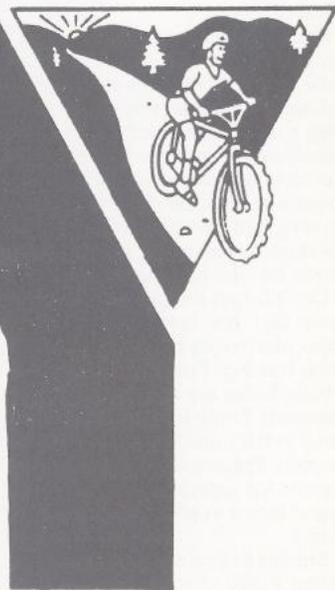


Mountain Bikes As Tools of Therapy



Adventure Trails

by Gary Sprung

Has anger ever driven you into a long bike ride to blow off the steam? Ever felt the exhilaration of the first moments of fresh air on a ride in the mountains after a hard week of cooped-up life in the city? Such experiences taught psychologists and social workers in Los Angeles that mountain bikes can be tools of emotional therapy and environmental education.

The Adventure Trails program of the Hollywood YMCA Counselling Center has now treated over one-thousand troubled or disadvantaged inner-city youths to the delights of riding trails in the nearby Santa Monica Mountains. The success of the program is proving to sceptical environmentalists that bicycles can safely provide transport through environmentally sensitive areas and further their goals of nature awareness.

Adventure Trails is the brain child of psychologists Kevin Fox and Larry Shaw who both love mountain bikes and seek alternative, non-traditional methods of counselling. Their effort began, said Shaw, when one day they brought a mountain bike to the West Hollywood Opportunity School which services youngsters with academic or behavioral problems. The kids loved it.

So Shaw and Fox got the local Kiwanis Club and the County of Los Angeles to spring for six bikes. Raleigh Cycle Company of America provided them at cost. Rides on

the bicycles served as rewards for good grades and not being truant. The bike program led at least one youngster to a move into the regular school system.

The next step was a camp for kids with cancer. There the counsellors saw how bicycles could promote self-growth and rational risk-taking.

Then they learned of the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy, which was on the one hand considering banning bicycles from the parklands and on the other, soliciting requests for grants for educational programs. After a difficult grant-writing process, Shaw and Fox faced a negative recommendation from the Conservancy staff and a board of directors set eleven to one against them.

That one vote on their side, from board member Carole Stevens, was crucial. She argued that mountain bikes are here to stay, so the board should accept them and turn them into a positive element of mountain recreation. The votes swung slowly after many people spoke in support...ten - two...a split... finally a majority.

The \$19,260 grant was matched dollar for dollar by the Olympic Torch Relay Fund and Adventure Trails was in business. Raleigh donated another 16 bikes.

The program is open mainly to inner city youth ages twelve to seventeen and their families, with particular emphasis on those

who would otherwise be denied the opportunity to enjoy the serenity and excitement of the outdoors. Many of the clients come by way of reference from the city's social services department, various medical clinics and counselling centers, and the police/justice system. More "normal" or middle-class participants have included the Boy Scouts of America and the Sierra Club.

All services and equipment are provided without charge. The riders need bring only a lunch, proper clothing, and at least two adult leaders from their organization.

Each ride begins with a lecture on the ethics of bicycling and respect for the environment. The program relies on a code of ethics derived directly from the NORBA Offroad Cyclists' Club. (Adventure Trails is a member of NORBA and Sierra Club.) Each rider must then sign a contract acknowledging that he or she understands the code and will abide by it.

Along the way, talks on botany, geology, history and such complement the escape from noise and asphalt. But the cardiovascular effort may be the key feature of this re-creation.

"Riding together teaches them how to interact socially. They all face the same hill, the same frustrations, then share the same success getting up and over," said Fox, the program's director. That experience leads, in psychology parlance, to "bonding", he

explained. The program is credited with developing other positive attributes like pride, self-esteem and a sense of responsibility for the use of valuable property--\$350 bicycles.

Fox hopes to eventually institute a second stage of Adventure Trails that will provide a rather opposite bicycling experience. The Olympic Torch Relay Fund grant opens a door to the velodrome track left over from the 1984 summer Olympics. One Adventure Trails guide/counsellor, Don Denegal, is a licensed velodrome racer. They hope they could develop youngsters into Olympic caliber racers and members of the U.S. team.

Besides proving the value of this new all-terrain technology, the Adventure Trails program is benefiting mountain bicyclists in a political way. The bike ban proposal was dropped. A committee of the local Sierra Club is sponsoring several outings. (That's the same chapter which initiated the national organization's recent classification of mountain bikes as "off road vehicles".) The chairman of that committee said he is relatively unconcerned about Adventure Trails because most environmental damage is caused by individual riders, not organized groups.

Fox hopes the program will be a prototype for more of the same and sees a basic necessity for such organized education. The growth of mountain biking causes increasing potential for conflicts with other users of mountain trails. With more programs like Adventure Trails, perhaps such problems might never happen.

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