

SOME PEOPLE STILL EQUATE MOUNTAIN bikes with motorized off-road vehicles. This mistaken connection began in the '70s when the name "mountain bike" was coined. It didn't help in '86 when the influential Sierra Club lumped mountain bikes into the ORV category in its official definitions.

As "off-road vehicles," the Club asserted, mountain bikes should be prohibited from all trails unless it could be proven that their impact was acceptable. In '88, a group of cyclists within the Club protested this stringent stance and it was moderated—albeit slightly. But the earlier policy continues to influence land managers nationwide.

The Sierra Club still criticizes mountain bikers categorically, saying they are a danger to other trail users, they compete for scarce land, damage soil, disrupt wildlife, and encourage illegal hunting. And among the larger community of environmentalists, hikers and equestrians, mountain bikes continue to have an uneven image and are sometimes still grouped with ORVs.

"The crux is the use of vehicles, whatever their design," says George Barnes, chairman of the Sierra Club's ORV subcommittee. "To the perception of a hiker, I think a mountain bicyclist, especially a gonzo bombing down a hill, has more similarities with a motorcyclist. The speed is similar. The weight is lighter but the tires are narrower, resulting in similar ground pressure. Both can channel water in the same way. Bicycles are quieter, so they're less disturbing at a distance. But they're also dangerous because they're on top of you before you know they're there."

Aside from these considerations, a key reason the Sierra Club classifies mountain bikes as vehicles is to keep them out of designated Wilderness areas (where no vehicles are permitted). Most mountain bikers are willing to accept a Wilderness exclusion but would consider Barnes's comparison of mountain bikes to motorcycles to be extreme. Cyclists can cause water-channelling ruts, but for safety, we try to avoid riding in them.

Of course the Sierra Club's perspective on mountain bikes is not the sole determinant of bicycle trail-use policy. Forest rangers, for

MOTORCYCLES AND MOUNTAIN BIKES

ONE CYCLING ADVOCATE'S PERSPECTIVE ON A CONTROVERSIAL ALLIANCE

BY GARY SPRUNG

example, generally take a more moderate position and tend to recognize the differences between bicycles and motorcycles.

A VOICE OF EXPERIENCE

Now, as the sport of mountain biking works to clarify its image, cycling advocates need to decide how to interact with the ORV community, and they need to understand how that relationship will affect the sport.

Mountain bikers can learn from the experience of organizations such as the 65-year-old American Motorcycle Association. It commands a firm grip on the issues facing ORVs. Its trail guide is an excellent handbook for planning, surveying, managing volunteers, and constructing and maintaining trails. AMA also publishes guides for political activism. And since off-road cyclists face challenges remarkably similar to those the AMA has battled for years, this information is invaluable to their cause.

The AMA encourages mountain bikers to join. "We see the issue of public access to public lands as one that concerns everybody interested in outdoor recreation," says Bill Wood, managing editor of AMA's magazine, *American Motorcyclist*. "We don't see ourselves on the other side of the issue from hikers and mountain bikers.

"Most off-road motorcyclists are enjoying nature in the same way as everybody else. The reason we're attracted is that we enjoy beauty, we enjoy scenery, being outdoors, and the challenge of conquering the

mountains. We have the same love of nature as hikers, bikers, and equestrians."

Wood criticizes people who divide recreation into 2 camps: non-motorized and motorized. The first group, he says, is perceived as good, the second as bad. Instead, he says, people should focus on the difference between responsible and irresponsible trail users. "The responsible people need to band together to educate the irresponsible," Wood says.

AMA members have been riding off road a lot longer than those of NORBA, IMBA, or any other mountain biking group. AMA also wields more lobbying clout. But before mountain bikers join them, common ground must be found (if it exists) and political consequences must be considered.

Another group soliciting cyclists is Tread Lightly. It was started by the U.S. Forest Service to promote ethical behavior among motorized trail users. Recently, it became a private, non-profit corporation that receives major financial backing from motor vehicle manufacturers.

Now Tread Lightly wants to enlist non-motorized recreationists, says director Cliff Blake, who has asked for corporate support from Specialized and plans to approach the American Horse Council, American Hiking Society, and the Sierra Club.

Tread Lightly's stated purpose is to minimize or eliminate land impact by "off-highway vehicles." It instructs ORV users to protect the environment and leave no trace. "Hopefully, we'll eventually pro-

mote a new generation of people where adverse activity will be unacceptable and not the norm," says Blake, who promises to work with all trail users who want Tread Lightly's support.

