

Fossil Fuel Free Coast to Coast to Coast 2016

by Steve Muir, www.cycletrailers.co.nz, steve@cycletrailers.co.nz, 0210619296

Introduction

In January 2016, eight people towed four kayaks behind three tandem and two single bicycles from Christchurch to Arthur's Pass, then on to the West Coast and returned again to Christchurch over six days. The purpose was to have some fun, raise awareness of climate change and to encourage the use of active transport for as many journeys as possible, particularly those journeys that involve carrying loads and are made regularly, like commuting, shopping or training for multisport events.

The participants were mostly from the ICECycles free bike maintenance group in Christchurch, who encourage more people to bike by fixing and giving away bikes to people on low incomes. Steve Muir made the kayak trolleys to tow the kayaks and he also makes low cost, custom designed cycle trailers for shopping and general load carrying.

Day One

We all gathered at 2pm on Friday afternoon near the University of Canterbury. Three of the kayaks were towed by the three tandem bikes ridden by Steve and Meg, Olly and Ting, Dave and Emily. One kayak was towed by Alastair on a single bike and John rode another single bike carrying some heavier gear in a single wheel cycle trailer.



Departing from Ilam

After a couple of minutes we made it to Avonhead Road and realised that Olly and Ting had dropped behind, having punctured their front wheel less than 500m from home. They also realised that their 'comprehensive' tool kit lacked tyre levers, so Ting jogged back home to retrieve them and completed the repair. As a consequence, we left Christchurch slightly behind schedule around 3pm heading down Yaldhurst Road, onto the Old West Coast Road enjoying a gentle Easterly wind. The gentle Easterly soon gave way to a rising North-West head wind and thirty-degree heat, which made for challenging riding conditions. Slipstreaming with a five-meter kayak gap between riders does not provide much reduction in wind intensity, so it was a slower-than-expected crawl across to Springfield, going straight to the Springfield Hotel for some food before the restaurant closed at 8pm. We stayed the night with Tom and Dorothy, camping in their shed and a tent and enjoyed some of Tom's excellent home brew, except for Alastair who was suffering some very unpleasant effects of dehydration, so put himself promptly to bed to recover.

Day Two

We had a restless night sleep with the Nor-West gusting noisily around the tent and shed, and were not encouraged with the latest weather forecast – gale force Nor-Westers for several days, with possible heavy rain on the West Coast. We had a discussion about whether we really wanted to subject ourselves to such conditions, but agreed to give it a go. As we cycled towards Porters Pass the head wind was relatively light, and so began the much anticipated grunt up the big hill. All but Steve and Meg managed to ride up the whole way which was impressive. The forty-year-old tandem that Steve and Meg were riding just didn't have enough gears to cope with the extra steep section at the top (despite Steve standing on the pedals) so a small walk was enjoyed to the top, arriving around 90 minutes after leaving Springfield.



Dave and Emily on Porter's Pass checking out the fossil fuel dependant alternative



Olly & Ting nearing the top of Porter's Pass



Steve & Meg on Porter's Pass just before their short walk section

The downhills on the other side of Porters were exhilarating, with some of the kayaks reaching speeds around 40km/hr and handling very nicely. The wind was not as gale-force as anticipated, so we had an enjoyable ride through the spectacular scenery of the Craigieburn and Arthur's Pass regions, stopping for lunch at a friend's house at Castle Hill. The hairpins down the Craigieburn Cutting were no problem, and we did consider going for a paddle on Lake Pearson but general lethargy and time constraints intervened. After eight hours of increasingly hard riding we were very pleased to make it to our bach at Bealey Spur, then took a dip in the stream and headed to the Bealey Hotel for a meal.



