

ROAD SAFETY IN TASMANIA IN 2021.

I make these observations and comments as a Tasmanian driver with over fifty five years experience and nearly a million kilometres covered. I have driven everything from small sedans up to buses and full size medium rigid trucks. I have towed trailers, boats, single axle caravans, heavier dual axle trailers and dual axle caravans. Driving experience has been in Tasmania, South Australia, Victoria, New South Wales, Queensland and the A.C.T.

My training includes that by the Tasmania Fire Service for driving appliances under operational conditions, both on the road and off-road.

In my employment I drove both light vehicles and trucks, some over-width, over most parts of the State.

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OVERVIEW

When a person is working, they can do it in a safe manner, using the correct tools and methods of work. Things go better with practice, natural ability good working conditions and training. Or, they can use the wrong or faulty tools, poor lighting, no skills and no training and end up with a mess..

It is the same with driving safety. There is a need for good roads, good visibility, working mechanicals, ability to handle the vehicle in the conditions, ability to read the traffic and have a knowledge of the road rules.

Anything faulty or out of place is a hazard, likely to prevent the job getting done successfully.

Anything not known about the task at hand is “ “ “ “ “ “

Any inability to handle the work piece or tools is “ “ “ “ “ “

Any difficulty in seeing the work being done is “ “ “ “ “ “

The hazards for drivers are either fixed or mobile. Knowledge of the task is all about the Road Rules and the vehicle. Ability to handle the tools is driving skill. To see the work one needs good lighting and clear vision.

FIXED HAZARDS

The hazards mentioned below could occur anywhere, but all of them occur in Tasmania.

They take the form of dangerous corners, badly placed entrances, inadequate signage, poor signage, badly placed signage, badly parked vehicles, un-repaired potholes, corrugations and rutting (even in sealed surfaces), narrow vehicle lanes, poor street lighting, bad road drainage, the lack of sufficient overtaking lanes and roadside growth being allowed to impinge on the travelled area.

Signage.

Road designs that were suitable for 1950 are certainly not suitable for 2021. While vehicles are better, the traffic density is much, much higher and drivers have to act quicker when an opportunity occurs. Traffic and directional signs need to be larger and placed well before the applicable site, as well as at it.

Design and Maintenance.

Road corners and bends that have incorrect cambers, gutters that overflow and allow water to stream across the road surface, drains that block causing flooding, loose gravel, poor or blocked sight-lines, un-marked temporary road hazards, uneven surfaces and poorly maintained line marking all contribute to the difficulties faced by the Tasmanian motorist.

Road Breakup.

Every road will develop potholes, surfaces will break up. Years ago the traffic was slower and less dense. Drivers had more time to see the problem and more chance to steer around it. Not so today – see it, drive over it. Swerve a bit and you'll hit an on-coming vehicle, or go off the road.

Overtaking lanes.

All of the State's highways and a lot of other main roads as well, should have overtaking lanes every five kilometres and on every substantial hill. This is because slow and fast traffic do not mix. There is often sudden braking, poor visibility, cutting in too early and much angst.

Where the highway traffic density is high, there should be an overtaking lane in addition to the regular two lanes going up a hill. In Tasmania this warranted in several locations.

It is to allow lighter vehicles to travel at or near the limit in the right lane, heavy trucks etc to travel in the left lane, and light trucks etc to travel in the middle lane.

Roadside growth.

Where trees, shrubs and grass are allowed to grow alongside our roads, they are often the cause of trouble. The thicker and nearer growth becomes a fire hazard and with climate change this is happening more often and to a greater degree. Shrubs and grass grow out into the traffic area. Cyclists are forced to brush past the growth, or veer further out into the traffic lanes..

Also, trees get blown over in the wind with disastrous results. Dead trees and limbs fall at anytime. Lives have been lost this way.

Even without physically intruding, the growth affects sight-lines.

When there is an on-road incident the vehicles have no-where to go for fear of hitting a tree.

Lighting.

