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## BEHIND THE WHEEL/2006 Lexus RX400h; The Hybrid Emperor's New Clothes

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**ONE** question lingers after driving the 2006 Lexus RX400h: How did it come to this, that Toyota is now selling a hybrid gas-electric vehicle with no tangible fuel economy benefits?

In my test-driving, the Lexus hybrid, which is based on the gasoline-only RX 330, did not achieve better mileage than the 2005 RX330 that I drove for comparison.

My hybrid tester's window sticker did boast a federal mileage rating of 31 miles per gallon in the city and 27 on the highway, compared with just 18 and 24 for the RX without the hybrid drivetrain. But the government's testing procedure has a habit -- one that seems to be exaggerated with hybrids -- of rendering fuel economy numbers as relevant to the real world as national energy policies have been to actually reducing dependence on foreign oil.

Speaking of which, isn't that what hybrids are all about: conservation, improved fuel economy, weaning the nation off its oil habit? Perhaps not any longer.

The hybrid version of the Lexus sport utility wagon follows in the tracks of the 2005 Honda Accord Hybrid by offering more horsepower than the conventional version of the same vehicle, a markedly different approach than that of economy-focused hybrids like Toyota's own Prius or Honda's Civic Hybrid. In this case we're talking 268 horsepower for the RX400h, versus 230 for the gasoline-only RX330.

True, Toyota is not marketing the RX400h as being environmentally friendly, focusing instead on its performance and typical Lexus luxuriousness. While this may provide the company some absolution, the RX400h's failure to deliver, in my experience, even a nominal improvement in gas mileage still seems like a sin of omission. It has been fundamental to the understanding and acceptance of hybrids that they offer better fuel economy than vehicles powered by conventional gasoline engines. Toyota itself helped to establish that impression with its Prius.

A hybrid's improved economy is primarily accomplished in city driving, by using an electric motor to assume some of the motive burden from the gasoline engine, as well as shutting off the engine when the vehicle comes to rest, so it is not idling, burning fuel, at red lights.

Certainly, it is the Prius's above-average fuel economy that Toyota has to thank for its image as a green car company. Environmental advocates do not proclaim the righteousness of all things Toyota based on the 958,888 light trucks and S.U.V.'s that it sold in the United States last year, fully 47 percent of its total sales. By comparison, only 53,991 Priuses were sold in 2004, though the company has stated that it plans to double that number this year.

It is understandable that Toyota would like to transfer the Prius's hybrid chic and green patina to other products. To this end, a hybrid version of the Toyota Highlander S.U.V. was also introduced this year, and the automaker has announced plans to add both a hybrid version of its Camry, the nation's best-selling sedan, and a hybrid Lexus GS sport sedan next year. Whether these vehicles will be gas misers like the Prius or thirstier performance-oriented hybrids like the RX400h remains to be seen.

My first seat time in the Lexus hybrid came over a weekend in which I drove the 200 miles from Chicago to Grand Rapids, Mich. I spent a lot of time on the freeway, but I also traveled some back roads and slogged through a couple of stop-and-go city stints. By the time I returned to Chicago, I had put 531 miles on the odometer and calculated my fuel economy at 20.9 m.p.g.

I returned this vehicle to Toyota, but later tested another RX400h for a week. I drove this one 556 miles and did a bit better, averaging 23.0 m.p.g.

In an effort to make a direct comparison with the conventional gasoline-only Lexus, I contacted Toyota and asked for an RX330 test car. When the company said that none was available, I called on an acquaintance who had recently bought an RX330 with all-wheel drive, and made arrangements to drive that vehicle over essentially the same Chicago-Grand Rapids route.

While this was not a controlled experiment, the results from my stint in the RX330 were nonetheless illuminating: 462 miles traveled, at an average of 21.6 m.p.g.

I'll be charitable and call the gas mileage comparison between the hybrids and the standard RX a draw, though there is a clearly a loser -- anyone who buys an RX400h under the assumption that it will consume appreciably less fuel in a range of driving situations.

That it doesn't force one to consider the RX400h on its other merits, of which there are precious few. The hybrid is visually indistinguishable from its conventional counterpart, save for some cosmetics and slightly different gauges, though it does come loaded with luxury equipment that is optional on the RX330. It has somewhat lower tailpipe

emissions, carrying a "super ultra low" emissions rating on models sold in states that follow California's clean-air rules, compared with "ultra low" for the RX330.

The best thing I can say in its defense is that at least behind the wheel of this hybrid, you won't find yourself being cut off by drivers of full-size S.U.V.'s and luxury sedans muttering "tree hugger" under their breath, as you might in a Prius.

The hybrid RX does accelerate briskly, thanks to the addition of two electric drive motors to a detuned version of the 3.3-liter V-6 found in the RX330. (A third electric motor acts as a starter-generator.)

The ultimate value of this extra thrust is debatable, however, as by Toyota's own admission the hybrid drivetrain cuts only half a second off the RX330's 0-to-60 acceleration time of 7.8 seconds. The culprit here is the extra 300 pounds of mass the hybrid has to haul around, which pushes its unloaded weight to 4,365 pounds.

Whether those driving the RX400h will use the extra oomph is another question, as under full power the vehicle's continuously variable transmission tends to rev the engine, producing quite a bit of noise. This is exactly the sort of unpleasantness that causes the average motorist to avoid the upper reaches of the tachometer.

Noise of any sort is anathema to a Lexus, so on the freeway the incessant whirring of the RX400h's front electric motor was as surprising as it was irritating. Cycling on and off, the sound was not loud, but it was audible above the drone of talk radio.

Though I might be willing to put up with all sorts of annoyances in the name of better fuel economy or enhanced performance, I found not a lot of either in the RX400h. It doesn't even travel farther between fill-ups, since the hybrid's gas tank is two gallons smaller than the RX330's. And with very little to make it preferable to a comparably equipped RX330, the price is more outlandish than the mileage: At \$49,185, the RX400h's sticker is \$4,000 more than a fully loaded RX330's and about \$11,000 more than one without options.

Even so, Toyota presold 11,000 of the hybrid sport wagons before they arrived at dealerships, a not-unsurprising development given the popularity of the Prius. At least the people paying so much for this hybrid should be able to afford all the gas they won't be saving. They will also be eligible, under current law, for a \$2,000 federal tax deduction for hybrid-vehicle buyers, and possibly for state and local tax breaks as well.

I hope Toyota continues to pursue the worthy cause of developing vehicles that push the limits of automotive technology in the quest for better fuel economy, as it has with the Prius.

That the RX400h does nothing to further this goal is regrettable. Perhaps even more unfortunate is that Toyota's motivation in pushing hybrid technology may turn out to be a different shade of green than we've been led to believe, one much closer to the color of

money.

**INSIDE TRACK:** Toyota's zero-sum game.

**Photo:** It is quicker and more expensive, but the Lexus RX hybrid may not save a lot of gas.

**Chart:** "Gas or Gas-Electric? 2 Lexus Sport Wagons" lists features and specifications for selected Lexus Sport Wagons.