John, Alastair, Emily & Dave just after Lake Lyndon



The view from the back of Dave & Emily's tandem



Lunch break at a friend's house in Castle Hill



Alastair enjoying some speed at the bottom of the Craigieburn Cutting



Rest stop at Mt White turnoff



Olly & Ting on the Mingha Bluffs



Dave & Emily on the Mingha Bluffs



Steve & Meg overtaking Dave & Emily heading towards Bealy Spur



Dave & Emily & John approaching Bealy Spur



John with the single wheel heading up Bealy Spur

Day Three

The weather forecast had not improved with 'possible' heavy rain still expected later in the day, but the rain on the Mingha side was light, so Emily, Meg and Olly decided to give the run over the Mingha-Deception a go. John with the single wheel trailer had to return to Christchurch for work commitments the next day, so we farewelled him, stowed the kayaks behind the bach at Bealey Spur and tandemed down to Greyneys Shelter. The crossing of the Bealey River was fine, and the three joggers enjoyed the run up the Mingha valley in increasingly heavy rain, making it almost to the pass when they met some others who had come over from the Deception Valley side, who described mid-thigh deep river crossings, increasing to over waist deep. They made the wise decision to turn back at that point and jogged all the way back to Arthur's Pass and down to Otira, a distance of around 40km.



Leaving Bealy Spur for the Mingha



Crossing the Bealy River



Joggers at Arthur's Pass having jogged up the Mingha and returned via the road



Steve, Ting & Dave riding solo to Otira before the rain got heavy

The cyclists continued in the rain to Arthurs Pass to check the latest forecast and talk to the Rangers. It was not good news. The possible heavy rain had developed into a severe weather warning with 300mm of rain expected in the next two days, maybe up to 400mm, accompanied by increasingly gale-force winds. This meant any attempt on the Deception River was out of the question and also the Waimakariri River would likely be dangerously flooded, and so the kayak section would have to be cancelled also. Rather depressed we made the decision to cancel the whole journey. Steve had to return to Christchurch on a shuttle for his Aunt's funeral anyway, and so decided to bring a car and trailer back and drive everybody home. While this would void the fossil-fuel-free goal of the journey, we recognised that fossil fuels can be handy when the weather gets to the severe stage and you are stuck in the mountains.

The riders continued down the Otira Gorge, going very cautiously down the steep hills. Steve discovered that the forty-year-old brakes on steel rims did not work that well in the rain, and scooted most of the way down, drum brake on the back cable-tied on full, and jumping off at regular intervals to keep the speed under control. The technique worked well and was an entertaining part of the journey. Before Steve departed from Otira, we shuttled a tandem and single bike down to the Deception River footbridge, unsure whether the joggers would make it through or not. As it turned out they were not needed, so were retrieved again at the end of the day.

Day Four

The six remaining participants awoke to gloomy clouds that looked like they would downpour at any minute, but the wind was not too extreme, so stoically the team decided to try and make the journey to Kumara Beach. With rain jackets and polypros on, they set off on the three tandems, to be greeted by blue skies and sunshine about ten minutes down the road. The jackets were happily stripped off and they enjoyed the warm sunny conditions for the rest of the day. At Kumara they managed to get cell phone reception and a message to Steve that maybe all was not over, but Steve was already proceeding back after the funeral, with the car and trailer. The team enjoyed a stroll on the beach and paddle in the waves, before cycling back to Otira, a 130km trip. Some of the local kids at Kumara enjoyed some joy rides on the back of the tandems when the team stopped to get dinner supplies.



Enjoying the beach



More enjoying the beach



Emily, Alastair, Meg, Ting, Dave & Olly on the West Coast



Joy rides for the locals

Day Five

The rain set in again heavily overnight, so a reconnaissance journey down to the Deception River confirmed that it was dangerously flooded and not wise to attempt crossing. In the warm persistent rain showers, Meg and Dave jogged back up to Arthurs Pass on the road while Steve, Ting, Emily and Alastair biked and walked up the Otira gorge. Olly was happy to have a rest day after the 40km run and 130km ride of the previous days, and drove the now un-needed car and trailer back to Bealey Spur. Having missed the walk up the Deception Valley, we were feeling a bit hard done by on the walking front, so headed to the tarns up Bealey Spur for the afternoon and enjoyed some great views.



