

MBM explores more on The Sierra Club

by Gary Sprung

I. Horses and Skiers Don't Belong In The Wilderness

Horses and Skiers should be banned from the wilderness. The Wilderness Act says so.

Congress tells us that it wants to protect some lands from harm by designating them wilderness. Yet it allows cows and horses which tramp on the land and would not live there naturally. We humans brought those beasts into nature's garden of North America. Those critters belong in Europe where they came from! They scare away our elk, our deer, our bighorn sheep, and our mountain goats. They stole the land from our wolves and bears.

Horses eat the land. Typically, they lounge about chewing on backwoods meadows after carrying their owners' heavy gear into the wilderness. They love the yummy wildflowers.

Back on the trail, the horses start emitting these large green globules of smelly stuff. Plop, plop, all over the trail. Plod, plod, the hooves scoop it up and spread it around.

Yuk, Yuk, complain the hikers following behind.

Uh-oh, watch out! Here comes a mud puddle.

No problem, horses have long legs. Into the muck they sink deep holes. Riders stay clean and dry. Hikers have to detour onto the adjacent plant life.

The trail climbs up steeply above timberline. Nifty, those horseshoe-hooves, they sure do get traction. They just cut right into that soil and hollow out a neat little groove in the center...a good path for running water. Gets kinda muddy for the hikers, though.

Time to give those horses a rest, they're acting skittish. Here comes the hikers. Better give a wide clearance, those walkers wouldn't want to get kicked.

It's wintertime...time to get out those elegant marvels of transportation, our skis. We glide along on a white, soft carpet, not even touching the land. Noiselessly. No one sees us. We see no one. No animal. Just clouds and trees and mountains and snow. It's ethereal, totally in touch with raw nature. We spiritually tour into pristine backcountry. Affecting naught, receiving much.

It's these fiberglass skis, cordura/foam backpacks, Gore-tex coats and polypropylene underwear which let us travel in comfort in so wild a place. We bring along

petroleum in a concise little stove to stay warm and fed. Our food is condensed to offer powerful nutrition in a lightweight package. The super-plastic shovels can carve us a simple, effective shelter. Transceivers add insurance to our life.

Skiing exercises our muscles totally, beyond any other sport. It's tops in aerobics and uses every muscle with diversity and variety as we fight gravity then use it to delight in the terrain.

Is this mechanical transport? If so, we're not supposed to be here in the winter wilderness.

These means of our transportation are 1986 high-tech. Six thousand years ago we traveled on wood we carefully carved ourselves. Now we use fiberglass, aluminum, steel, kevlar and foam manufactured in complicated machinery. The designer has carefully conceived the function to cut into snow for turns and stops or to glide along with minimal friction. The new plastics go much faster than wood.

There's a strong advantage created in the skis' camber. The springing action keeps the grip wax off the snow while we glide. After a kick, it pushes upward for better forward momentum. Often we can cross the land more quickly and with less effort than summertime hiking. We move faster than snowshoers by adding skins for the uphill than schussing down on glide wax.

"Mechanical," says the 1964 College Edition of Webster's New World Dictionary, means "having to do with machinery or tools; produced or operated by machinery or a mechanism." "Machine" means a lot of things. At the top of Webster's list is an archaic use: "the human or animal frame." Next is "a vehicle operated mechanically; specifically, an automobile." Then comes the clincher: a machine is "a structure consisting of a framework and various fixed and moving parts, for doing some kind of work."

So the 1964 Wilderness Act bans skis from wilderness because they're mechanical machines. A ski is both a framework and a moving part. The binding is a mechanism which holds in place a rigid but flexible tool of travel, the boot. The system provides a definite mechanical advantage.

What about snowshoes and saddles? Are they mechanical? Since some people once called the human body a machine, we probably should exclude people totally from at least some wild places.

Clearly, mountain bicycles, wheelchairs, hand gliders, and the Gossamer Albatross

are mechanical. What about vibram soles and cordura/foam/aluminum backpacks? How should we draw the line? None of the above use petroleum or electricity for power. All that's needed is a bunch of muscles.

Snowshoes, saddles and Vibram soles all have a framework. Snowshoe bindings and saddle stirrups move. Soles bend in just the right place; grip by cutting the soil slightly.

