

Enlightened Land Managers

by Gary Sprung

Two fine studies of mountain bikes on public lands have crossed our desks at MBM recently. While Sierra Clubbers are busy reacting emotionally to perceived threats, these land managers have coolly evaluated the problems and possibilities of our favorite recreation device and concluded that mountain biking should be encouraged.

JEFFERSON COUNTY, in the foothills west of Denver, Colorado, has 20 parks totalling 16,000 acres. For one of their newest acquisitions, Planner George J. Maurer of the county Open Space Division has gone so far as to suggest a mountain bike park.

"Hikers and horseback riders should be discouraged or prohibited from using the park," Maurer wrote in his February, 1987 proposal.

Stuart Macdonald, the Colorado State Trails Coordinator, has criticized the proposal but not because he has anything against mountain bikes.

"I think two things are wrong with this idea," Macdonald wrote in a letter to this author. "One, it makes it easy for the Parks Administration to restrict ATBs (All Terrain Bicycles) elsewhere because they have 'accommodated' them in one place. Second, it perpetuates the notion that ATBs are dangerous or 'different' and should be separated from other users." Macdonald commutes to his downtown office on a mountain bike.

Maurer agreed. "Even if it is not the intention, it might create the impression that mountain bikes ought to be segregated," he said. "But there is nothing wrong with designing trails to suit particular uses."

In May, 1986, Maurer wrote a six-page paper called "Mountain Bike Research and Recommendations." He first reviewed the policies and experiences of other Colorado park agencies and user groups. In that survey, he determined that, with the exception of the Boulder Mountain Park System, no jurisdiction was experiencing problems with mountain bikes. Boulder's problems (the lands have since been closed to mountain bikes) are unique, he concluded, because of the immediate proximity of a large urban area with a sizable college population.

The document was intended as a planning tool so Maurer created criteria to judge the problems, or lack thereof:

A. Criteria Supporting Mountain Bike Trail Use

1. Absence of frequent sharp, blind turns.
2. Absence of frequent rock or log water bars, and check dams on the trail.
3. Absence of substantial lengths of very narrow trail with drop-offs.
4. Absence of substantial loose rock on steep grades.
5. Trails that are former logging, mining or service roads, or improved to x-c ski trail standards.

B. Criteria Supporting Trail Closure to Mountain Bikes

1. Trails associated with a high number of complaints against trail bikers because of user conflicts arising from heavy trail use by bikers and other trail users, or high speed cycling.
2. Trails associated with off-trail riding that is damaging the environment.
3. Trails that receive frequent mountain bike use and possess extensive soft, wet soils, or lengths that remain wet and soft from snow melt for extended periods of time.
4. Trails located in a wilderness setting or where the natural surroundings of a trail are the primary focus for the trail use.

He concluded that none of the closure criteria apply in the Jefferson County Open Space Parks. Beyond that, he suggested: "Trail closure should be a last resort. Trail closure should follow only after an evaluation of a trail according to the criteria listed above, an effort to monitor and document the amount of bike and other trail use and complaints, an effort to educate bikers on trail etiquette, and the adoption of appropriate regulations."

One of Maurer's most enlightened conclusions was his observations about user conflict: "Some trail users simply do not like to see bikes on trails regardless of whether conflicts exist or not. Part of this opposition may stem from the fact that mountain bikes are the new member of the trail user family and people aren't used to them yet."

On erosion, he noted, "There is no evidence that mountain bikes are more damaging to trails than other trail uses."

For the proposed mountain bike park, Maurer suggested using the standards for building cross-country ski trails. That would mean wide curve radii, straight runouts at the bottom of hills, ample trail width on steep downhills, and removal or avoidance of hazards.

On the other hand, the trail should not be built to too high a standard. Maurer further suggested park trails could "provide riders with a physical challenge by incorporating more steep grades than would normally be desirable in trails planning, by leaving exposed rocks in the tread, by allowing irregular or bumpy trail surfaces in places, and by undulating the vertical alignment of trails."

Maurer reported that no action has been taken on his proposal yet only because of other more pressing county business.

A Forester Seeks Bike Opportunities

The Ochoco National Forest in Oregon has purchased what probably is the first official Forest Service-owned mountain bike. Recreation Planner Gordon R. Hain has published a paper he wrote for a

university class on outdoor recreation management called "Developing Mountain Bike Opportunities on the Ochoco National Forest." Realizing he needed some first-hand "field experience" on the subject, he convinced the Agency to buy him a bike.

He then realized that finding roads for mountain biking "would be no problem. I then concentrated my efforts on trail routes."

