

Subject: FW: Frequently Asked Questions about Mountain Biking

Date: Mon, 29 Mar 2004 11:47:08 -0800

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-----Original Message-----

From: Mike Vandeman [<mailto:mjvande@pacbell.net>]

Sent: March 29, 2004 7:01 AM

Subject: Frequently Asked Questions about Mountain Biking

Comments?

Frequently Asked Questions about Mountain Biking

Michael Vandeman, Ph.D.

March 5, 2004

1. Why do people mountain bike?

a. They say that using a bike allows them to get much farther, in the same amount of time, than they can by walking. They also maintain constant pressure on land managers, to open more and more trails to bikes. Of course, all of these trails are already open to them, if they choose to walk. They also frequently claim that closing trails to bikes "excludes" them from the parks. This could only be true if they were unable to walk. Of course, they are able to walk. There's nothing inherently wrong with bicycling instead of walking; we all like to save energy, when it's appropriate. Use of a bicycle to replace automobile use is obviously beneficial. However, by the same token, replacing hiking with mountain biking is obviously not beneficial.

b. They are interested in the quantity of nature they can see, rather than the quality of their experience. While riding a bike, especially over terrain as rough as a trail, one has to be constantly paying attention to not crashing. That make it almost impossible to notice much else. By contrast, a hiker feels the ground, hears all the sounds and smells all the odors of nature and can stop instantly, if he/she finds something interesting. The brain thrives on stimulation. A biker has to travel several times as far as a hiker, to get the same stimulation as a hiker. (And, by the same token, motorcyclists have to travel several times as far as a bicyclist, and an auto user several times as far as a motorcyclist, since they are enclosed in a metal box.)

c. They are interested in thrills. Riding a bike on a trail, especially a trail containing many obstacles, or a trail one is not familiar with, is very challenging. (But if mountain biking is the high point of your week, as it seems to be for many mountain bikers, you must be leading a pretty dull life, off of the bike!)

d. They are interested in building mountain biking skills and competing with other mountain bikers. The thrill of racing drives people to spend more money on their bike, and ride it harder and more often. Racing, up to and including the Olympics, drives a lot of mountain biking. Of course, it is also extremely harmful to the parks and natural areas that are used for practice! It is hard to think of any other (legal) use of public lands, other than hunting, that is as harmful as mountain biking.

2. What is driving the sport of mountain biking? Besides the attraction for participants, manufacturers and retailers of mountain bikes and mountain biking accessories, as well as "adventure" travel guides, make a lot of money from promoting mountain biking. Even some auto manufacturers (e.g. Subaru) promote and sponsor mountain biking, and try to use its popularity to sell more cars. The tourism industry also promotes mountain biking, among other attractions.

3. What harm does mountain biking do?

a. Most obvious is the acceleration of erosion. Knobby tires rip into the soil, loosening it and allowing rain to wash it away. They also create V-shaped grooves that make walking difficult or even dangerous. The mechanical advantage given by the gears and ball bearings allow a mountain

biker to travel several times as fast as a hiker. Given their increased weight (rider plus bike), this results in vastly increased momentum, and hence much greater horizontal (shearing) forces on the soil. (Witness the skid marks from stops, starts, and turns.) According to Newton, every action has an equal and opposite reaction. Mountain bikes were built much stronger than other bikes, so that they could withstand the greater forces they were subject to on rough trails. These same forces, therefore, are being applied to the trails! To give a definite number, the winner of a 20-mile race here in Briones Regional Park averaged 13 MPH (the speed limit is 15 MPH -- where were the park rangers?).

b. A hiker must be very careful not to accidentally step on small animals and plants on the trail. For a mountain biker, it is almost impossible to avoid killing countless animals and plants on and under the trail. They have to pay attention to controlling the bike, and can't afford to look carefully at what is on the trail, especially when travelling fast. And even if they happen to see, for example, a snake, it is hard for them to stop in time to avoid killing it. A hiker, when crossing a creek, will try to avoid getting wet, by crossing on stepping stones or logs. Mountain bikers, on the other hand, simply ride right through the creek bed, crushing any animals or plants that happen to be there. Mountain biking magazines are full of photos of mountain bikers throwing up spray, as they barrel through creeks. Not only do bikes destroy animals and plants as they ride across streams, they ride through streams stirring up sediment. The sediment in the water interferes with the oxygen uptake by aquatic life, for example, killing fish- and frog eggs. Young fish, insects, amphibians, and aquatic microorganisms are extremely sensitive to sediment in water.

c. Bikes also allow people to travel several times as far as a hiker. This translates into several times the impacts, both on the trail and on the wildlife (to say nothing of the other trail users). Existing parklands are already inadequate to protect the wildlife that live there. When they are crisscrossed by mountain bikers and legal or illegal trails, their habitat becomes even more inadequate. Mountain bikers frequently advertise rides of 20-50 miles or more. Have you ever tried to walk that far in a day? In other words, allowing bikes in a park greatly increases human presence in that park and drives wildlife further from the resources that they need to survive, including water, food, and mates.