Splitting hairs is probably not what Congress intended in 1964. Congress included nothing about mountain bikes and hang gliders in 1964 because they had not yet been invented. Skis and saddles were obviously to be allowed, because people had moved through wilderness with them for so long. Should bicycles be banned because they are new?

Or because they have some measurable (but not yet measured) impact on the land? Hang gliders have zero land impact, yet many believe that form of transport should be banned from wilderness.

The ban is philosophical, not environmental. Or is it just emotional? Where is the reasoning?

There's plenty of room for argument on this issue. That's why it's so interesting. It's also profound, because it provokes thought on the basic question, "What is wilderness?"

II. The News

The Sierra Club in May, 1985, issued a new national policy which defines mountain bicycles as an off-road vehicle (ORV) in essentially the same class as motorcycles, snowmobiles, dune buggies, and all terrain vehicles. The policy expands the environmental issue of mountain bikes from one of just wilderness management to a broader question of overall public lands management.

As an ORV, mountain bikes are deemed "objectionable in most areas because of the introduction of another product of technology whose consequences have not been fully understood," the policy reads.

The Sierra Club then issues a policy recommendation: ORVs "should be presumed to be detrimental to land resources and human safety." ORV operators on private lands must obtain written permission from the landowner and have that permission in their possession. ORV operators on private lands must obtain written permission from the landowner and have that permission in their possession.

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ORVs must be licensed with the fee paying for repair of the environmental damage and for patrol and law enforcement.

Most frightening to mountain bicyclists is the policy's idea that bicycles should be excluded not just from designated wilderness, but also from "de facto wilderness and trails built for use by foot or horse traffic."

The policy recognizes the difference between bicycles and motorized ORVs in matters such as pollution and noise, but in most cases it treats both kinds of machines as identical.

Sally Reid, the national board member who introduced and pushed the policy, told Mountain Bike Magazine that the policy has its roots in three basic concerns: 1) damage to the trails, 2) hazard to other users, and 3) a less defined problem or "aesthetic intrusion and a need to get away from a hoard of bicyclists traveling along at great speed."

Reid describes MBM Editor Barlow's editorial on the Club policy (August-September, 1985 issue) as a "hysterical public lashing." She cites a NORBA News article which she believes glorifies the macho aspects of mountain bicycles and illustrates their potential for environmental destruction. She notes that one trail maintenance volunteer in Santa Barbara County has observed erosion damage from bicycles. In December's California Magazine, she found an article on "Suicycling" which gets hot and

heavy on the "rad...guts...killer instinct...adrenal outdoor high" aspect of the sport.

Reid wrote that the Club "acknowledges the family outing and quiet touring possibilities of mountain biking," but she told MBM in a phone interview, "I live in the country and I hike trails a lot. I have never seen these lovely little groups...riding along serenely."

She, herself, has never ridden a mountain bicycle: "I might even like to have one. I think they're great." She asserted she does not need to ride one to see how they're used, to see that they are misused.

Reid's letter says that land managers of public lands ought to act on a "case by case basis" and designate trails that may be used by bicycles without damage to the resource or danger to other users. Yet the Club policy is national, applying everywhere. It presumes the machines are bad; excludes them from foot and horse trails. (What other kinds of trails are there?)

The club also reaffirmed its support of the 1964 Wilderness Act's prohibition of "mechanized modes of transport" from entry to designated wilderness.

MBM pointed out to Reid that horses eat the land, damage trails, and can scare and even harm hikers; that bicyclists must carry less gear than hikers; and that modern hiking shoes and backpacks enable hikers to cover far more ground than before. We also asked how a bicycle can facilitate "illegal hunting?"

"Hunting can be easier through use of a bicycle cart", she replied. As to the other arguments, those are "not relevant" and are "picky" according to Reid.

The Sierra Club policy is not an example of a board of directors out of touch with its members. Reid explained that the policy began with a few people in the Club who had long worked on ORV policy. It then went to their Regional Conservation Committees all over the nation. Those committees are made up of hard-working volunteers who represent a cross-section of the Club's members. Many of the committees passed the policy unanimously. Then a forum of the Regional Vice-presidents (also volunteers) passed the policy. Then it passed the Club's National Public Lands Committee. The board finally affirmed an idea which probably represents the views of a majority of Club members.