Steve & Ting walking up Otira Gorge



Alastair & Emily catch Meg & Dave jogging with rain coming and going



Steve, Ting, Dave & Emily enjoying the finer weather East of the Main Divide



Getting an alternative walk section in, up Bealy Spur

Day Six

The weather turned from warm Nor-West to a cold South-Easterly overnight, which was bad for the kayak section, but the Waimakariri River had not flooded, running at around 110 cubic meters/second which was not at all dangerous. Having hauled the kayaks all the way up there, our incentive for actually getting them in the river was very high, so we agreed to proceed with the kayak section. We towed the kayaks back from Bealey Spur to Mt White Bridge and Steve, Olly, Emily and Dave all set off on the paddle. Alastair had to return to Christchurch by midday to be with his wife while she had a hip operation, so took the car home, dropping a spare tandem and kayak trolley at the Waimakariri Gorge Bridge on the way. The original plan was for him to have a very early start, drop a kayak at the bridge, and bike home very fast, then for someone else to bike up from Christchurch and help us get the kayak home from Oxford.



Four kayakers about to depart into the chilly South-Easterly



Dave, Emily and Olly setting off on the paddle leg

Emily was probably the most experienced paddler among us in white water boats, and had a borrowed a down river boat for this journey which was unfortunately less stable than what she was used to, resulting in her rolling and falling out multiple times. The South-East wind intensified as we approached the gorge and Emily began to get unacceptably cold. Under her very useful Z-sack we warmed up and discussed options for pulling out, deciding that Olly and Steve would continue, while Dave and Emily would get out at the Poulter River and jog or hitch back along the Mt White Road to the State Highway and try and join the others at Oxford. As it happened Dave and Emily hitched rides very easily, and spotted the two remaining cyclists Meg and Emily who had biked a tandem each by themselves, and were now having a well-deserved cuppa at Springfield. They had a very hard ride into yet another very strong but cold head wind, so had taken eight hours for the journey.

Steve and Olly had a cool and rainy paddle through the very scenic gorge, but kept warm enough while moving, so made it successfully through the gorge with one tip-out each and a dislocated rudder pedal. On arriving at the Waimakariri Gorge Bridge, Steve and Olly had just began to haul the kayaks up the bank when Meg, Ting, Emily and Dave all tandemed up, in great spirits and with impeccable timing. The wind and rain were both pretty intense, so we quickly loaded the two kayaks up and cycled onto Iain and Beth's house just out of Oxford, where we had a much appreciated shower and change into dry clothes. Meg heroically cycled off to buy some dinner supplies in Oxford and managed to get a bit lost in the grey murky conditions, so added another 25 or so kilometres to her already long bike ride that day.

Day Seven

Another cool rainy start to the day at 8am, but we were very pleased to see the wind was South West rather than South East as forecasted, so made very good time down South Eyre Road, getting into the outskirts of Christchurch around 10:30am, then were met by a few friends at New Brighton Pier. The weather had not sufficiently improved to induce us in for a swim or a paddle in the surf, so after a few photos and stories headed off home for lunch and dry out of all the gear.



A damp South West day heading for home



Arriving at New Brighton

Reflections

While some fossil fuel was used as a result of this journey, it was for exceptional circumstances of severe weather forecasts and attending the unexpected funeral of a close relative. The normal circumstances of ordinary-level bad weather and transporting large cumbersome loads long distances around the country, were all handled enjoyably without the use of fossil fuels. Had the weather and circumstances been friendlier, the journey would have been easily accomplished without fossil fuel as planned.

The team handled the tough conditions brilliantly, being realistic about the dangers and making wise decisions when needed, and managing to genuinely enjoy the experience despite the challenges. The team average age was around 51 years old, so the pacing of the trip over seven days seemed good – allowing enough time for aged bodies to recuperate and still enjoy the process.

Towing a kayak over long distances is a bit slower than riding a standard touring bike, but still enjoyable even up steep hills and into head winds. Traffic was generally very considerate with the exception of four vehicles who passed unpleasantly close or with insufficient space, which is a very small proportion of the total vehicles who passed us.

If you would like to have a go at doing more of your journeys around town or on holidays or expeditions, then please get in touch for more info or to get suitable trailers to assist you.