FOSSIL FEUD

For the last decade I have worked as a Colorado environmentalist, focusing on water preservation, development issues, and multi-use trail management. My experience, coupled with political common sense and scientific evidence, has led me to the following opinion: Cyclists should not form an alliance with AMA or Tread Lightly now.

Traditionally, motorized groups take anti-environmental positions. In central Colorado, for example, cyclists have a long-running conflict with motorcycles over motorized travel on Fossil Ridge, an alpine Wilderness Study Area. Cyclists have photographed serious trail erosion caused by motorcycles and shown that they have traveled off trail, damaging fragile alpine tundra. Most local mountain bicyclists, including the owners of 2 bike shops, have said they are willing to give up mountain bicycling in the area to protect it. But motorcyclists have unanimously and unceasingly opposed the protection of Fossil Ridge as a Wilderness, and continue to ride there.

Wood says the AMA has always supported Wilderness "for those areas that truly meet the definition, that truly do not have evidence of man's presence." Fossil Ridge, in his mind, doesn't qualify, and he supports a bill that would ease restrictions on its use.

Perhaps the clearest picture of the differences between mountain bikers and ORV users comes from examining the work of the Blue Ribbon Coalition, an alliance of motorized recreation groups, which AMA supports. On the front page of its September '90 newsletter, the Coalition charges, "Throughout Montana, local economies and communities are being destabilized at an alarming rate by disruptive and obstructionist anti-resource management extremists." One of them, the BRC charges, is Congressman Pat Williams, who supports "preservationist extremes against sound multiple-use management."

The BRC strongly opposes a compromise among Wilderness activists, timber companies, and mill workers that would keep 98 percent of the national forest timber out of Wilderness. Apparently, that's not enough. The BRC also opposes the Endangered Species Act and the "unrelenting acquisition of private land" by the Nature Conservancy and federal government. (The Conservancy protects small parcels of critical ecological concern, and federal acquisitions create more public land for recreation.)

The limits of ORV travel are determined by their motors, not their riders. That's why the basic difference between cyclists and ORVs is power. ORVs produce much more—enough to compensate for mistakes, such as getting stuck. Anyone who has shared a trail with a motorcyclist has witnessed the ability of a motor to accelerate soil impact.

This observation is supported by scientific studies, particularly of motorized vehicle use in the desert. *Environmental Effects of Off-Road Vehicles*, a book published in '83 by Springer-Verlag, concluded: 1) motorcycles, dune buggies, jeeps, and other vehicles have destroyed vegetation, denuding some areas; 2) motorized vehicles often affect animals, causing problems such as hearing loss, which dulls their ability to detect predators; 3) disturbance to soils has created giant dust storms; 4) rehabilitation and recovery is unproven and should be assumed impossible, or at least difficult and costly.

Another example of an ecosystem harmed by ORVs is northern Florida's Dog Lake. "Only churned sand and tire ruts remained where grasses, flowers and low-lying shrubs once grew," reported the Sierra Club's magazine, *OHV Monitor*, in '78.

Of course, mountain bikers have also been accused of harming the environment. But a number of studies have concluded that they cause little more damage than hikers and far less than horses or motorcycles.

A MAINSTREAM ISSUE

Finally, as more celebrities and government officials endorse environmentalism (in words, at least), and as science continues to warn us about the burning of fossil fuels, the

so-called green movement is gaining a larger forum. It's becoming a mainstream U.S. issue, and its tenets are receiving support.

It's likely that the green movement will become increasingly critical of motorized off-road recreation. Damaging soil, burning irreplaceable oil, and filling the backcountry air with noise and exhaust—all in pursuit of fun—are hardly "green" ideals.

So I believe it would be a political mistake (a philosophical one, too) for mountain bikers to align with the Blue Ribbon Coalition or other motorized groups. And I think cyclists should wait to join Tread Lightly until it shows it can recruit



Of course, mountain bikers have been accused of harming the environment. But a number of studies have concluded that they cause little more damage than hikers and far less than horses or motorcycles.



hikers and equestrians, modify its advisories to reflect the approach of non-motorized trail users, and broaden its financial base beyond 4WD manufacturers.

This doesn't mean closing the door completely. Instead, mountain bikers should continue conversations with all trail-use groups and learn from AMA's experience. Above all, they must work with land managers, continue to educate fellow off-road cyclists, and respect the environment. ●