In-operative street lighting means that parked vehicles, cyclists in dark clothing and many other objects all temporarily become invisible when a streetlight or two, or three are not working. Yes, there are cyclists who ride at night without lights. I have even come upon skate-boarders riding on the road at night in poorly lit areas.

Making a report to TasNetworks results in a request to supply them with the pole numbers of the faulty lights. Getting a number while driving at night is impossible. It used to be that the HEC sent the emergency crew out to check on things, when not attending to emergencies. Why not now?

A recent trip from Burnett St. in North Hobart to Taroona revealed over 22 faulty street lights.

Multiple hazards.

Anyone new to driving can get caught out by a road hazard that they have not encountered before. When two or more problems crop up in close proximity, things can go seriously wrong.

Add a mobile hazard to a fixed one and even an experienced driver may have trouble controlling things.

MOBILE HAZARDS

Slow moving vehicles travelling at well under the speed limit, stock on the road and cyclists in the traffic lane are of course a feature.

Traffic making unexpected moves, making moves suddenly even if expected, modern vehicle lighting with definite cut-off lines causing flashing due to road undulations, traffic moving at high speed, vehicle lighting defects, driver inexperience and lack of driving skills or lack of consideration for others, lack of spatial awareness and lack of knowledge of the road rules are all major problems.

When a volume of traffic is in motion, doing so in an orderly fashion, everyone's nerves are settled. A sudden change of speed, lane position or distancing between vehicles by one or two vehicles is bound to cause un-ease. This then leads to road-rage, possibly a mis-interpretation of the situation by others and possibly a traffic incident.

When a line of traffic queues, e.g. at a set of lights, the driver that stops well short of the line or vehicle in front is in great danger of getting shunted. Everyone behind automatically plots where they will stop, but unexpectedly their stopping distance is cut short.

Cyclists.

There is the question re cyclists: Why are they not riding in the cycle lane? It is often because there is too much gravel and debris in the lane. Councils and the State need to clean the cycle lanes at least monthly and after any big rain or storm.

Also, cyclists should be told to ride entirely within the cycle lane if at all possible. I see many riding with their wheels just inside the line, but with their bodies well outside it. This makes it very difficult for motorists to give them the necessary clearance.

Spatial awareness.

Drivers who do not know how big or small their vehicle is, often cause problems. Not proceeding when their vehicle is way smaller than the gap ahead causes a sudden halt when it would ordinarily not be expected. And stopping short in a queue is similar. Conversely, those who do not see their vehicle as being as large as it is often charge through a narrow space doing damage as they go. This can occur on the road, in car parks, in driveways and drive-throughs.

Turning.

The art of doing a right-hand turn is not understood by many drivers. Some stop in the middle of their lane, often blocking traffic trying to pass them. Others stop at an angle, and yet others stop with their front wheels turned. I have even seen vehicles stopped with all three mistakes evident. It never crosses their mind that there might be a safer method.

Back early last century it was common practice, when turning left in vehicles that did not have good turning ability, to swing out to the right and then cut in to the left right on the corner. This was especially so for the vehicles that were six metres or more in length .

This habit has persisted through the generations in some families, although vehicle turning ability has vastly improved. (Trucks still require it, depending on the length.) So I sometimes see a car swing right before turning left. It usually startles the drivers of other vehicles in the vicinity, as they do not expect it.

Inability to read the road.

There are drivers who travel down the road at a set speed and who do not allow for variations in the road /traffic conditions. Hills, bends, changes in road surfaces, side-winds, narrowing of the vehicle lane and oil deposits on it all mean nothing, apparently. The only thing to cause them to vary their speed is catching up to the vehicle in front.

Knowledge of the vehicle and night driving.

I often come across vehicles being driven at night without any lighting. The drivers do not understand that at night it is about being seen as well as them seeing other traffic. They do not realise that they could see the road surface better if they turned their lights on. I sometimes wonder if they even know how to switch them on..

Knowledge of the vehicle speed.

Many drivers assume that the speedo fitted to their vehicle is accurate. Also, many assume it to be inaccurate, but do not know by how much. Either way, they usually get it wrong. The road-side mobile speed monitors that display the reading back to the driver are often badly placed, as well as not recognised as credible. They only appear in some locations anyway, so many drivers do not come across them.

