

START A CLUB

If your area doesn't have a bike club, start one. Go to a local bike shop, talk to your cycling friends, and find people willing to spend the time and energy to protect and improve local trails. Try to convince them that an organization can educate more cyclists and promote the sport more effectively than individuals. Clubs can teach members how to ride responsibly and put peer pressure on renegade riders. Publish an educational pamphlet or newsletter to spread the word.

WORK ON TRAILS

Working on trails should be a top priority for every club. Nothing impresses a land manager more than a group of volunteers willing to work with picks and shovels, bow saws and pruners to improve a trail.

KNOW THE RULES

When dealing with any level or department of government—in many cases bureaucracies—you must know its rules, hierarchy, and the people making the decisions. For example, in working with the U.S. Forest Service, you need to understand the concept of "multiple use" land management, the role of the local district ranger, and how to appeal decisions. For state parks, find out the primary purpose of the park. Is it recreational? If so, then bicycles should be allowed. If its purpose is ecological or historical preservation, as it is at California's Nisene Marks State Park, bicycles may not be appropriate on some trails.

BE A MOUNTAIN BIKE ACTIVIST

10 WAYS TO PROTECT YOUR
TRAILS AND KEEP LAND
MANAGERS ON YOUR SIDE

BY GARY SPRUNG

LAST MAY, WHEN HE LEARNED THAT THE Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources might ban bikes from his favorite trails, Carl Birkelbach became a mountain biking activist.

"They were going to close the trails at Kettle Moraine State Forest [near Milwaukee] because of complaints from hikers," Birkelbach explains. In response, he posted a petition at a local general store, warning cyclists of the closure and soliciting support for unrestricted cycling. More than 2,000 people signed it. Birkelbach then talked with Wisconsin DNR officials and discovered that many of them enjoyed mountain biking. Officially, though, they had received no input from cyclists and didn't know how to deal with a few inconsiderate gonzo riders, except by closing trails. The managers were glad to talk with him.

Next, Birkelbach sent a letter to those who signed the petition, explaining the problem, outlining an organization, and requesting membership money. He also asked for comments. More than 100 people responded and the Southern Wisconsin Trail Biking Club was

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had signed the petition. It also arranged interviews with the *Milwaukee Journal* and *Silent Sports* magazine. The *Journal* put the story on its front page.

About 200 cyclists and 5 hikers attended a hearing last summer. A compromise was forged. DNR awarded cyclists the right to share a 10-mile trail system in half the park and granted hikers an exclusive 6-mile loop in the other portion.

Southern Wisconsin cyclists were lucky. Birkelbach was willing to fight for trail rights, and land managers were willing to listen.

There are many groups at work today trying to exclude mountain bikes from public lands. Most are older, larger, and better organized than we are. To preserve our rights, we must learn to work with land managers and emulate the strategies of established user groups.

Having fought for environmental issues for 12 years, I've learned that it takes great expertise and determination to be an effective activist.

formed. A trail-work crew and bike patrol were soon organized.

When DNR scheduled a public hearing on the Kettle Moraine issue, the club sent letters to everyone who

PLAY POLITICS

In addition to its formal rules, a land management agency is often influenced by politics. For example, the Army Corps of Engineers could play tough guy with the irrigated pastures in my area of Colorado, because they are technically wetlands. But they're owned by powerful ranchers, who banded together and appealed to political representatives when the Engineers proposed an enforcement policy in the early '80s. The result: no enforcement.

GATHER FACTS

When there's a conflict, government officials have a hard time arguing against facts. If a land manager accuses cyclists of tearing up a trail, request proof from that manager. Better yet, visit and photograph the section in question. Perhaps a photograph revealing the impact of other trail users, such as horses or motorcycles, might buttress your case. But ultimately, we need more facts about the impact of bikes on trails compared with that of other users. Unfortunately, few such studies exist.

MAKE A PAPER TRAIL

To understand the intricacies of an issue, you must begin with Day 1 and the first report of the controversy. Right-to-Know laws ensure your access to most federal and state public documents. If you're stymied, you can file a Freedom of Information request. This usually prompts a federal manager to act quickly. When you meet the manager or talk to the press, be well informed and understand the evolution of the problem. If you need a response from an official, you can discuss it verbally,

but always follow it up with a letter requesting a written statement.

DEMAND A HEARING

The public has a right to provide input on management policies and decisions on all public lands. If a manager closes a trail without public input, that's wrong. Demand a public hearing! If the manager refuses, contact his superior. If that fails, you can picket the office and contact the media.

If you're granted a public hearing, be sure cyclists are well represented. Pack the meeting with allies. Numbers count. Remember the importance of political influence.

USE THE MEDIA

In our political system, media are the watchdogs of government. Use them. Know the reporters and editors of local newspapers and radio and television stations. Identify those sympathetic to your cause. Then call them whenever you have an event, concern, or problem. Media can inform quickly and influence dramatically.

Learn how to write clear and concise press releases. When you have an event or meeting, advise the local media. Don't expect them to know about it unless they're contacted directly.

CULTIVATE RELATIONSHIPS

Establish cordial relationships with land managers before problems arise. Then, if conflicts occur, they'll know you better and probably will listen earnestly.

When it's time to criticize in a public forum, keep complaints impersonal. Right: "The U.S. Forest Service acted unfairly by...." Wrong: "Ranger Steve Smith really

screwed up." Personal attacks upset managers and force them into defensive and sometimes intransigent positions.

Conversely, when managers promote our sport, compliment them publicly. This is the time to be personal. If someone is helping you, work to build their reputation in the community and within their agency.

It's important to remember that our activities are valuable to land managers. Managing recreation usually allows for creative solutions that can help managers improve their image. It's not as controversial as clearcutting vs. the spotted owl, or oil drilling vs. wilderness preservation. Land managers have a lot to gain by working with cyclists.

WORK WITH OTHER GROUPS

Finally, we need to form alliances, or at least working relationships, with other trail users. If a lot of equestrians share your trails, attend their club meetings and talk to them. If farmers or ranchers exert a powerful influence on nearby public land, meet with them and discuss mutual concerns.

Many of our conflicts are with environmental groups, such as the Sierra Club. But this shouldn't be a reason to ignore them or become antagonistic. Join these groups and work for understanding and compromise.

This will be a decade in which environmental issues steadily gain momentum. We can't alienate ourselves from anyone who is working to preserve the planet. We must meet with them, and take them on bike rides with us. We must remember that on issues that really count—clearcutting, strip mining, global warming, and air pollution—we're all on the same side. ●