us can do in signalling our willingness to make personal changes, alongside recycling and changing light bulbs, for example. The more of us who cycle and do it for environmental reasons, the quicker the culture will change. It is easy to talk about change but actually doing things is so much more powerful. Getting on your bike is an inspiring act of leadership that can really change the world. When I turn up to meetings on my Brompton it really sends a signal that we are serious at Friends of the Earth.

What next for Tony Juniper?

Don't know yet. I do know, however, that what I will do next will be environmental and will make a difference. I'm not leaving Friends of the Earth for a change in direction or my personal mission, it is really a question of finding new personal challenges and a sense of change having been with one organisation for nearly two decades. I am now starting to consider specific opportunities as we begin the search for my successor and I expect to make some decisions about my future during the spring or early summer. If anyone has any good suggestions, then please drop me a line.

If you could ride off into the sunset on your bike, where would you ride to?

If I could get on a bike and go for a ride wherever I wanted, I think I'd fancy a touring holiday around northern Norway or Sweden in the high summer. Actually, this would be cheating, as there would be no sunset at that time of the year!

ABOUT TONY JUNIPER

Tony Juniper has been executive director of Friends of the Earth (www.foe.co.uk) for six years. He will stand down from the role in the latter half of 2008. He originally joined FOE in 1990 as its tropical forest campaigner, coming from the conservation charity Birdlife International, where he was regarded as one of the world's foremost experts on parrots.

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