Wheel the Earth

**HER Helmet Thursdays cuts carbon emissions and costs.**

**By Mari Lynch Dehmler**

I asked a local businessman what Earth Day brought to mind. His response: “Taking a day off from oil!” Not a bad idea. And it’s not only doable; it can be fun.

A Monterey Bay Aquarium exhibit shows how human populations are drawn to coastal areas. Those of us living on the Central Coast know others want to join us here, if only as visitors.

That means increased traffic along with air, noise and water pollution. As one of the largest sources of carbon dioxide emissions, motorized transportation is a prime contributor to climate change.

As grave as it is, climate change competes for attention with today’s economic crisis. When this month’s financial bottom line presses hard, it makes sense that people try to ignore climate change.

In March 2009, Weekly readers identified cloth bags as the best green/eco trend. I was disappointed; those have been around for 30 years. But I was disappointed in myself too because I hadn’t been stretching to take new actions.

So I decided to start biking regularly for transportation, something I’d done before moving to rural Monterey County in 1981. Soon I was helping tourists on our bikeways. From that was born “Helmet Thursdays,” a free online guide. In June 2009 I began taking posters announcing the guide to stores and hotels.

Then, last October, I talked with the manager of a Carmel Row business who said they were starting half-off Fridays to bring in new customers, due to the slowed economy. An idea came to mind: Attract new customers and help the environment by having “Helmet Thursdays,” with discounts for customers who bicycle. (The helmet would serve as evidence.) At first I quipped the idea in my mind, I couldn’t spare the time to start it.

But the Earth can’t wait until we all have enough time.

In November 2009, the Monterey City Council unanimously adopted the city’s Bicycle Transportation Plan. Also addressed was “Attitudes and Usage of Monterey County as a Destination,” with representatives from the Aquarium and Convention and Visitors Bureau speaking.

Helping visitors leave ears at hotels, at least some of the time, was suggested. And the desire was expressed to build a reputation as one of the most bike-friendly places in the country.

I recognized that HER Helmet Thursdays could help. Attracting visitors who want to bike here can strengthen our economy—and in a way that lessens visitors’ environmental impact. It can also inspire locals to support businesses and organizations, and to bike more ourselves.

And so, Thanksgiving week 2009, I invited the first HER Helmet Thursdays participants to join a new ecology-economy partnership. Business owners and organization directors quickly recognized the ease and value of participating.

By the time I took a break from extending invitations, there were 100 participants—in Big Sur, Carmel, Carmel Valley, Carmelville, Del Rey Oaks, Gaviota, Greenfield, Marina, Monterey, Moss Landing, Pacific Grove, Salinas, San Ardo, Sasset and Soledad.

HER is an acronym for Hotels (and other lodging), Educational attractions and Entertainment venues, Restaurants (and other places selling food or beverages, including wineries). HER also stands for Mother Earth, since she benefits from more bicycling.

In November 2010, Monterey.com reported: “HER Helmet Thursdays project helps almost 500 people bike while visiting Monterey – in just 3 months.”

This is a long-term sustainability project with no scheduled end-date. The project has been launched as a community service project, with no ads to buy and no fees to participate.

Cyclists of all ages and abilities are essential to the success of this partnership. If you are able, please hop on your bike and support the participants. Walk in with your bike helmet in hand on a Thursday, and—bingo—get a discount.

For lodging discounts, there are special arrangements. You don’t need to bike to the place of lodging to get a discount. It’s only necessary to show them you’re going to do some biking while here. Simply BYOB (bring your own bike) or rent one here to get a discount on a Thursday night stay.

Besides reducing emissions, cycling delivers strengthened community relationships (you tend to slow down and connect with people more), improved personal health and pure pleasure.

Want to take a day off from oil? Do it—and make the first one a Thursday, Happy Earth Day, Monterey County! 🌍


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November 2015