

# 'BIKES BELONG' IN WASHINGTON

*Model Mountain Bike Policies Are Developing in the Pacific Northwest*

BY GARY SPRUNG

**G**ood news. The State of Washington is adopting policies that are favorable to mountain bikers and could serve as model regulations for other states.

After 8 months of public input, the Washington State Parks and Recreation Commission has decided to allow mountain bikes on all roads and trails unless there are compelling reasons to exclude them. This edict stands in bold contrast to the policy of that giant state to the south, California, where bicycles are generally prohibited on state park trails unless cyclists can prove they have minimal impact.

Washington's policy is in tune with the thinking of the International Mountain Bicycling Association (IMBA) and other bicycle activists, who argue that bikes are a safe, non-polluting, low-impact recreation and transportation vehicle that should be permitted on most nonwilderness trails. If bicycles are to be prohibited, activists say, the burden of proof should be on land managers or trail-user groups that propose the closure.

A few areas have been identified in the Washington rules as unsuitable for bicycles—exclusions that most cyclists will view as reasonable. Bikes are prohibited from officially designated "natural areas" and "natural forest areas"; from designated special-use trails such as interpretive and exercise trails; and from docks and piers. The policy also gives discretion to park managers to close trails on the basis of "conflict with other park users, public safety, or damage to park resources and/or facilities related to these devices." It mandates a public meeting to debate the merits of any proposed closure.

## *Signs, Language*

IMBA director Jim Hasenauer praises Washington's policy for putting the burden of proof on those who desire closures, and for its help in minimiz-

ing signage. "If you don't see a sign that says a trail is closed, you can assume the trail is open," he says. "If all goes well, there won't be a lot of signs and sign pollution. The policy respects the environment and recognizes that not everything should be open, while still maximizing opportunities for bicycles."

Washington's regulations also include a section requiring cyclists to behave properly. They must yield to pedestrians, dismount in crowded areas, pass slowly, use courtesy, and not disturb wildlife. They must also "restrict speed and manner of operation to reasonable and prudent practices relative to terrain, prevailing conditions, equipment, personal capabilities, personal safety, and the safety of all other park visitors."

Yes, it's a mouthful. And this speed-and-manner prescription seems open to arbitrary interpretation (i.e., abuse), perhaps by a ranger who simply dislikes bicyclists. But the alternative—a definitive speed limit such as the radar-enforced 15-mph restriction in Northern California's Marin Municipal Water District—leaves no room for faster riding, even when it's safe and appropriate.

State parks operations planner Don Powell attributes Washington's favorable policy to his agency's heritage. "Washington state parks have a long history of bicycle use and multiple-use policy," he says. "We try to accommodate a wide range of users. We don't ban things outright. We just control where there's a problem with a minimal amount of regulation."

Bicyclists should applaud (and hope their state imitates) the way Washington's State Parks and Recreation Commission solicited public input during the development of this policy. "We purposely sought [the opinions] of bicycle shops and organized bicycle groups," Powell says. "We contacted

hiker and equestrian groups." These efforts began 8 months before the commission formulated its final policy. "Once you get to the commission meeting, it's too late," he says.

## *Statewide Trails Plan*

More good news comes from the Washington Inter-Agency Committee for Outdoor Recreation (IAC), which is developing a statewide trails plan. Its preliminary draft recognizes mountain bikers as legitimate users of public trails.

An IAC official estimates that Washington has more than 11,000 miles of trails—2,500 miles of which are open to mountain bikes. This figure doesn't include trails in state forests or those on private land. Lumber giants Weyerhaeuser and Champion International are welcoming mountain bikers on their logging roads. Weyerhaeuser restricts access on weekends, while Champion charges a \$10-per-day user fee.

Like the park policy, the IAC trail plan was carefully devised with input from more than 400 people, including representatives of all levels of government, the state's 3 geographic regions, and 6 major user groups. The committee met regularly for 8 months before issuing its first draft last winter.

The IAC's general policy section should be complete by the end of this year. Meanwhile, planners are beginning the second section, which will provide specific details on all existing and proposed trails in the state, and suggest solutions for problems. In '91, the IAC will prepare a technical manual on trail planning to aid small towns and counties.

## *Win Some, Lose Some*

But even in Washington, not all is rosy. Phil Miller, a bicycle activist who serves on the boards of Bicycle Federation of Washington and League of

American Wheelmen, notes 2 major losses for mountain bicyclists.

The first came at Bridal Trails State Park, a large urban park east of Seattle. "The name gives you an idea why the closure took place," Miller says. "It was a done deal when the policy discussion took place. They had their ducks lined up and they closed it."

A more significant closure, in Miller's opinion, came at Cougar Mountain. "Cougar was an interesting beast," he says. "It's a mountain in the Issaquah Alps, which are tall hills surrounding Lake Snohomish and suburban Seattle. It's a fascinating place to ride, with a lot to see." The park was donated to King's County in the '60s and dedicated as a regional wildland park. "But it was a mistake to classify it as anything near wilderness," Miller says. "It was heavily mined for coal in the late 19th century, logged two or three times, and [once] hosted an anti-aircraft base on top."

Through the efforts of the Issaquah Alps Trails Club, a hiking group, the mountain has been revegetated and is regaining its natural beauty. When it became a popular site for mountain bicycling a few years ago, one Issaquah Alps trail member singlehandedly took on the new arrivals and engineered a prohibition.

The person was Harvey Miller, author of hiking and environmental

books. He encountered racers training on Cougar Mountain trails and was irritated by their speed. His political campaign resulted in a quick administrative decision to close the trails to cyclists. There was little public involvement.

This experience motivated Phil Miller and other Seattle mountain bikers to get organized, and they've succeeded in gaining more clout in King's County.

### *Tradition of Activism*

Cycling—both off road and road—continues to be extremely popular in Washington. A 4-year-old IAC study found that half of all households in the state included at least one cyclist, and 14% had at least one off-road rider. In King's County, which includes Seattle and 30 suburbs, 80% of trail use was by bicyclists. Given the sport's growth, these percentages must be higher now.

Washington off-road riders are benefiting from the large community of organized, activism-minded road riders. The Cascade Bicycle Club has 3,000 members. Raleigh Bicycle Co., based in Seattle, has supported advocacy efforts by backing the work of its employees and donating services and money.

Phil Miller himself fits this pattern. He directs RoadShare, a program within the county department of pub-

lic works that focuses on pedestrian, equestrian, and bicycle issues. His work centers on paved roads, but also provides connections for volunteer efforts that benefit mountain bikes.

One of these is a proposal for the Mitchell Hill Mountain Bike Park, an item on the county's new regional trails plan. Miller says he originally opposed this plan, because he feared it would be an excuse to segregate mountain bikers and corral them into one or 2 parks. But after learning that the regional plan endorses mountain bike access for the *entire* trail system, he had no trouble supporting it.

With so many efforts already in progress, it's no wonder Washington is one of 2 states selected by the National Park Service to receive grant money to conduct model trail planning projects.

"It's not a matter of debate [in Washington] anymore," says Miller. "Bikes belong. The debate is shifting to locations, rather than philosophy."

Miller has learned that advocacy is a never-ending effort. "It's not a matter of showing up at one hearing and venting your spleen," he says. "You must work with people to educate and convince them. [You must learn] to compromise, when necessary, but as little as possible.

"Respect is earned, not granted. Folks up here have learned that lesson." ■