

Your Land Or My Land?

An Overview of Public Land Access

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THE FIRST AUTOMOBILE users owed the existence of paved roads to bicycle lobbyists. But today, bicyclists are squeezed by intense motor traffic and are too often ignored by public policy decision makers. Many are deserting the asphalt for the joys of backcountry cycling.

Unfortunately, these escapees are encountering land access problems. Mountain bikers are the newest members of the trail-user family and are unfamiliar and sometimes unwelcome to the hikers and horsemen who have preceded them. These elder siblings also outnumber and outinfluence mountain bikers. Compounding the problem is a legacy of friction between motorized and nonmotorized trail users. Mountain biking's mechanical nature arouses suspicion among many environmentalists.

In the midst of this conflict, mountain bikers must remember these are our public lands too. We have the right to use them whether on foot, horse or bike. Most public lands are open to recreational use, and mountain bikers can ride any road, route, or trail across most federal land managed by the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) or Bureau of Land Management (BLM).

Maps available from each USFS office show land use restrictions. In some areas, travel is restricted to routes designated with an arrow, but on most lands you're free to find your own routes. BLM lands are less regulated, and you can usually forge a trail through untracked land wherever you want. But that freedom should be tempered by recognition of potential land damage. Managers are authorized and expected to close lands to users who harm them.

At the other extreme, bicyclists are not allowed on most military or Indian reservations, nor in any National Wilderness Preservation System lands. There are also a few other restricted areas; e.g., the mountain watersheds for Boulder, Colorado and Salt Lake City, Utah, which are off-limits to everyone.

Somewhere in the middle is the public



park system—national, state, county and municipal. Regulations in each, except for the national park system, vary. Cycling on National Park Service (NPS) trails is banned. Most state parks appear open to bikes though that varies by state and even within states. County and municipal parks are locally regulated with no overall policy.

The National Park Service's attitude toward mountain biking makes no sense. The agency has built paved highways across tundra, swamps and deserts, yet has banned bicycles on trails. In any developed area which has been master planned, National Park supervisors have the authority to designate trails where bikes are allowed, but in all other areas

(accounting for almost all the acreage), trails can only be opened to bikes after a formal ruling by the Park Service. That in turn requires formal notice in the Federal Register, a dense instrument of the bureaucracy published every day to inform the public of federal actions.

Ironically, the original purpose of the National Parks was to provide recreation and preservation. This principal was established with our first national park, Yellowstone. In sharp contrast, designated wilderness management policy places preservation far ahead of recreation. Trails in numerous national parks and national monuments are perfectly suited for bikes. They're uncrowded, well-built, and highly rideable by competent bikers. These trails ought to be identified and opened to cyclists after input from all groups of users. Mountain bikers aren't advocating a wide-open policy; we simply want a balanced policy. Unfortunately, changing the NPS attitude is a major obstacle.

Quite a few mountain bikers also believe bikes should be allowed on some trails in selected wilderness areas. Other mechanized wilderness users already exist: skiers, horseback riders, mountain climbers, even backhoe operators. There's nothing about a bicycle in the wilderness that precludes anyone from having a wilderness experience as intended by Congress in its 1964 Wilderness Act.

The need for mountain bikers to organize is clear. Local, grassroots clubs are needed to deal with local park managers while a national organization operates at the federal level.

Even though progress is being made, all mountain bikers must participate by becoming informed about land access and the environment in general. We have to prove we're responsible members of the backcountry family by communicating with and understanding the needs of other public-land users and by influencing the behavior of mountain bikers abusing these lands. That's the political reality all mountain bikers face whether we have "right" on our side or not.