

Editorial



Prof. Dr. Eckhard Kutter,
head of the "Transport" department, asks:

"Why isn't the potential for
environmental protection in the
transport sector being used?"

The consumption of fossil energy (petrol, oil, coal) serves as a bench-mark for the extent of human interference with the earth's climate. The transport sector accounts for between 20% (if just the fuel directly consumed is counted) and 30% (including road building, and vehicle construction and disposal) of such consumption. Transport is not only problematic with regard to the climate, however; it is also growing far too quickly, is inefficient and conflicts with other interests.

If transport is cheap and readily available it takes on compensatory functions for other problems, e.g. inadequate provision of basic services or unfavourable spatial structures. This, however, induces a "transport spiral": initially, transport represents a useful opportunity; subsequently, though, settlement structures and behavioural patterns change, and at some point a situation of "forced mobility" arises.

Transport policy as currently practised wastes energy. A car is actually inappropriately designed for the requirements of normal transport situations; it is really suited only for the marginal case of motorway travel. And the price for the chance to travel at over a hundred miles an hour are half a tonne of excess weight (for power and safety) and the inability to drive in a way that is appropriate to city traffic and fuel efficiency. This, in turn, is why the climate "down here" – i.e. the air above our cities – suffers so heavily from transport. In metropolitan areas many are already conscious of the fact that the urban lifestyle and total automotive mobility are incompatible, and that in built-up areas there is simply too little space to live as people in rural areas do.

There is thus no shortage of reasons for saving energy and reducing CO₂ emissions – and of relatively simple opportunities to do so – in the transport sector and of course especially in private motorised transport. But these facts need to be clearly explained to the public at large. Unfortunately, politicians find this prospect very alarming. They are afraid of being "misunderstood" and "punished" at the next election. This explains the virtual lack of a transport policy worthy of the name. Higher petrol prices (to induce a decisive move towards smaller cars) – "No", car-drivers are already paying through the nose; a speed limit on the German "autobahn" (so that they are safe enough for smaller cars, – "No", that would endanger jobs and damage export; improved, transport-avoiding urban planning (to make some journeys unnecessary) – "No", everyone wants a house with a garden, etc.

We could live perfectly well with less transport. And at the start of each term of government office, concepts are regularly put forward for a fundamental change in transport policy. But by the next elections at the latest, the will to implement reforms has evaporated. And all the while the "transport spiral" keeps on spinning, and the economic cost of the transport sector continues to rise.