“All about me”.

The selfish driver is a real problem. Practices include going faster than the rest of the flow, using any chance to overtake and doing it aggressively, sometimes on blind corners. Plus, tailgating, disobeying directional arrows and ignoring amber lights are typical actions. Even shooting through on the left lane at traffic lights, even though the traffic in the other lanes has begun moving, just to save ten seconds is a frequent action. Blatant speeding (20kph or more above the limit) shows a severe lack of responsibility.

Towing or carrying a load is always a reason to go a bit slower. But those who choose to go slower without good reason often raise the ire of the motorists behind..Overtaking is then often attempted, sometimes causing others to take evasive action. Hanging well back in a snail trail will just give the impatient driver reason to jump in to fill the gap. A safe distance – yes, but an excessive and increasing gap/delay is a no-no when there is not a structured overtaking opportunity.

A lack of vehicle maintenance.

Misaligned headlights blinding on-coming drivers, individual lights not working and trailer lights not plugged in, are all evident on a daily basis. Also, tail-light bulbs pushed in the wrong way round so that the brake light is dim and the tail light appears bright, is a not uncommon “effect”. Sometimes a vehicle is seen with a complete failure of all the tail lights, or failure of a complete cluster at the rear. Such faults are easily detected by the driver who uses their mirror.

Driving on bald or worn tyres, driving with steering out of alignment, having broken mirrors, faulty wipers and even faulty brakes are other features of some vehicles.

Vehicle service periods have lengthened remarkably. Fuelling up is now a do-it-yourself task. Cars used to be seen by a mechanic every couple of months and by an attendant every week. Tyres got checked about fortnightly.

Now the tyres get neglected for months, it might be six months or more between mechanical check-ups. With the newer servo site plans the one air hose (if it is working) is out of sight around the corner.

THE WORLD OF TRUCKS.

While trucks come in a wide range of sizes and types, some of their drivers are pretty good at the art of safe driving.

Most of the long haul drivers are skilled, but from my observations, those in Tasmania are not as skilled or as courteous as their counterparts on the Mainland. Some of the log-truck drivers are the worst tail-gaters.

Trying to make time to get as many trips done in a day is the problem.

From my observations some of the short haul drivers and some of those involved in a trade are the ones more likely to display poor skills and attitudes. They have been seen pushing the speed limits, cutting in, ignoring amber lights, dis-obeying lane markings, parking in places that are usually signed as no-standing or no-parking, blocking traffic lanes and generally displaying poor driving attitude.

They are identifiable by what the vehicles carry, the vehicle design and signage. Even what they wear tells the observer what they are. Even though they are identifiable, they often still behave badly on the road.

On the road, the safer tradies and delivery drivers often have neater, cleaner, newer vehicles.

Road Works and Construction Vehicles.

One action, or lack of it, is leaving a rotating beacon on while in transport mode. The orange beacons are designed to act as markers to alert other motorists to the fact that the truck is involved in construction work and may move in odd ways. e.g. driver looking in mirrors while driving forward, moving at an angle compared to the traffic flow, etc. Driving down the road at the same speed as other traffic and away from any construction site is no place to have the beacon still operating. It just minimises the attention getting of the passing motorist.

BUSES.

A regular problem with buses is where the bus driver has not pulled into a bus stop early enough and the bus rear is still partially out in the traffic lane when stationary. This means that passing traffic must move over, often going into the on-coming lane.

Another problem is the incorrect use of the “Flashing 40” signs. These signs are meant to be used to indicate when a bus driver on a “school run” is about to, is currently, or has just completed a stop to allow school students on or off the bus. I have seen many instances where the signs are in use whenever a younger passenger (even a young adult) is picked up or dropped off, well outside school run hours. This causes the motorist to be busy scanning for children when there are no children involved. That in turn takes their attention away from the actual driving task. It also means that the flashing signs become the norm and drivers will ignore them.