The Club will use the policy as a basis for public input to hearings and to communicate with public land managers, Reid explained.

III. Commentary: The Sierra Club Is Avoiding The Deeper Questions

Mountain Bikes an ORV? The idea insults me.

It's not that I believe motorized recreationalists have no place on public lands, and it's not that I don't understand

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that a mountain bicycle is a vehicle that travels off roads. It's just that the acronym "ORV" has a negative connotation in my mind. It connects to the idea that Americans love their cars too much, that the internal combustion engine has invaded our recreation as much as it has invaded our land.

I know the fun of owning a small pickup truck and driving it all over America's West. I especially know the pleasure of carrying recreation gear for Anne and I to use for fun on the stops of the drive. But car travel is my transportation--hardly the time I look forward to. I can never connect with a place enough to make good photographs while in my truck. In a motor vehicle, I don't touch the land.

The same goes for chairlifts at downhill ski areas. I'd rather be skiing than riding the chair. That's why backcountry or track skiing is better than ski areas. The uphill and the tough exercise is as fun as the downhill.

We mountain bicyclists love aerobic exercise. We love the strain on our muscles. Some of use also like the risk to our bodies.

I suspect that aerobic muscle strain is not so loved by most motorized recreationalists. But they do share our enjoyment of risk.

I disdain recklessness. Whether motorized or not, our recreation must be considerate of the land resources and carefully alert to other people and animals. And plants.

I wish the hikers who disdain us would

realize how mechanical they are and how close our interests are to theirs. We dislike cow dung on trails at least as much as they do!

I am an active advocate of wilderness preservation. I believe it's more important than my bike riding. Most of the people I ride with feel the same.

I also believe bicycles are appropriate on some trails in some wilderness areas.

Not in the Gates of the Arctic or other places that are truly wild. Nor in crowded spots like Yosemite or Maroon Lake of the Maroon Bells/Snowmass Wilderness near Aspen. But the Maroon Wilderness does have a few trails that are excellent for biking.

The Sierra Club's position is full of logical inconsistencies. It's clear that skis, especially ski bindings, are mechanical and thus, by their logic, should be excluded from wilderness. The Club recognizes that horses have a huge impact, but has not advocated banning them from parks and wilderness.

A 1978 article in Yosemite Nature Notes estimated that a horse impacts wet areas between 10 and 100 times as much as a human.

"In fragile wet meadows, all it takes is 2 or 3 animals to get a trail underway...backpackers, avoiding loose soil, rutted trails, or manure, then walk along the margins of these trails, widening them or creating new trails."

The article adds that stock grazing can result in elimination of plant species in favor

of other species, often non-native. Stock grazing is considered detrimental by the Yosemite researchers but they don't know how much grazing constitutes overgrazing. ("Stock Use in the Yosemite Backcountry," by James Sano and Alexander Moad)

So, just like ORVs, the consequences of horses have not been fully studied or understood.

The Club advocates licensing of bicyclists and a law requiring that they obtain and carry written permission from owners when operating on private land. Why should such restrictions not apply to hikers?

Sally Reid's dismissal of the logical holes in the Sierra club Policy as "not relevant" and "picky" was an attempt to obscure the fact that the Club was acting more emotionally than rationally. The Club is really acting as a lobby for particular kinds of recreationalists--few of whom have learned the new delights of mountain bicycles, so their expectations of the wilderness differ from ours.

I started out as a hiker, runner, and backpacker in my enjoyment of public lands. I soon extended that into skiing, bicycling, and boating. Motors don't provide my recreation.

Motors are the differential on the continuum of mechanization. Motors are where the wilderness prohibition should apply absolutely. Since the beginning of the Wilderness Act, the U.S. Forest Service defined "mechanized" as non-motorized.

Motors also provide the line of

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demarcation between mountain bicycles and ORVs. Mountain bikes create no air or noise pollution.

On grounds of wildness or safety or land impact, only hikers should be allowed in some places. Other places can accommodate bicycles and horses, but not motors. Motors are okay in some spots which can withstand their power.

