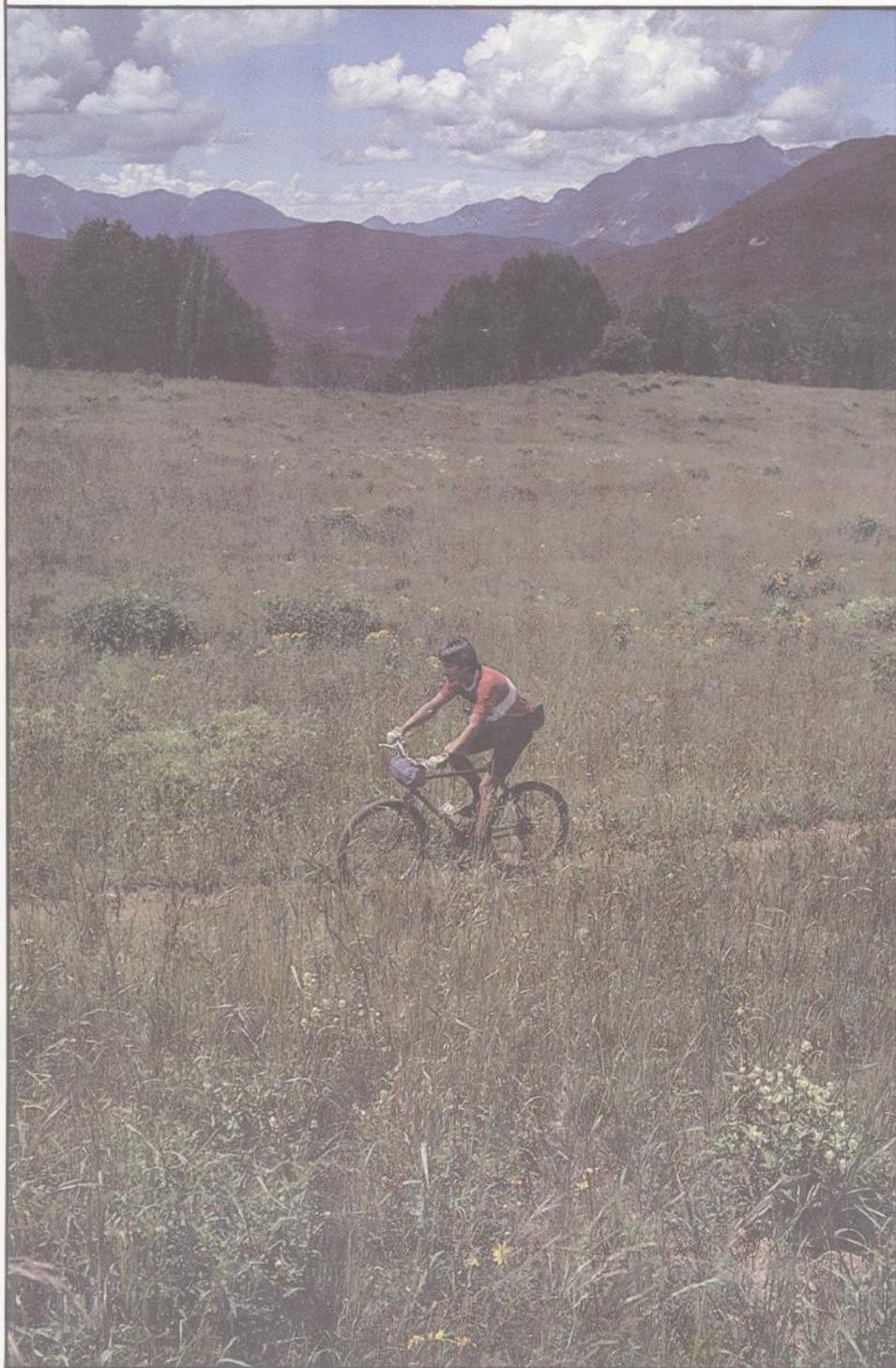


# Wilderness Areas: Conflict

by Gary Sprung



The U.S. Forest Service and National Park Service have arbitrarily banned bicycles from wilderness areas. Consequently fat-tire bicyclists, despite conservation orientations, have started opposing some proposed wilderness designations. Both the agencies and those bicyclists are wrong. Bicycles should be allowed on selected trails but wilderness preservation is the overriding issue.

My beef with the Forest Service stems from their twenty years of opposing more wilderness than they have supported, yet these professional foresters call themselves "conservationists" and have the nerve to tell me what wilderness means. The National Park Service is even more at fault because National Parks are created specifically for recreation as well as preservation. Recreation is almost incidental as a reason to establish Forest Service Wilderness.

Let's get one item done with early in this argument: land erosion or other physical impacts by mountain bikes is minimal as long as they stay on trails. Though almost no scientific studies have been done, I think it's fair to say their impact is between that of a hiker and a horse. If horses are allowed, then the impact argument says bicycles are OK, too. If the Forest Service really had physical impact in mind, it would not have banned hang-gliders along with bicycles.

Bicyclers definitely impact the social environment when they encounter hikers who believe bikes are inappropriate in the wilderness. Here we get into the heart of the issue because what is appropriate depends on one's definition of wilderness.

