

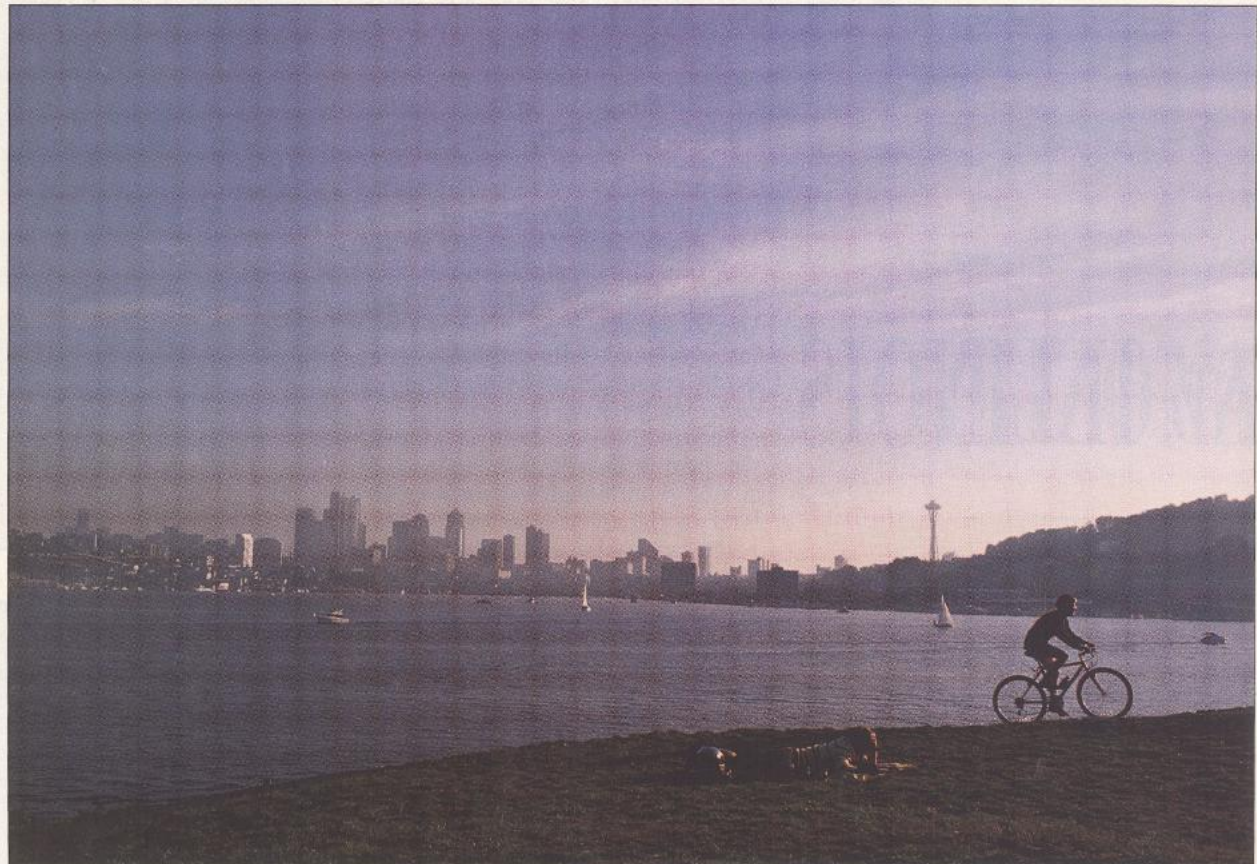
CITY SINGLETRACK

IN SEARCH OF FAIR METROPOLITAN PARK POLICIES

BY GARY SPRUNG

WHEN MY EDITOR ASKED ME TO FIND A model city for mountain biking, I didn't know where to start. I certainly knew of opposite examples—cities where bikes are prohibited from park trails (such as New York, San Francisco, and Atlanta) and others where restrictive policies exist.

I also had an idea of what a city ideally should offer to off-road cyclists: a variety of well-marked



Mountain bikers who live in cities struggle to find convenient off-road terrain. With trails like this one along Lake Union, Seattle riders fare better than most.

routes, including singletrack; public education explaining the rules of the trail; a written parks policy specifying cycling opportunities and procedures to resolve conflicts; and a forum to promote cooperation among cycling clubs, land managers, and other user groups.

Seeking positive examples, I decided to focus on Madison, Wisconsin; Portland, Oregon; and Boston. But I discovered that none of these cities has a model mountain bike policy. Subsequent research hasn't revealed one, either. (If you know of a city that's doing a first-rate job of managing and promoting mountain bike use, please write to me in care of this magazine.)

The park manager in Madison didn't know the difference between a BMX bike and a mountain bike. In Boston, the parks agency has been working with cyclists for a couple years, but budget cuts have reduced recreational staffs and kept some trails from reopening. In contrast, Portland cyclists lost trails, then reclaimed them by lobbying the parks department.

MISUNDERSTOOD IN MADISON

A land manager's attitude often determines trail access. If he (or she) rides a mountain bike or has friends who do, usually he will try to accommodate cyclists. Conversely, if a

manager dislikes bicycles (often a case of not understanding the activity), his park's access policy may reflect this bias.

