

Vietnam's true carbon threat: its kingdom of 50m motorbikes

CO2-spewing old two-wheelers an obstacle to decarbonization

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TOKYO -- Vietnam has drawn unwanted attention in recent months for controversial coal-fired power plant projects. But the country has another big source of carbon emissions: its ubiquitous motorbikes.

Vietnam is home to roughly 50 million motorbikes, according to the National Traffic Safety Committee -- five times as many as in Japan. Sales fell 17% in 2020 amid the pandemic but still reached about 2.71 million units.

Economic growth has added to the problem, allowing some people to own two motorbikes: one for commuting and one for pleasure. Suited for navigating the multitude of narrow streets, they are the most popular means of transportation in the country.

Cars are expensive and incur high taxes, putting them out of reach for many. Only 400,000 or so four-wheeled vehicles were sold in 2020.

Vietnamese consumers have not acquired the habit of frequently upgrading their bikes to new models, meaning that the streets are full of exhaust-spewing two-wheelers. There is little room for environmentally friendly electrics or hybrids to cycle into the market.

Ho Quoc Bang, an environmental expert at Vietnam National University in Ho Chi Minh City, has blamed motorbikes and other transportation for 99% of the city's carbon dioxide emissions. Bang is also concerned about air pollution from exhaust and tire dust.

Rail services within Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City could start operating as early as this year. But they are unlikely to prompt people to ditch motorbikes.

"If I have to walk hundreds of meters to a train station, then I'd rather choose a motorbike," an office worker living in Hanoi said.

Motorbikes are woven into the fabric of daily life in Vietnam, and taking many of them off the road will be a challenge. Rolling out electric bikes or heavily taxing outdated models will be imperative. These two-wheeled emitters of greenhouse gases are a more pressing issue than coal-fired plants.