

Life & Times of a Biodieseler



Rich Grogan often gets asked about the political sticker on his jury-rigged biodiesel station wagon.

In America, cars allow us to see places we have never seen before. Whether we are traveling the Eisenhower Interstate System, or William Least Heat Moon's "Blue Roads," we love our cars because they take us to places far flung and connect us to friends and family in other parts of the country.

But it is quite obvious that we have too much of a good thing. The EPA last estimated that 31 percent (as of 1997) of our carbon emissions are from transportation,

with a significant portion of that coming from cars. Car manufacturers haven't exactly heeded the call to produce smaller, more fuel efficient vehicles. In fact, about the only thing they have given us are hybrids and ethanol flexible fuel vehicles. Hybrids still use plenty of gasoline, and they offer no gas mileage improvements over traditional vehicles in highway driving, while ethanol is a questionable alternative at best.

But almost two years ago, I found a solution I ▶

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thought could make a difference: biodiesel.

At the time, I was living in Chapel Hill, N.C., and I came across Piedmont Biofuels (www.biofuels.coop), a cooperative that offers biodiesel to customers through a couple of local pumps. Because of North Carolina’s temperate climate, 100 percent biodiesel (B100) can be used almost year round — biodiesel, because it is made from fats, does not agree with very cold temperatures.

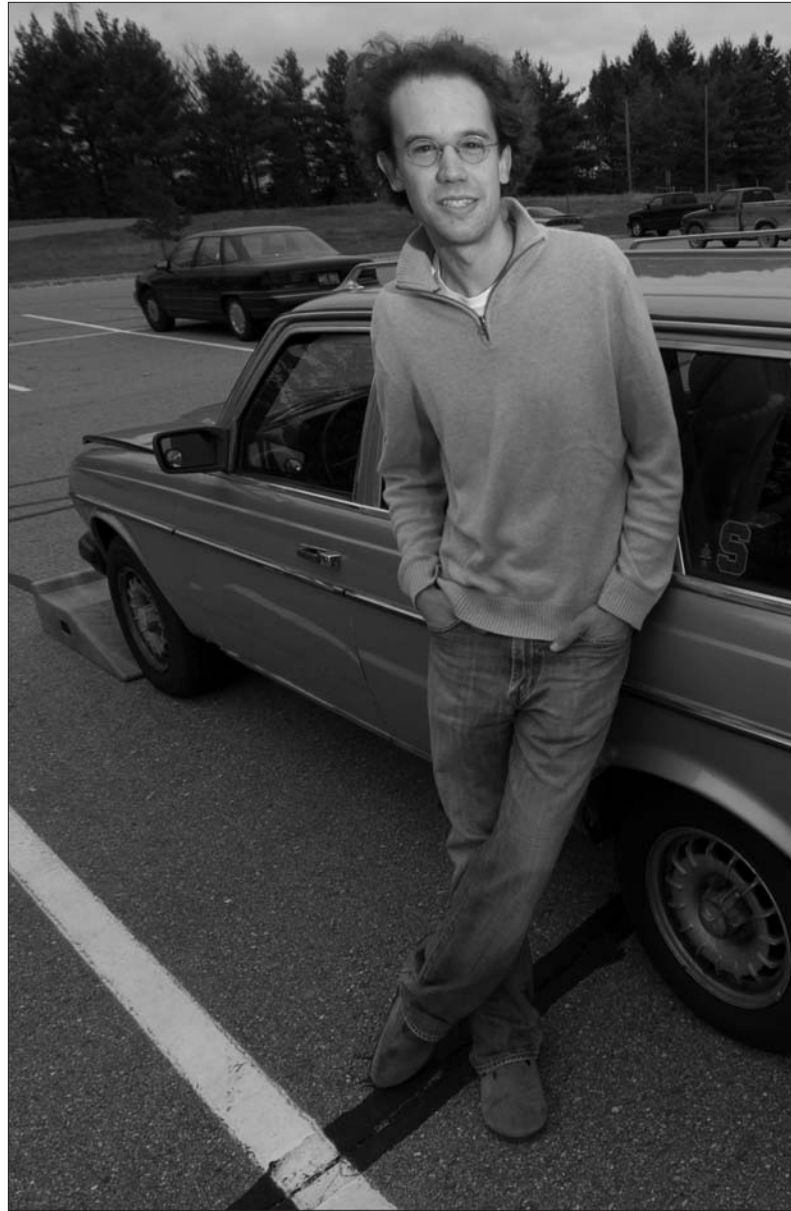
The only thing to do was sell my car and buy an old clunker diesel.

