The Cost of Playing Outside: The Unadvertised Impacts of the SUV

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A current advertisement for the 1997 Infiniti QX4 sport utility vehicle (SUV) proclaims: "Careful, you may run out of planet." The advertisers most likely meant to suggest that the car is capable of taking the driver anywhere he or she wants to go, though the warning implies that number of locations could be exhausted. Increasing numbers of drivers have embraced the idea of owning a vehicle capable of traversing both city streets and backcountry roads. The environmental movement aided in popularizing the outdoors, drawing many people out of the city and into national parks and wilderness areas. However, when we begin to examine the actual environmental impacts of driving an SUV, it becomes apparent that there is more being lost than just driving terrain. The growing popularity of SUVs has caused serious environmental impacts ranging from increases in pollution rates to widespread climatic changes. Advertisers must begin to respond to the claims of environmentalists who at one time fueled the sales of SUVs, but now threaten to ruin them. In light of the growing concern over the negative effects of SUVs on the planet, advertisers have begun to portray the vehicles in a more environmentally concerned light.

Sarah Baird, with a concentration in environmental writing and an English minor, with environmental concerns. Inside the safe world of an environment should be enjoyed from the inside of the Tahoe. The OnStar system means the owners will never be lost or find themselves beyond the boundaries of assistance. The Chevy Tahoe allows for exploration without risk. SUV advertisers suggest that we needn't e xo se ourselves to the harsh conditions of a cruel environment. An advertisement for the Chevrolet Blazer in Backpacker (September 1999) plays on the idea of minimizing risk by offering the consumer a safe way to view the world. The Blazer advertisement contains a black and white photo of a rocky coastline with waves crashing and ominous clouds looming above. The Blazer is perched atop a large, white lighthouse and its headlights are providing a beam of light. The slogan promises: "A little security in an insecure world." We're meant to feel calm and cosseted amidst the uncertainty of the pending storm. The contrast between the lights and dark images allows the lighthouse and the Blazer to stand out as beacons in the storm. The Blazer's headlights lead us believe in the safety of an SUV in a threatening world.

Sarah Baird is from Denver, Colorado and is a senior environmental studies major with concentration in environmental writing and an English minor.

THE COST OF PLAYING OUTSIDE: THE UNADVERTISED IMPACTS OF THE SUV

BY SARAH BAIRD '00

The advertisers most likely meant to suggest that the car is capable of taking the driver anywhere he or she wants to go, though the warning implies that number of locations could be exhausted. Increasing numbers of drivers have embraced the idea of owning a vehicle capable of traversing both city streets and backcountry roads. The environmental movement aided in popularizing the outdoors, drawing many people out of the city and into national parks and wilderness areas. However, when we begin to examine the actual environmental impacts of driving an SUV, it becomes apparent that there is more being lost than just driving terrain. The growing popularity of SUVs has caused serious environmental impacts ranging from increases in pollution rates to widespread climatic changes. Advertisers must begin to respond to the claims of environmentalists who at one time fueled the sales of SUVs, but now threaten to ruin them. In light of the growing concern over the negative effects of SUVs on the planet, advertisers have begun to portray the vehicles in a more environmentally concerned light.

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learning of its 12 mile per gallon fuel efficiency, the Sierra Club called it a “suburban assault vehicle [that] will guzzle enough gas to make Saddam Hussein smile” (Akre 1999).

The advertising industry is addressing these environmental concerns largely by urging us to forget about them. It does not portray the SUVs against polluted backdrops and their impacts on the landscape appear minimal or non-existent. The ads show vehicles that respect nature, though, in reality, SUVs are major contributors to environmental degradation. The ads choose to focus on how safe the owner of an SUV feels. They promise us safety, security and power and play into our notion of “bigger is better.” The industry is also capitalizing on the cultural popularity of appearing “outdoorsy.” Even though only ten percent of drivers ever leave paved streets and highways, the ads suggest that an SUV can at least allow us to appear rugged (Storck as quoted in Goeway 2000).

After examining the tactics used to market SUVs, we begin to wonder if the advertisers have been successful in sedating environmental concerns by offering them harmonious images of the vehicles in the natural world. An article in The New York Times highlighted the story of 39-year-old single engineer who described himself as environmentally conscious and worked to conserve energy by keeping his heat low during the winter. In 1997, he traded in his 1994 Subaru Wagon for a 1994 Land Rover Discovery, the SUV with one of the lowest fuel efficiency ratings, so that he could make it to the ski slopes during large snowstorms (Bradsher 1997). This consumer is not alone, as evidenced by the fact that the over 60 million light trucks on the road today is more than triple the number in 1975 (Bradsher 1997). In response to the growing popularity, environmental groups such as the Sierra Club continue to speak out about the impacts of the SUV and many groups and individuals are pressuring Washington to raise the standards for the vehicles, ultimately leading to “greener” SUVs (http://www.sierraclub.org/globalwarming/news/prsrel5%2D27%2D99.html). The industry does not appear to be receptive to the proposed changes. Though it owes part of its success to the environmental movement, the industry blatantly disregards the concerns of the environmentalists by offering false images of environmentally-friendly vehicles.

Works Cited


Toyota. [www.toyota.com, accessed 2/1/00]