In 1964 Congress defined wilderness as "an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain." That word untrammelled is critical. It's defined as "not confined, restrained or shackled." Congress went on to say wilderness "retains its primeval character and influence," looks natural and not man-altered, and "has outstanding opportunities for solitude and primitive and unconfined types of recreation."

Mountain bikes did not exist in 1964 and Congress did not explicitly say what sort of transportation is appropriate in wilderness. It did generally forbid motor vehicles and "mechanical transport."



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Bicycles are certainly mechanical but so are skis, canoes, saddles, and even hiking boots. Webster's 1964 College Dictionary relates "mechanical" to machines, and defines "machine" as either "a vehicle" like an automobile or as "a structure consisting of a framework and various fixed and moving parts." Mechanical is a grey word and Congress provided no guidance. (As for bicycles' "mechanical advantage" over walking, skis and saddles provide that admirably.)

Wilderness cycling opponents who accept the greyness of mechanical often turn to "traditional" as the dividing line between horses and bicycles.

## Mountain bikers should cast their self-interest to the wind and stand nobly and work actively in favor of protecting more wilderness!

Well, the only mention of tradition in the '64 Wilderness Act are sections specifically allowing continued grazing and mining and use of aircraft or motorboats "where these uses have already become established." Nothing in the Act invokes the ambience of the Old West or the pioneers of the frontiers.

Congress did say wilderness recreation ought to be "primitive." Webster's in '64 said primitive means "characteristic or imitative of the earliest ages; ancient; original." In the earliest ages, backpacks, saddles, skis, and shoes did not exist. These inventions are roughly 500 to 10,000 years old. Bicycles are relatively recent but how primitive are they compared to Gore-tex/Vibram boots, fiberglass mountaineering skis, indestructible hypalon rafts, and super-comfortable backpacks? Today's wilderness users are more akin to spacemen than cavemen. Should we insist on wooden skis, or exclude wheelchairs and the new muscle-powered airplanes?

The Forest Service in its 1965 set of regulations implementing the Wilderness Act interpreted mechanical "as any contrivance...propelled by a non-living power source." In 1982 that rule was still on the books and the Acting Director of Recreation recognized that the blanket prohibition of bicycles "may have been unduly restrictive. We can look at these types of vehicles as

being primitive, muscle powered, aids to transporting. The history of wilderness exploration has shown that early users of the American frontier and wilderness relied on bicycles, carts, and other primitive wheeled devices to transport their possessions."

At the same time, the Associate Deputy Chief told foresters the prohibition published that year should not have been blanket but "only where (bicycles') presence created a conflict or problem."

In 1983, the Chief of the Forest Service, R. Max Peterson, arbitrarily made the prohibition universal.

Regardless of the 1964 U.S. Congress, wilderness is a living concept which must be continuously interpreted. Unfortunately the Forest and Park Services did their interpreting according to their own ideas of wilderness and held no public meetings before issuing the prohibition rules. Why?

I'm confident most federal land managers do care about wilderness values, at least somewhat. But a conspiracy theory pops to mind: here we have the Chief of the agency overruling other top administrators, thereby creating a division amongst the pro-wilderness constituency between fat-tire bicyclists and environmental groups (who oppose wilderness bicycling.) Thus weakening the wilderness cause. The Chief is the top non-political employee. His bosses are the political policy-makers currently in vogue, the anti-wilderness Reagan administration. Could they have created this division deliberately?

Whether or not that wild idea is true, mountain bicyclists should search their souls on this issue and examine their reasons for choosing wilderness and mountain bicycles. I suspect most mountain bicyclists choose canoes or kayaks over powerboats and cross-country skis instead of snowmobiles. They also like to get away from noise and now complain that no trails in the forest are open for bicycles to the exclusion of motorcycles.

Mountain bikers should cast their self-interest to the wind and stand nobly and work actively in favor of protecting more wilderness! Look at the political realities: only two percent of the lower-48 states is designated wilderness; only five percent could ever qualify. Civilization constantly threatens to engulf that last unprotected three percent. Wilderness is still the best protection against mining, clearcutting, road building, ORV destruction, and overcrowding. Wilderness holds the answers to questions we have not yet learned to ask.

In Crested Butte, we may lose one of the most popular and finest of all mountain bike areas if we succeed in protecting the nearby Oh-Be-Joyful valley as wilderness. In making such difficult choices for our last remaining wild lands, we should err on the side of preservation. It's better to lock these places up now; we can open them later should that prove wise. The Sierra Club and Wilderness Society, whose clout overwhelms that of the fat-tire bicycle community, wisely want to avoid opening up the Wilderness Act for changes, given today's prevailing political atmosphere.

A possible alternative is the creation of intermediate designations prohibiting mining or motors but allowing some less destructive uses. We should also declare some wilderness totally

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closed to humans. But such alternatives are currently politically impossible.

Fat-tire bicyclists should continue to prod the environmentalists toward a better view of the virtues of wilderness bicycling. We'll have an easier time convincing if we stand up for preservation instead of our self-interest. Such a move will benefit the public images of both fat-tire bicycling and preservation. The alternative is nasty bickering between people who otherwise would be allies.