I seldom have observed busses exceeding the applicable speed limit but those that were belonged to Metro Tas. A bit more often I see Metro Tas buses being driven aggressively, overtaking other traffic and generally trying to make up time. When this has occurred I have not seen any passengers onboard.

CONFUSING SITUATIONS.

Tasmania has not so long ago adopted the two variations of lane merging, i.e. end of lane, marked with “dots” at the end of the lane meaning give way to the traffic in the second lane, and the open lane, meaning that the zipper action be applied.

However, there are two common situations where drivers usually do not follow these rules and it works well, as opposed to what is supposed to occur.

The first is at the end of an overtaking lane, which has end-of-lane dots. Slower traffic travels in the left lane, faster in the right. At the end, by habit of years past, the front vehicle in the left lane uses their indicators signalling that they wish to merge while the front vehicle in the right lane assesses the situation and if necessary adjusts speed, then whichever vehicle in the lead proceeds to go ahead. This way the vehicle in the left lane may slow, or accelerate, but never has to wash their speed off to any degree. Vehicles in the right do the same.

In other words the drivers act as if the zipper rule applied. To follow the rules correctly, traffic in the left lane should slow and come to a stop if there is a string of traffic in the right lane.

The second situation is where traffic has either slowed markedly, or come to a halt on a road, while there is also traffic wanting to join from the left but is waiting behind a give-way line. It has become the norm that the drivers in the on-road queue will invite drivers from the left to fall in line in front of them. i.e. the zipper action.

And in both cases the second and subsequent vehicles in the right-hand lane do the same when it is their turn.

Yet in other instances the opposite applies. (When traffic in the right hand lane is moving and the cars on the left (from the side entry) wait until the traffic in the right lane clears).

Where there are no markings drivers seem to get confused as to who has right of way.

Either the end-of-lane dots need removing, or the two rules need re-writing to reflect reality.

Roundabouts always cause confusion re when to indicate and when to give way.

While the rules say to give way to traffic on the right, this means to traffic already in the roundabout or close to it. Traffic that is further away need not be yielded to. The idea is if you can merge, then do it. However, a lot of drivers wait for anything that they can see approaching at all.

Under the latest rules signalling left is only necessary when exiting, however there are many roundabouts where there are more than just four arms, or where the arms are unequally spaced. When the exits are closely spaced, signalling right during the first stages of the vehicle's progress around gives other drivers confidence that they need to wait just a bit more and are reading your intentions correctly. Not signalling leaves them in doubt. Particularly where the number of lanes builds and decreases around the perimeter.

Driver knowledge

Over the years traffic rules change, road design changes, traffic density increases, new types of sign appear, new versions of old signs are used and vehicles get more technical in their operation. Yet, in Tasmania there is comparatively little attempt to update the driver knowledge base. That which is done is not reaching much of its target, as evident from all of the habits of old.

Policing.

Going by Tasmania's population, the number of vehicles on the road, the number of vehicle related deaths and public expectations of 1950 (when vehicle ownership started to take off after the war years), compared to that of 2021, the Police Force is way under staffed.

Many times I have driven through Hobart and its environs and have not seen a Police presence, either on foot or in a vehicle.

Over the years only once have I seen Police on patrol on Christmas Day, but that is when there is a higher chance of drivers under the influence of something, making errors.

Also, the number of vehicle safety checks – being pulled over for tyres/wipers/lights/breath etc. has diminished compared to the number of vehicles out there.

Transport Officers used to check trucks and trailers more frequently too.

The Outcome.

The current infrastructure deficiencies can be summarised as too little road maintenance and out-dated design standards. Sometimes it is as if we are living in Cuba, it is so bad.

Driver deficiencies show up as infrequent vehicle maintenance, too few vehicle checks, poor driving attitude, poor driving skills, lack of vehicle knowledge, insufficient uptake of traffic rule changes, and too few police out and about.

Actions required.

Infrastructure

More regular patrols and earlier repairs. More frequent attention to the verges and nearby trees. Better drainage, better cambering, avoidance of gravel scatter. Better signage, earlier signage. Move entrances away from corners. Improve sight-lines, construct more overtaking lanes. Make the Midland Highway and Bass Highway a minimum of two lanes in each direction from Hobart to Burnie.