AFTER AN INITIAL EMBARRASSING SPILL, Hain discovered the wonders of the sport: "I felt the thrill of the downhill run and the exhaustion of the uphill climb. . . . I pedalled through beautiful natural appearing areas and through heavily logged-over areas; over light snow cover to dry, dusty conditions; over downed trees and through open flats; over water-bars; and around obstacles. I found that the bicycle, being challenging, made trail travel exciting. Also, it offered a whole new perspective to the forest. I was amazed at how much more I could see and how many more areas I could access. On forest roads that I have driven in the past, the slower speed of the bike now gave me an opportunity to really look into the country, seeing the trees as part of the forest."

One of Hain's best ideas was to contact the Forest Archeologist. Thanks to an Act of Congress protecting our archeological heritage, all timber sales, road building projects, mines, and so forth must be preceded with an examination of the site to see if the project might destroy some prehistoric ruin or artifacts. That's the job of the Forest Archeologist. In Hain's forest, the archeologist just happened to have a map of the forest dating from 1915. On it were trails that are no longer maintained but still exist.

While Hain's paper was written as a guide to other foresters desirous of providing mountain biking opportunities, contacting the Forest Archeologist need not be limited to officialdom. This could be a superb method for discovering "new" mountain bike routes!

The bulk of Hain's study is a review of existing literature and a report on conversations with leaders in the sport. He writes that some ski areas are now actively promoting mountain biking on their Nordic ski trails. He also writes about a conversation with Glenn Odell, former director of NORBA, in which he learned of bicyclists' bitterness about wilderness closures and the feeling that bikers were betrayed by the Sierra Club. Odell stated he'd been a backpacker and outdoor enthusiast all his life.

From MBM Editor Hank Barlow, Hain reported on the "importance of responsibility in caring for the land and trails." He talked to Jim Paxon, District Ranger for the National Forest lands around Crested Butte, and learned that "Resource damage is virtually non-existent from bike use. Paxon explained that most bikers will pick up their bikes and walk around steep or muddy areas. . . . Paxon believes that mountain bikes do not damage trails."

Like Maurer, Hain came to the conclusion that "many times resource damage is just a smoke screen for conflict between user types."

Hain noted a zoning system instituted on the Missoula Ranger District in Montana. The Forest Service coordinated a system of routes which were individually ranked by level of mechanization, as follows: A) Four-wheel drives, B) All-terrain vehicles (ATVs), C) Motorcycles, D) Bicycles, E) Horses, F) Hikers, and G) handicapped individuals.

"Routes were designated by the highest type of use allowed. That use and all lower user classes are acceptable and the route is closed to all higher use classes. The district is rating and signing difficulty levels using the ski trail difficulty symbols," Hain wrote.

Hain also discovered a paper from the British-based environmental organization Friends of the Earth which endorsed mountain bikes as a "valuable recreation tool." The group said that mountain bikers ". . . will cause less damage than will a horse and rider, and certainly less damage than a moped, motorbike, car, or farm vehicle."

Hain wrote that the Forest Service has in general "done very little to prepare for the demands of mountain bike use on the National Forests" even though the forests offer a multitude of opportunities. Most agency action has been reaction to user conflicts.

HAIN FINISHES THE BOOKLET WITH A SHINING example: He mapped and discussed each mountain biking route in the Ochoco National Forest, including photographs of the beauty and excitement. He urged foresters to promote mountain bicycling through pamphlets and Recreation Opportunity Guides.

"There are many individuals and groups interested in developing routes for mountain biking. Now is the time for land managers and recreation specialists to get out in front of this challenge," Hain concluded.

Gordon Hain's Mountain Bike Trail Guide

	Easiest	More Difficult	Most difficult ¹
Grade			
Maximum Pitch	10%	30%	+30%
Max. sustained pitch	5%	10%	15%
Length	100'	300'	500'
Turning Radius	6'	3'	2'
Length of Trip			
Day	10-20 miles	20-40 miles	40-50 miles
One-half Day	5-10 miles	15-20 miles	20-25 miles
Clearing²			
Width	48"+	36"-48"	36"
Height	8'	8'	Max. 8'
Tread³			
Width	24"+	12"-24"	12"
Surface	Relatively smooth	Sections of Relatively Rough Surface	Varied—Some Portage required

Notes:

1. Upper limit of grade and pitch length depends on soil type, amount of rock, vegetation type, and other conditions affecting stability of the trail surface.
2. Curve alignment to avoid cutting large trees.
3. Increase tread width 6" on switchbacks or where side slopes exceed 60 percent.