

Subject: [Fwd: The Psychology of Mountain Biking]

Date: Thu, 24 Mar 2005 16:06:52 -0800

From: Brian Platts <bplatts@shaw.ca>

To: Corrie Kost <kost@triumf.ca>

I thought Monica had already sent us this article previously.

-Brian

Subject: The Psychology of Mountain Biking

Date: Thu, 24 Mar 2005 15:57:42 -0800

From: M E Craver <mecraver@shaw.ca>

To: "FONVCA (E-mail)" <fonvca@fonvca.org>

CC: Liz James <Cagebc@yahoo.com>, Maureen Bragg <m.bragg@shaw.ca>

For your information and files. This was written over five years ago, and is still very true today. Just read the NSMB.com bulletin board forum. It does not take much to see the contradictions.

The Psychology of Mountain Biking

Michael J. Vandeman, Ph.D.

January 24, 2000

For a psychologist, mountain biking is a fascinating phenomenon.

Lying

The first thing one notices about mountain bikers is that they lie continually! For someone from my generation, raised to tell the truth at all times, this is puzzling. Surely, they must know that everyone, at least all those who aren't mountain bikers, can easily see through them! For example, Oakland Councilwoman Nancy Nadel caught Eric Muhler, President of the Bicycle Trails Council of the East Bay, publicly claiming that mountain biking in Joaquin Miller Park has caused hardly any erosion! One look at Alec Karp's photographs of the park is all it would take to know that he was lying. Similarly, the vice president of ROMP ("Responsible Organized Mountain Pedalers"), Patty Ciesla, was caught red-handed building an illegal trail.

Their favorite lie, of course, is that land managers who ban off-road biking are banning mountain bikers. Actually, it is only their bikes that are banned! It would be impossible to ban mountain bikers even if we wanted to, since they don't look different from anyone else.

And they aren't doing their already rotten image much good. Since none of them ever admit lying, we can only guess at their motivation. The best that I have been able to come up with is that they don't believe that they can justify their selfish, destructive sport except by lying. Well, ... yes, of course! Since mountain biking destroys wildlife habitat, drives away wildlife and other trail users, and benefits only the mountain bikers, it is hard to see how anyone can justify allowing mountain biking in any natural area.

Similarly, it is hard to explain why land managers lie so frequently, when asked why they allow mountain biking. For example, a ranger at China Camp State Park told me that mountain biking is causing "no erosion". An equestrian familiar with the park then told me that the bikers were "turning the trails into powder"! I guess that the land managers are afraid to admit that they have allowed political pressure -- or, in some cases, free trail maintenance provided by the mountain bikers -- to cloud their better judgment.

Mountain Biking as an Addiction

Recently I suddenly realized why this pattern seemed so familiar: they act exactly like the drug addicts that I knew when I worked with Synanon Foundation! They demonstrate the same willingness to take enormous risks, just to continue their "habit". They risk their image, their job, their relationships, their freedom, even their life, just to continue seeking the ultimate "high". Many subscribe to mountain biking mailing lists at work, risking losing their job. Thousands risk arrest and fines for riding illegally or even building illegal trails on public and private land. The "Sedona Five" took advantage of a temporary closure of Grand Canyon National Park to ride down the North Kaibab Trail, which is closed to bikes (and got arrested). Taking serious risks to continue a habit of doubtful value is the best indicator of a true addiction. In mountain biking newsgroups they exchange stories about their latest "high" (riding "sweet singletrack"), with extra points given for experiences that were dangerous, illegal, or both.

When caught riding on trails closed to bikes, in my experience, they lie ("I didn't know it is closed" -- but they don't offer to leave!), threaten ("I'm going to bust your head"), and even physically attack whoever tells them to leave the closed area (one biker rode back up the trail, turned around,

and then rode into the guy who had told him the trail is closed, as fast as he could, knocking him bloody). That is a lot of risk to take, just in order to ride one trail illegally! And a good sign that they are addicted. Indeed, many of them, in their discussions on the Internet, describe mountain biking as an "addiction".

Mountain Biking as an Image Enhancer

Another psychological factor, of course, is the image boost that the sport and its accoutrements give to rebellious young people, just as racing bikes did for an earlier generation (hardly any of whom actually raced!). The knobby tires and "hardened" frames clearly say "I'm tough. Don't cross me!" The names attached to the bikes and tires ("Velociraptor", "Omega-Bite", "Incisor") reinforce that image, as do the photos in mountain bike magazines of bikers flying through the air (getting "big air"). These bikes are clearly intended to indicate that they will help you "conquer nature" (while, ironically, actually insuring that you will have even less contact with that nature, due to their speed, lack of contact with the ground, and suspension systems!).

Narcissism

Closely related to image is their narcissism: they apparently have no awareness of, or interest in, the welfare or feelings of the wildlife and people around them. Hikers who are young or elderly, and are afraid of being hit, are ignored or termed "unreasonable". People who say that they go to parks to experience peace and tranquility, and to get away from all signs of civilization, are called "selfish". Mountain bikers want to ride on trails that are as narrow as possible -- exactly the trails that are too narrow to accommodate both bikers and other trail users!

Cognitive Dissonance

Yet another factor explaining their insistence on biking at all costs, even at the risk of getting arrested, is embodied in the psychological term "Cognitive Dissonance": after spending often more than \$3000 for their bike, it would be very embarrassing and

upsetting if they had nowhere to ride it!

Perhaps this explains why, after years of talking about how they are going to put an end to the erosion damage, illegal riding, and illegal trail building in Joaquin Miller Park, the mountain bikers are continuing all of those activities unabated.

Monomania

All land management plans are evaluated by a single criterion: do they provide "sweet" (attractive), "technical" (difficult to ride) "singletrack" (narrow trails)? The President could be about to designate a million acres of new wilderness, but they don't care. All they care about is "will I be allowed to mountain bike there?" (in wilderness, no).

Laziness

Why ride a bike, when you can walk? Only because you can get to your destination a lot faster and with a lot less energy. In spite of their muscular, "hard-body" appearance, mountain bikers are lazy!

Bad Role Modelling

Mountain biking also provides very bad role modeling for our children. Whether or not a bike is ever ridden off-road, any child looking at one will get the impression that it is used to tear up wildlife habitat, and that this is okay.

Paradox

Mountain bikers claim to want just what we all want -- the experience of nature in all her pristine glory. However, the very fact that they ride on a bike denies them that experience! They move too fast to truly experience what they are seeing. They have to pay attention to their "driving", to avoid crashing. They are insulated from feeling the ground by distance, tires, and expensive suspension systems. And they (in common with other trail users, of course, although to a much greater degree) destroy nature in the very act of "appreciating" it.