Build several speed check gantries so that drivers in all parts of the state can be assured that they are obeying the limits. Then there would be fewer surprises, less argument and better on-road behaviour. Such gantries are scattered across the Mainland. Drivers know exactly what their speed is and adjust their behaviour accordingly.

Suggested sites: Hobart: Southern Outlet near the Lea; Eastern Outlet as it passes Cambridge; Midland Highway near Brighton.

Launceston: East Tamar Highway; West Tamar Highway; Midland Highway near Perth, Bass Highway near Hadspen.

Devonport: Bass Highway near Latrobe and near Leith, or the bottom of Don Hill.

Re-education

Introduce regular and frequent driver updates in the media, covering subjects such as:

Turning procedures and rules; the use of roundabouts; why car lights are used and when; the need to maintain lights; the need to check tyre pressures; the need to maintain wipers; the use of mirrors; the use of mirrors for towing; tow ratings; understanding braking distances; tow coupling and the use of safety chains; correct loading; load restraint; the need to know the accuracy of the fitted speedo; use and maintenance of seat belts; understanding different road surfaces; assessing a vehicle's width and lane position; parking technique; stopping and queuing distances; speed regulation and speed limits; the reasons to slow; driving in wintry conditions; traffic rule updates; responsibilities toward passengers; alcohol and drug effects on driving ability; use by cyclists of cycle lanes; school buses and children; works sites; road etiquette.

Employ many more Police out on the road looking for dangerous behaviour and dangerous parking. For minor offences, help the drivers to learn with a warning, but record the warning. Even give a second warning. Then on the third instance, issue a fine. In other words, earn the respect of the public.

For serious incidents the offender needs to be charged outright.

Vehicle checks

Introduce a common sense annual vehicle check system:

Allow all mechanics to sign off on a customer's vehicle when serviced at least once per year and maintained with regard to lights, wipers, horn, tyres, steering, suspension and brakes. Have them issue a job sheet, as they should be doing now, but keep their electronic/hard copy version of it as their record (also as they should be doing now). Use secret drivers to put vehicles with faults through to check that the work is being done. - Pay a volunteer \$50 to put their car with a planted, or genuine, known safety fault through a strange mechanical garage and report what happened. If all ok, then that is it. If something is missed or done badly, then tee up a second car for a "second chance" – see ** below.

Tyre/steering/suspension work not done by the service mechanic could then be done by a specialist who would then sign off that particular section of the sheet.

The \$50 should cover any extra costs other than the actual repair/service. (transport & time). But the driver would know that they are helping to oversee the testing/repair procedure and keep the costs down, comparable to regular servicing.

No paperwork would need to be filled out other than the regular job sheet that is handed to the owner/driver. It could be photographed and that sent to an administrator for the records and paying of the \$50. The owner would keep the sheet till re-registering time, or pass it to a new owner.

There would only need to be a secret car once or twice per year in a suburb to keep the system honest, as a missed item or over-servicing would soon be checked with a ** second secret car. A third car would prove the situation. Honest mistakes get a second chance. A second error gets a warning, multiple errors get a notice in the local paper to raise standards.

It would operate like the Michelin Food Guide, but focussing on the negative side. Source the secret drivers from the R.A.C.T. membership.

Do not set up separate testing stations as they become a costly addition, time users, and a nuisance that many drivers cannot afford. Secret drivers will keep the system honest, but also keep the cost down as the time is booked, the vehicle is already on the hoist, the work was probably being done anyway, the parts can go on and un-necessary work will be avoided.

A mechanic could do his own vehicle, but they would still be open to getting a secret car in.

Home mechanics would need to go to a business once per year for a check, and pay a fee.

At the time of re-registration, the owner would supply the original job sheet, or get a copy from the mechanic, for sighting as evidence of testing/repair. It could be submitted either in hard copy or a photo sent on-line to Service Tas. Falsified paperwork would incur a severe fine for circumventing a safety issue. No job sheet, no rego.