When I chose Madison (pop. 170,000) I expected an enlightened policy that encouraged bicycle use. A college town and state capital, Madison has carried a liberal reputation since the '60s, so I presumed it would champion a fair-minded parks policy as well. I was wrong. Bikes are banned in Madison parks. Why? According to city parks superintendent Dan Stapay, trails are used for cross-country skiing, and bikes would cause ruts that ruin trail grooming.

Had he observed this problem? I asked.

"We've never had it, but I do understand that it exists," said Stapay. "There's never been a large demand for bike trails," he added. "We built a track for them about eight years ago, but we tore it up."

"A track?" I was confused. "What do you mean?"

He then described "children's bikes" and explained the characteristics of a BMX bicycle. So much for enlightenment.

"The city won't even discuss the bike issue with us," says Chad Gallwitz, who manages Erewhon, an outdoor sports store in Madison. Madison park trails were closed to bikes in '85. But cyclists still use them because enforcement is lax. Eventually, though, the rules will be enforced, Gallwitz predicts.

"Some people are tearing up muddy trails," he says, "but this problem could be resolved by seasonal closures, temporary barriers, and rider education."

Curiously, outside Madison, Dane County parks and many private property owners allow mountain biking. For example, Indian Lake-Coney Park grooms its trails for cross-country skiing and permits mountain biking when there's no snow.

Part of Madison's problem, I suspect, is its large and ever-changing student population. It's not easy to educate undergraduates about park rules. Student abuse was a root of wholesale trail closures in Boulder, Colorado, in '83.

BANNED IN BOSTON

Boston (pop. 563,000) offers a lot for off-road cyclists—at least on its outskirts in parks of the Metropolitan District Commission (MDC). Heidi Davis Fulk, president of the New England Mountain Bike Association (NEMBA), gives credit to Boston's land managers. "They understand that we aren't out to destroy the trails and that we are an environmentally conscious group."

Two years ago, however, the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Management drafted a policy that tried to separate trail use groups into "mechanized" and "non-mechanized" camps. Worried that the distinction would lump bicycles with snowmobiles and all-terrain vehicles, Fulk organized a letter-writing campaign directed at the MDC. "They resented having to respond to

all those letters, but that's the nature of the game," she says.

While that potential problem was avoided, Boston mountain bikers face other challenges. Last fall, heavy rains eroded trails in Middlesex Fells, a 2,000-acre park located 6 miles north of downtown. The damage was compounded by cyclists, prompting MDC park manager Chip Norton to ban bicycles, though reluctantly.

Norton, a mountain biker himself, is frustrated. He and NEMBA "have an excellent relationship," he says, and he wants to accommodate cy-



"We have a problem with hormone-enraged males in their twenties," says Fulk. "They don't want to listen and they don't care."



clists. But his territory also serves as a watershed, which places it under additional regulatory authority. He says an education program might solve user conflict and environmental problems, but he lacks the time to oversee it, since his staff has been reduced from 9 to 3 by budget constraints. For now, the simplest and most effective way to protect the park is banning bikes.

Fulk acknowledges her group's limitations. "We have a problem with some people we cannot reach," she says. "I call them 'hormone-enraged males in their young 20s.' They don't really want to listen to anybody and they don't care. They come up on elderly people and seem to take delight in scaring them."

PROGRESS IN PORTLAND

Activists feel content, almost enthusiastic, about their successful effort to reopen park fire roads in Portland (pop. 366,000). Until a couple years ago, bikes were permitted in Forest Park, a 4,800-acre area that starts downtown and stretches 7 1/2 miles northwest. Billed as the largest forested city park in the U.S., it features 30 miles of singletrack and 30 miles of fire roads. Unfortu-

nately, a few renegade riders prompted land managers to close it to bicycles for safety reasons.

That's when Theo Patterson organized the Portland United Mountain Pedalers. PUMP's lobbying persuaded the Portland Bureau of Parks and Recreation to reopen 3 fire lanes on a trial basis. "After a year we passed with flying colors," says Patterson, adding that the parks department is now considering opening 3 more routes.

Andy Osborne, owner of the Bike Gallery in Portland, would like to see Forest Park singletrack reopened, but he says most local cyclists are satisfied with the challenging fire roads.

Another positive example is Powell Butte, a 570-acre watershed area owned by the county and located 7 miles from Portland. It offers 9 miles of singletrack—trails that were planned 5 years ago and built in the last few years.

Jim Sjulín, resources supervisor for Portland's Bureau of Parks and Recreation, suspected that more people would be riding mountain bikes. At first he was nervous about environmental damage in Powell Butte because of excessive mud in the soil base. But after 9 months, erosion was minimal, and only one trail needed modification.

Sjulín applauds PUMP, but says, "They're a segment, not everybody." Like Boston's land managers, Sjulín is wrestling with personnel cuts. Oregon voters last November passed a tax limitation bill that resulted in a 20% reduction in park staff.

THE EFFORT CONTINUES

It's obvious that the dramatic growth of mountain biking is putting new pressures on already crowded urban parks. City park managers and mountain bike advocates are struggling to find reasonable solutions.

Some strategies are apparent. We need to introduce ourselves to land managers and offer our help. We need to convince those officials who dislike us that cyclists can use city parks safely and responsibly. We also need to educate city riders, especially the irresponsible ones. Admittedly, this is a tough job.

Finally, we must find cities where mountain bikes are sharing trails harmoniously and promote them as national models. ●