

# 'Automobility' the real menace to island living

**Our car culture is making the lives of many islanders less sustainable**

**Phillip Vannini, Times Colonist**

Published: Thursday, July 10, 2008

Ferry-dependent community residents are used to quirky schedules, peak-tourist-season invasions and the neglect of distant landlubber governing authorities.

But a new menace looms on the horizon. It threatens to turn their safely insulated island lives into a forgotten, unreachable world. It's a menace that could destroy a sustainable, unique way of life and sink a meaningful part of Canadian culture on the West Coast.

The menace isn't a ferry boat, a ferry corporation or even a government that defines aquatic highways as liquid assets instead of cultural capital.

The menace is the demise of automobility -- the end of a gas-fuelled dream that is unsustainable, both culturally and economically.

With each new fuel surcharge added to ferry fares, island life changes dramatically, to the point that the ability of islanders to regenerate their way of life across generations has been seriously compromised.

Diversity, the lifeblood that fuels island life, is also at risk.

As diversity is lost, so are community integration, civic spirit, economic vibrancy and collective identity.

What follows might be the death of island living as we know it.

This equation in social ecology is simple: As the cost of going to town increases, island living becomes less and less sustainable.

In hundreds of interviews with islanders over the past two years I have met many who have witnessed the ugly, normally hidden side of life on the coast.

On many of the Gulf Islands, some families, unable to commute to work off-island, camp for the summer and rent their homes to vacationers from the mainland and elsewhere looking for an idyllic island getaway.

The pressures can be found in communities like Swindle Island, where a four-litre jug of milk costs \$11 or \$12, or in Bella Bella, where diabetes is on the rise and foot passengers returning from a Port Hardy grocery store are charged for each box they bring onboard.

That's why people there are turning to cheap, durable yet unhealthy food like pop and chips.

Automobility, a religion that has made the automobile the centre of our universe, is culturally, politically and socially antithetical to island living. Yet it has been the prevailing lifestyle of North Americans for more than half a century.

Recognizing this is a first step to halting it. Disconnecting automobility from marine mobility is the first crucial step to making a ferry boat feel less like a bridge and a small island feel less like a sprawling suburb.

Reducing the dependency of small islanders on the rest of the world and its ways -- including the system of automobility -- might actually put small islanders at the forefront of a global movement in sustainable living.

Making ferry travel free for walk-on passengers and cyclists, providing discounts for high-occupancy vehicles, giving more aid for car pooling, investing in rural public transit and providing free parking at terminals all seem to be ideas that could make island living less dependent on automobility, more island-like and less disconnected.

They might also reverse the threat to a unique way of life on Canada's West Coast.

Phillip Vannini is an associate professor at Royal Roads University's school of communication and culture with an interest in B.C. Ferries' social and cultural aspects.