

Watt's Happening? #141

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from Alaska to Argentina with Solar Energy



Keegan Taccori (left) and Joel Hayes are travelling in their all-electric solar-powered van from Alaska to Argentina, the adventure of a lifetime. But an adventure with a cause – they're talking with every one they meet about solar energy and climate change, and why the way we use energy every day really matters.

To drive from Alaska to Argentina powered by solar energy, talking to as many people as possible on the way. That's the goal of two young Australian

adventurers who recently passed through Dawson Creek as they began their two-year trek south.

I met them at the Peace Energy office in Dawson Creek,

where they were charging their big blue electric van at our solar electric vehicle (EV) charging station. I invited them in for a coffee and a chat.

WHY?

“We are in transition to clean energy, but how do we speed that up?” asks Joel Hayes, who has a Bachelor of Science majoring in climate change adaptation. “We are meeting people at their own level. We’re not boring engineers preaching to people about clean energy, we’re just normal guys having fun talking to people as we travel.”

“These conversations need to be had,” explains Keegan Taccori, “but many people, especially our age, are just not engaged or interested. We hope that by meeting people we can add to the conversation and inspire interest.”

Keegan has a communications degree in journalism, and is filming their journey and the people they meet for a series of micro-documentaries on renewable energy and a larger documentary about solar in particular.

“I saw in university how science has trouble communicating with the public,” adds Joel. “Our journey, besides being a great adventure (and we both love adventure!) is an experiment in communication. How do we break down barriers and get people interested without pointing fingers?”

THE ELECTRIC VAN

Their electric delivery van was purchased used in Oregon and refurbished with living space and a large foldout roof-mounted solar array.

Joel (a self-described “avid backyard engineer”) did most of the renovations last year with help from Brett Belan of Solarolla, a solar scooter company. “A one year project that we completed in two months.”

With the solar array folded out, it can take a few days to get a few hundred kilometers of range for the van. If they want a fast charge, they can always top up at a regular EV charging station, but really, they’re not in a hurry. They would rather linger for a while at each place they stop, attracting attention and talking to people one-on-one.

They began at Coldfoot, Alaska, at the Arctic Circle, and their long journey will end at the southern tip of South America. So far, about half of the energy

needed to power the all-electric van has come directly from sunlight.

EV INTEREST IS HIGH

Public interest in electric vehicles is growing, with 4 million EV’s sold around the world this year, expected to reach 5 million by early next year. Filling your car with electricity costs about one quarter of the cost of the same fill with gasoline (estimates vary), and EV’s require almost no maintenance, so they promise some real cost savings, both to owners and to the environment. Plus they’re a thrill to drive, with unbeatable acceleration and handling.

But they’re hard to find. A recent survey by Clean

Energy Canada called all 322 dealerships in BC that qualify for the province’s EV rebate program (\$5000 for a pure electric like the Nissan Leaf or Tesla, \$2500 for a plug-in hybrid like the Toyota Prius Prime), and found that only 40% have electric cars on the lots available for test drive or purchase.

This will likely change quite quickly, however, as

every major vehicle manufacturer is quickly electrifying their product lines. Expect dozens of new models of cars and trucks next year, both full electric and plug-in hybrids. Ford, GM, Honda, Toyota, Nissan, BMW, Volkswagen, to name just a few, are all rushing into the EV market. Even vacuum manufacturer Dyson has announced the release of their own EV in 2020 that will be “radically different”!

Electric vehicles and solar energy are only part of the solution, however. Why is it important to change the way we do things? When I flick a light switch or drive my car to work in the morning, why does it matter where that energy is coming from? Why should I care?

Perhaps two adventurers from Australia, driving south in a solar powered van and talking with thousands of people along the way, can help inspire that conversation.

Joel and Keegan are self-financing their solar energy road trip. To make contact with them, offer assistance or follow their adventure, email: routedelsol@gmail.com