With the endorsement of my wife, our biodiesel adventure began in earnest. First, we secured a two-tone — not in a good way, but because of junkyard sheet metal repairs — 1980 Mercedes 300TD station wagon. The rear hatch badging indicated a turbo under the hood, but a test drive assured me that was not the case. In fact, this was the first of many “presents” that the former owner left me. My favorite was his extensive use of duct tape on pressurized hoses.

Biodiesel, at least in May 2005, was still relatively new outside of government car yards and city bus fleets. That meant I had to seek out a lot of information for myself. I was not prepared for the many puzzled looks and confused head scratching I encountered as I asked for advice about how often to change fuel filters or whether to replace rubber fuel lines in old diesels. (Many people contend that biodiesel eats through rubber hoses because it is an excellent solvent).

After a Maaco paint job and some shadetree repairs (one mechanic, John, drove my car for a week because his was “broke down” before calling me to tell me the job was complete), the time finally came to fill up with B100. A representative from the co-op, Evan, picked me up on Franklin Street in Chapel Hill and awarded me with key #1 for the co-op’s new pump. There were more than 60 key slots by the time I left Chapel Hill in May 2006.

There is something great about driving without using fossil fuels. Driving in a car that is powered on nothing but the remnants of old fried food and soybeans gives one a feeling that is hard to express.



Some who did understand are the many people I met at the pump, located at the Town of Carrboro’s Public Works Department. I got to know several biodieselers there, while quizzical public works employees stared at us and wondered why we would drive all the way across town to fill up our cars with grease.

I am not religious, but sometimes I feel like a religious person when people stop at my car and inquire about my sticker that reads “Biodiesel: No War Required.” I usually end up giving a brief lec-



ture about biodiesel and its environmental and social benefits. I am guaranteed a glance, mostly because it is unusual to see such a big old car in everyday use. But this notice works to my advantage, as it invites questions, and with questions comes the opportunity to spread the word about alternative fuel use in this country.

I just moved to Michigan to attend Michigan State University. B100 is not sold near East Lansing, at least not that I have found yet. But if you look hard enough, you can find some biodiesel

blends lurking around.

The Department of Energy has an incredible map that allows consumers to locate alternative fueling stations anywhere in the country, and I have used that map to find some stations close to my new home (<http://www.eere.energy.gov/afdc/infrastructure/locator.html>). My wife and I had our first adventure recently — a half-hour drive to fill up with B20; not B100, but better than straight petroleum.

On the way to the station — adventure, more puzzled looks, and most of all, getting to know the environment of Michigan. Owning an alternative fuel car is nothing if not an adventure, but it is an active and engaging one. You meet people you never thought you would. And, more importantly, you start to understand how public policy works against you in some cases, and how it can help in others. Our government and society is a confusing labyrinth of grants, often juxtaposed with disincentives. As people who love nature and our environment, it is our responsibility to understand this complex system if we are ever to change it.

As of writing this essay, I am contemplating selling my biodiesel car. The combination of few fuel options and Michigan's harsh winters just doesn't make our old clunker a viable option anymore. But I am just beginning my alternative fuels adventure. I live close enough to campus to walk, which is the ultimate alternative fuel. And, as a Ph.D. student, I plan to research alternative fuels, and my research is getting me excited about future alternatives that are even more eco-friendly than B100. It is my hope that soon we can all enjoy our environment while emitting nothing but joy. ☺

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