

CALL OF THE WILD

A Different Look at Mountain Biking in Designated Wilderness

BY GARY SPRUNG

Three months ago in this column, I urged mountain bikers not to support H.R. 3172, a bill pending in Congress that would allow bicycling in designated wilderness areas. Utah Rep. Jim Hansen's proposal would amend the Wilderness Act of 1964, a law that hikers and wilderness supporters—our fellow environmentalists and trail users—consider untouchable. If we alienate them by pressing for change, we'll lose precious ground in our fight to maintain trail access on nonwilderness land.

Despite my opposition to Hansen's bill, I still believe bicycles should be allowed in *some* wilderness areas on *some* trails. In my mind, bicycles are an appropriate nonmotorized, low-impact tool for experiencing wildness. In February, I traveled from my home in Crested Butte, Colorado, to Washington, DC, to discuss my beliefs with the staff of The Wilderness Society (TWS)—the 55-year-old advocacy organization for U.S. wilderness.

Shared Roots

I presented my case at a brown-bag luncheon of about 2 dozen professional wilderness activists. I began by explaining that I hiked in the wilderness long before I started cycling. I noted that I've worked for wilderness preservation and today serve as president of a local environmental group. I told them I would gladly give up cycling in wilderness study areas if these lands would receive formal wilderness protection. And I suggested that the issue of bikes in the wilderness is important not just to cyclists, but to all wilderness supporters because it raises important questions, such as the meaning of wilderness and what we are going to do to protect it.

My hosts seemed to appreciate my background and our common goals. But it wasn't long before someone said, "How many mountain bikers are like you?" And that comment led to several tales of encounters with reckless and disrespectful riders.

In the face of such firsthand reports, I didn't have a rebuttal. Ron Tipton of TWS's Conservation Department came to my defense—our sport's defense—by suggesting most mountain bicyclists share environmentalists' goals. He said a majority of off-road cyclists are hikers, or had been. But neither he nor I could prove this.

Next, we discussed the philosophy behind the Wilderness Act of 1964. Its original wording, particularly the clause that disallows mechanical transport, seems to clearly prohibit mountain bikes from wilderness trails. Bikes are obviously mechanical transport.

But just a year after enactment, the U.S. Forest Service didn't think so. In '65, it defined mechanical as "powered by a non-living power source." In other words, mechanical equals motorized. This seemed to clear the way for bikes. That definition remained an official regulation until the nationwide ban of wilderness bicycling in '82.

So what does mechanical mean? In its '64 College Edition, Webster defined it as "of, or like a machine." And a machine, said Webster, is "anything, either motorized, or more generally, a contraption with fixed or moving parts." By this definition, one could argue that hiking shoes and horse saddles are mechanical.

And ski equipment? An alpine touring set incorporates bindings made of high-tech alloys and plastics. Skis themselves are composite marvels developed through millions of dollars of computer-aided research. Yet skiing is allowed in wilderness.

Key Issues

We also discussed the question of actual impact, addressing the question of whether mountain bikes harm the wilderness environment. The answer, no doubt, is yes. But to what extent? Nobody knows. Certainly, their impact is less than that of any motorized vehicle. Bicycles also have a rough time getting off trails, so they don't trample

as much vegetation as a cow, horse, or wild animal. Nor do they eat grass and flowers and defecate on trails.

So why are horses allowed and bicycles prohibited? Tipton conceded that it's a historical accident—horses have been around a lot longer. And horse travel and grazing aren't the only loopholes in the Wilderness Act—even mining (on all claims proven valid before '84) is permitted. These political compromises show that the Wilderness Act is far from perfect.

Perhaps a key consideration is speed: Bicycles may be too fast. I conceded that bikes effectively reduce the size of the wilderness because we can travel so much farther. On the other hand, I know of a guy who ran 20 miles through the Maroon Bells wilderness last year. How different was that entirely legal journey than our passages? I say it's a matter of degree, not fundamental differences. There is a continuum of experience ranging from barefoot travel with loincloth, through backpacking and horseback riding, to high-tech skiing and cycling. The quantum leap, in my opinion, comes with the introduction of a motor.

One important issue is whether a bicyclist can enjoy a wilderness experience. I say yes. I remember the immense effort of lugging a 50-pound backpack. Bicycling the same trails can bring on the same endorphin high. We cyclists stop to admire scenery and smell flowers. We listen to birds.

When one Wilderness Society staffer suggested that a cyclist is capable of destroying the experience of a hiker, I had to agree. My guess is that this, more than anything, is the source of tension about bikes in the wilderness.

A solution, I replied, is some segregation. Yes, some trails should allow hikers and not bicyclists (nor horses, wheelchairs, etc.). On other trails, land managers might post "Bicycles not recommended" signs, but leave the trail open to the possibility. Or, "Bicycles recommended" signs would alert hikers to expect cyclists on a particu-

lar route. This idea certainly applies to nonwilderness trails, too.

Wilderness in America ranges from giant wild lands such as the 7-million-acre Gates of the Arctic in Alaska to the tiny 77-acre West Sister Island in Ohio. Not all wilderness is pristine. One designated area in the mountains near Phoenix, Arizona, overlooks the city. Which intrudes more on a wilderness experience, skyscrapers on the horizon or a few cyclists on a trail?

Making the Grade

The issue of bicycles in the wilderness raises the need for a graded wilderness system—an idea that isn't new.

Imagine a scale of 1-5 in which Grade 5 is totally closed to humans. Grade 4 allows hikers, but not bicycles, horses, or cows. (If you're hurt in a Grade 4 area, don't count on a rescue.) Grade 3 would be managed much like present-day wilderness. Grades 2 and 1 would allow all current users, plus bikes. Grade 1 would allow hardened campsites with pit toilets and

picnic tables.

Alas, a graded system remains politically impossible at this time because the wilderness lobby will resist any and all changes in the Wilderness Act. Nevertheless, I believe it could work well, especially if the acreage protected by the Wilderness Act increases significantly.

After I showed slides of the joy and beauty of cycling in Colorado, one TWS lobbyist commented that my presentation left him with mixed emotions. On one hand, he saw validity in some of my arguments and perceived the wholesomeness of our sport. On the other, he'd had several unfortunate run-ins with inconsiderate cyclists in the West Virginia mountains.

I told him I was glad he's not totally against us. I admitted that not all cyclists share my attitude. While most support the concept of wilderness and the designation of more wilderness areas, others don't.

And then I reminded my hosts that wilderness access is not our top prior-

ity. Mountain bicyclists need to focus first on keeping nonwilderness trails open. For us, a significant gain would be to put the burden of proof on those who wish to close trails. For now, too many people want the opposite: all trails closed to cyclists, unless there's strong evidence to open them.

Near the end of our meeting, we discussed the more pressing issues of our time—the fact that Earth faces an unprecedented environmental crisis that will affect us all. In this, cyclists, hikers, and horseback riders have many common interests. None of us has reason to support excessive timber harvests, polluting mines, sprawling housing developments, or new dams across our rivers.

Tipton realizes that the number of mountain bikers is growing rapidly, and that our political strength will increase. He acknowledged that many Wilderness Society members bicycle off road. He suggested that we continue this dialogue, with the hope that we can work together. I agreed. ■