The mechanic should not charge extra for the check, as they would not be doing anything extra to that which they ought to be doing now. Same checks and repairs, same paperwork, same records, same duty of care. Should they be asked for a back copy from their records, then a \$30 fee would apply.

The above system might have holes in it, but it would be acceptable to most, be low cost to the motorist, not require a great deal of administration and the \$50 x 100 occasions per year across the State would easily be covered by the reduction in costs associated with picking up the pieces following incidents.

Caravans

Incorrect tow vehicle – caravan loading has been identified as a major problem, giving rise to a number of excess sway/rollover incidents across Australia. It has become apparent that the average owner has no idea of the relevant weights of their combination. The manufacturer stated TARE does not reflect the actual situation and/or the ATM and GTM figures are often being exceeded, the tow-ball load is possibly over the maximum allowable, often before the van is loaded for the road. The tow vehicle is often overloaded, as well.

Even the supplier sometimes has no idea that things are going awry with a new van. Often, in the end the permitted capacity for food and clothing is exceeded without any water on board.

With second hand vans, the situation is often worse as there is no record of what has been added since the original TARE reading was taken.

Suitable tow vehicles are proving very scarce for a lot of the vans. Owners were led down the garden path by the inaccuracies coming from the caravan factories and the ambitious ratings by the vehicle manufacturers.

Various moves are being made around the country to get the manufacturers to quote real figures, help owners understand the problem, get actual loaded vehicle figures, remove the excess, or upgrade capacity where possible, and drive a safer rig. Quotes:

<https://www.caravanersforum.com/viewtopic.php?p=1362516#p1362516>

<https://www.caravanersforum.com/viewtopic.php?f=9&t=74396&p=1094617&hilit=queensland+caravan+education#p1094617>

Qld Police weight checking.

[Permalink](#)

Due to an increase in traffic crashes involving caravans and trailers, Police from the Capricornia District have undertaken training in conjunction with Transport and Main Roads in utilising vehicle weighing devices.

Police are engaging with all drivers, to inform them about correct weights whilst towing caravans and trailers and assist with driving safer!

[Queensland Police Service](#)

End quotes.

The situation is one where education and advice is needed. It will be some time before better-rated tow vehicles in suitable numbers become available. Owners have spent thousands in good faith on their vans. Fines will not resolve the matter any quicker.

For Tasmania there is an on-line list of weighbridge stations available. However, those stations are commercial operations tied to bulk goods operations. Occupying their facility for a couple of hours is not feasible, nor is it economically possible. To sort out a car-caravan situation there might be a number of weighings required to try out loads and placements.

Tasmania needs to set up a few cost free “Open Access Weighing Facilities” where an owner can come with their van or trailer and trial weigh various situations to attain a safe/safer arrangement. There needs to be a parking area, like that for semi-trailers, where vans can be separated, re-arranged etc.

There needs to be a toilet. Also a kiosk and shelter. The weighbridges need to be open for extended hours, 7 days per week. The facility needs to be automatic/self operated out of normal hours.

The “print-out” needs to be non-official (not recorded for official use) unless the owner wants it to be. This is so the owner can go away and come back having changed components/loads etc without incurring penalties.

During normal hours, (0800 – 1600 April to September, 0700 – 2000 October to March) an on-site official advisor could point out hitch problems, incorrect safety chain use, lighting problems, tyre problems and certify any machine docket as authentic, if required.

The site could be used for regular official truck checking purposes if a second bridge was installed alongside. That would offset the overall facility cost, plus the wages side of things.

This way the public have a way to find out if they have problems with their set-up before it gets nasty, get a chance or three to rectify it and when all is sorted, get a docket that indicates a satisfactory situation.

Again! It is all about education and making the best of a bad situation. The driver/owner has done nothing wrong as the figures quoted to them were incorrect and it will take years for the national tow vehicle and caravan fleet to get sorted.

Another area where Tasmania is way behind is that is no “TOW-ED” courses here, - no caravan towing training courses. Nor is there any testing as to the ability to reverse, park, stop, or turn with a caravan behind. Such courses can be found on the Mainland.

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29/07/2021