In very special places, like grizzly bear habitat, no one should be allowed at all.

Again, there's a continuum of wildness. Wilderness is a political tool with which we draw a line on the spectrum. It's a line full of compromise without clear meaning. The meaning can change with time.

The Sierra Club is making a mistake in its wilderness politics strategy. By calling mountain bikes ORV's, the Sierra Club risks alienating the rapidly growing numbers of mountain bicyclists. Mountain bike sales, though still a fairly small fraction of total bicycle sales, are the fastest growing segment of the industry. Already some mountain bicyclists are opposing wilderness designations.

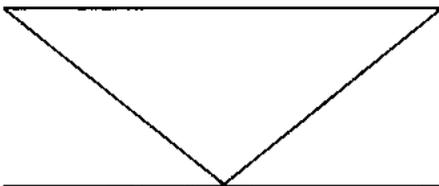
Mountain bikes are introducing people to a new ease of access to public lands. They could function much as do Sierra Club trips. The Club ought to have mountain bike trips. Such trips could promote the same kind of wildlands ethics for bicyclists as Club's hiking trips give to novice backpackers....minimum impact camping, how to be a good wilderness citizen...and spiritual enlightenment. Mountain bike trips could promote love of nature.

The idea is not new. Adventure Trails in Los Angeles invented it. Sierra club members have ridden on the program.

Maybe the Club's emotional reaction to mountain bikes is because they just can't handle getting passed on the trail. More likely, they instinctively fear the problems that have occurred with motorized vehicles.

Philosophical issues of land aesthetics and ethics and the political strategies for preservation ought to be paramount. Erosion and user conflicts from mountain

bikes are still minimal. The Club ought to take a more thorough and cool-headed look at the questions raised by mountain bicycles.



IV. What You Can Do: Advice to Mountain Bicyclists

Much of the opposition to mountain bicycling on foot and horse trails may come from the rough, reckless image portrayed in some accounts of riding. Opposition also comes from hikers' distasteful encounters with inconsiderate bicyclists.

Bicyclists need to promote a positive image of their recreation. They need to work to prove to hikers they should be allies. The opposite situation, of hikers and mountain bicyclists as enemies, would be a tragedy and a sure loss for bicycling.

Actions speak louder than word so the top priority is to observe the NORBA Code of Ethics. Race organizers should keep it in mind while designing their courses.

Bicyclists should be sensitive to the land. Just because a bicyclist can ride down a stream bed is no excuse for doing so. (There are places, though, where it probably does no damage-like water running on bare rock.)

Then, Sierra Club Director Sally Reid has a good point. Should magazines inculcate and promote a macho, reckless attitude about bicycling? So what if you get all muddy, unruly, and out of breath. It's one thing to write about how good that feels, quite another to popularize a tough guy image.

The media image of bicyclists could determine in a few years the acceptance of mountain bikes by the public. Riders and manufacturers do not want any of the connotations carried in the motorcycle gang phenomena.

Mountain bicyclists also face the problem of a public which does not understand the machine and the experience. At least some part of the opposition to bikes in wilderness comes from people who do not expect to see bicycles there, who react negatively because of associations with motorcycles. Many who've never ridden a mountain bike have little idea of its limitations, of how little power it has compared to motors. They cannot know its possibilities for wilderness experiences.

This problem is declining as more people buy mountain bikes. Mountain bikers can make it go away even faster by turning new people on to the sport. Take a friend-or an enemy-along for a ride.

In the political arena, bicyclists should not stand for the ORV categorization. But need this difference of opinion turn into a bitter dispute?

Opposition by bicyclists to wilderness designations will not solve the problem. Most polls find the American public solidly in support of wilderness preservation, so bicyclists could be standing on the wrong side of the fence.

The best way to change the Sierra Club and other environmental groups is from within. The Club, unlike most political organizations, is highly democratic. Club members who enjoy mountain bikes should speak out and write to the board of directors. That may be a good reason for opponents of the policy to join the Club. Gain a voice!

Environmentalists and public land managers have acted in a knee-jerk manner in regulating mountain bikes. They have avoided the deeper questions this new recreation invokes. The issue needs more discussion and thought.

It's up to bicyclists to push the issue.