

SIGNS OF THE TIMES

Strategies for the Job of Communicating Rules of the Trail

BY GARY SPRUNG

Managing recreation on public land depends on communication between land managers and land users. For mountain bicycling, it's crucial. The faster all trail users—not just cyclists—become familiar with the rules of responsible riding, the sooner our new sport will gain acceptance.

There are 4 time-tested methods of conveying messages to the recreating public: brochures, maps, face-to-face conversations, and signs.

Signs most often come first. It might be a green monstrosity above an interstate highway to alert travelers of an upcoming exit. Or perhaps it's an inviting, elegantly carved wood-and-rock sign announcing a park boundary. In either case, more people will see it than any map or brochure.

And since most mountain bikers begin their ride at a trailhead—not at a park or forest office—the chances of a face-to-face meeting with a land manager are slim. Given these typical conditions, the burden of communicating falls on signs.

Simple, But Effective

The Arroyo Seco District of the Angeles National Forest, just north of L.A., began a pioneering effort 4 years ago to develop signs for mountain biking.

Ranger George Geer's first educational product was a typewritten handout of NORBA's mountain bike code. Next came a brochure that included a map that described favored cycling routes and closed wilderness areas. Then Geer decided to survey forest users. "A lot of people told us they didn't mind bikes," Geer says. "They just needed to know they're out there

and wanted more education about rights-of-way."

So Geer created a sign that uses just 4 words and 3 internationally recognized symbols to quickly convey a



Geer's "Yield To" sign could someday be seen on trails everywhere.

basic idea of ethical riding. The key words "Yield To" occupy its center spot, and the concept of who yields to whom is conveyed through symbols and arrows. Hikers yield to horses and bicyclists yield to both hikers and horses. (Horses get priority because they can be skittish and unpredictable.) Easy to understand, this triangular trail courtesy sign is now being used elsewhere in California and could soon become a national standard.

Two other simple signs are used in the Angeles National Forest to alert trail users. Designed for placement on vertical, wooden 4x4 posts, one says "Multi-Use Area," the other, "Limited-Use Area." Both are accompanied by recreation symbol signs, with or without prohibiting slashes.

Geer says he's sensitive to cyclists' concerns about widespread restrictions, noting, "We try to use education and engineering before enforcement." While he says he believes many trails in his area aren't appropriate for bicycling, he's reluctant to enact outright bans. So he's developed another useful sign—a rendering of the international bicycle symbol with a yellow slash across it that includes the words, "Not Recommended."

Geer explains, "This informs bicyclists that a trail is not a good ride—for whatever reason. But it lets the bicyclist make his own decision."

Sign Pollution

Mountain bike activists in Los Angeles applaud Geer's program. Yet the question of how many signs are necessary has sparked a debate within the Concerned Off-Road Bicyclists Association (CORBA).

CORBA board member Mark Langton wants more signs. "We run into hikers all the time who have a map but don't really know where they are," he says. "When we stop and ask, 'How are you doing?' they say they are planning a 12-mile hike up a difficult section. It's 4:30 p.m. and they have no water. Signs can make the difference [in cases like this], telling people just how far their route will really take them."

Langton also favors the installation of more signs on one L.A.-area trail that crosses a national forest, state park, and National Recreation Area. Each one has a distinct management policy, and Langton wants signs to explain the differences.

"Some people say signs are aesthetically negative," Langton says. "I agree that too many signs can be a detraction from the natural environment. But if they educate and help people to better enjoy and share an area, then I'm all for them. My personal feeling is, as many signs as can be placed, the better."

CORBA board member Jim Hasenauer worries that signs sanitize the environment and are part of an attempt to remove all risk from life and

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recreation. "I don't want to see signs warning of every possibility," he says. "We don't need 'Bicycles Yield Here,' 'Blind Corner Ahead,' or 'Water Crossing' signs. We don't need a sign at every point a trail crosses a road. That's way too much. One of the reasons most of us go to the backcountry is to shake off that kind of guidance. Too many signs becomes another kind

of urban nightmare.

"It's a delicate balance," Hasenauer continues. "We do need to have signs, especially to help new riders. But in my mind, the fewer signs, the better."

Location and Sign Language

Concern for the aesthetics and communicative power of signs has led many land management agencies to develop integrated signs programs. One of the best can be seen in areas managed by the National Park Service (NPS).

Steve Elkinton, the NPS Long Distance Trails Manager in Washington, DC, says the best locations for signs are at points of decision-making (such as intersections), points of confusion, and points of access (such as trailheads and parking lots). Trailheads often warrant large bulletin boards posted with maps, distance charts, rules, and codes of conduct, Elkinton says. But if there's no ambiguity, signs aren't needed.

"Clutter is a relative term," Elkinton says. "It tends to be more of a problem around cities, and also in remote areas where people are really sensitive to any kind of intrusions." He says it's possible to place a great number of

signs in wooded areas without detracting from the natural appearance, because all signs can't be seen at once. On the other hand, in open spaces just a few signs can seem too much.

The best signs blend with their surroundings. "In backcountry—[designated] wilderness or not—if you suddenly come upon a high-tech, aluminum sign with bright colors, you'll feel it's obtrusive," Elkinton says. He recommends making signs with natural materials, including local rocks for a base and using colors appropriate to the landscape.

"The farther the sign is from civilization, the more important it is to handle it sensitively," Elkinton says. However, he notes that natural signs are often more expensive than those that are mass-produced, and they weather more quickly.

The quality, engineering, and message of signs bear on the problem of theft and vandalism. Negative signs tend to get shot up first, Elkinton says. "In almost every case, a negative message can be stated in a positive way.

Instead of 'No Hunting or Horses,' a sign can say, 'Hikers and Fishing Only.'"

If a vandalized sign is left hanging, it invites more vandalism, he says. But if it's replaced the next day with a handsome, quality sign, vandals will sense that "these people are sharp, watching, and [they're] on our tail."

Case Studies

Steve Cook of Paradise Bikes and Skis uses signs to alert riders to private property around Crested Butte, Colorado. First Cook negotiates with local ranchers. In one case, permission to cross grazing land was given only during times when cows are not present. So Cook invented a folding stop sign. When the trail is open, the sign is folded and presents no message. When the trail is closed, the unfolded sign reads, "From mountain bikers to mountain bikers: Trail closed for grazing operation."

Another sign informs riders that the route is available, courtesy of the ranch. On one route, a Cook-made sign

warns bicyclists not to cross private property. It, too, uses a blunt peer-pressure message, "From mountain bikers to mountain bikers: Do you want to blow it for all?"

At the Cayahoga National Recreation Area in Ohio, where Elkinton served 4 years as trail and sign coordinator, there are 120 miles of roads that cross 2 counties, 3 towns, and 14 townships. "Signing was a nightmare," he says. Elkinton masterminded the park's first sign plan, which coordinated everything from interstate highway signs to those inside a building that direct visitors to the restrooms.

"Once we had it all installed, it really made a huge difference," he says. "It gives the place an identity it never had before."

Cyclists, of course, are looking for more than identity. We want trails that can be used safely and ecologically by a variety of users. And that's why land managers and activists should give careful thought to designing and implementing these important tools of communication. ■