d. Due to their width and speed, bikes can't safely pass each other on narrow trails. Therefore, policies that permit mountain biking also result in more habitat destruction, as trails are widened by bikers (or by hikers and equestrians jumping out of their way).

e. Knobby mountain bike tires are ideal for carrying mud, and consequently exotic plants and fungi, from place to place, resulting in the spread of exotic invasive species, such as weeds and Sudden Oak Death.

f. Mountain biking is driving the very young and old off of the trails and hence out of the parks. Even able-bodied hikers and equestrians fear for their safety, and don't enjoy sharing the trails with bikes. (The mountain bikers claim that they are simply being selfish and "unwilling to share", but actually they have no problem sharing trails with mountain bikers; it is only their bikes that are a problem!)

g. Mountain bikes, which are obviously built to go anywhere, teach children and anyone else who sees them that the rough treatment of nature is acceptable. This undoubtedly has a negative effect on people's treatment of nature.

h. In order to mitigate bike-caused erosion, park managers have been resorting to extreme measures -- even in some cases putting a plastic matrix or other exotic material under the trail (e.g. in Pleasanton Ridge Regional Preserve, near Pleasanton, California)! It's hard to imagine that this will have a beneficial effect on the park and its wildlife....

4. Mountain bikers claim that their sport has no greater environmental impact than hiking. Is that true? If you read the "studies" that make that claim, you find that they don't really compare the impacts of hiking and mountain biking, but only the impacts per foot. If, for a moment, we assume that the studies are correct in their having equivalent impacts per foot, it would still follow that mountain biking has far greater impact per person, since mountain bikers typically travel so much farther than hikers. Besides overlooking distances travelled, those "studies" almost all ignore impacts on wildlife. And they don't study mountain biking under normal

conditions -- only at a very slow speed. Actually, the comparison with hiking is irrelevant. It would only be relevant if we planned to allow only one of the two, and were considering which of the two is more harmful. In fact, no one is considering banning hiking. We are only considering adding mountain biking. Therefore, the only relevant question is, "Is mountain biking harmful"? (Of course, it is!)

5. Where should mountain biking allowed? A couple of role models for wildlife protection are Yosemite National Park and East Bay Municipal Utility District (in Alameda and Contra Costa counties, California). They both restrict bicycles to paved roads, where they can't do much harm. Somehow bicyclists have managed to enjoy their sport for over a hundred years, without riding off-road.

6. What should the policy be on trails? Closed to bikes, unless marked open. Signs that say "No Bikes" are quickly and repeatedly ripped out of the ground by mountain bikers.

7. Isn't it discriminatory to allow hikers and equestrians on trails, but not mountain bikers? Mountain bikers love to tell this lie, apparently because they think it will gain them some sympathy. The truth is that mountain bikers have exactly the same access to trails that everyone else has! It is only their bikes that are banned. If mountain bikers were really being discriminated against, they could easily go to court to gain access. However ... they already have access to every trail in the world!

8. Don't I have a right to mountain bike on all public lands? I am a taxpayer! The public has the right, through its elected representatives, to restrict how land is used. A federal court has already ruled that there is no right to mountain bike. It is a privilege, and any land manager who gives a good reason (such as safety or protecting the environment) can keep bikes off of trails (see <http://home.pacbell.net/mjvande/mtb10.htm>).


9. Don't mountain bikers do some good things, like trail construction and trail maintenance? Trail construction destroys wildlife habitat both directly (by killing plants and animals) and indirectly (by reducing the size of the intervening "islands" of habitat). Moreover, mountain bikers favor trails that are "twisty" (sinuous), bumpy, and full of obstacles that provide thrills for mountain bikers. Such designs increase habitat destruction (by lengthening the trail) and make the trails less useful for hikers and equestrians. Trail maintenance sounds good, until you realize that it would hardly be necessary, if bikes weren't allowed there. The mountain bikers are the main reason why trail maintenance is necessary! Trails used only by hikers require hardly any maintenance. Therefore, admitting bicycles to a park greatly increases its cost of maintenance. Nothing is really "free", including trail construction and maintenance. (How does the saying go? "Beware of Trojans bearing gifts"?)

10. But don't mountain bikers provide added safety, by being able to quickly summon help in the event of an emergency? I would rather trust in a cell phone, than a speeding mountain biker. Besides, natural areas are already one of the safest places you can be. In over 50 years of hiking and backpacking, I have never witnessed any situation requiring emergency aid. Most people go to natural areas partly for solitude. If we wanted to be around large, fast-moving pieces of machinery, we would stay in the city!

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I am working on creating wildlife habitat that is off-limits to humans ("pure habitat"). Want to help? (I spent the previous 8 years fighting auto dependence and road construction.)

<http://home.pacbell.net/mjvande>

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