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Bicycles Belong in the Wilderness

In the late 1960s, the off-road antics of several Marin County California cyclists heralded the birth of a great new sport. Mountain biking, in this early form, consisted of removing the unnecessary frills (such as fenders) from an old cruiser bike, finding a steep dirt road, and pointing yourself downward. Klunking, as it came to be known in those early days, quickly grew in popularity amongst the local populous. As time wore on, the bikes slowly and steadily evolved through experimentation with different components and eccentric inventions. Through many failures and successes, the sport grew into what it is today, facilitating the participation of everyone from weekend warriors aboard creaky, yet lovingly maintained steeds to professional downhill racers piloting their $10,000-plus dream machines. Yet, even in the birthing stages of this new outdoor phenomenon, opposition and resentment was steadily brewing amongst powerful adversaries. In 1984, prominent outdoor enthusiast groups including the Sierra Club and Wilderness Society flexed their honed political muscles to influence the interpretation of an important piece of legislation. Before the nascent mountain bike community had a chance to defend itself, its members were banished from almost 110 million acres of the most beautiful and unspoiled terrain the United States ha[d] to offer (Felton, “Banned Part 1”). Should it really be so difficult to find common ground with the Sierra Club? Hikers, bikers, and horseback riders have many differences, but share a much more important similarity: a love of the great outdoors. It is time for all factions to set aside their differences and work together to promote public access to trails. While the process will be delicate, it is time to re-examine the definition of “mechanical transport” in the Wilderness Act and to allow mountain bikers access to the wilderness once again.

The piece of legislation that the Sierra Club focused on was the Wilderness Act passed by the 88th U.S. congress in 1964. The purpose of this act was to ensure that, in a time of rapidly expanding population, settlement, and mechanization, the United States would not be left without any lands in their natural condition. The act subsequently set aside several hundred parcels of federally owned land to be given the highest level of environmental protection possible, stating that in these locations “…there shall be no temporary road, no use of motor vehicles, motorized equipment or motorboats, no landing of aircraft, no other form of mechanical transport…”(Wilderness Act). Despite the fact that mountain biking would not exist until several years after the passage of the bill (and so could not have been considered at the time of its proposal), and ignoring the clear implication made by the 88th congress that “mechanical transport” referred to motorized vehicles or machines, in 1984 the Sierra Club convinced the United States Forest Service that, somehow, mountain bikes fell under this category of travel to be forbidden in the wilderness.

Perhaps the Sierra Club along with their environmental lobbyist allies had a right to be concerned. Their organization of outdoor enthusiasts had and has always been dedicated to the preservation of pristine lands. Currently over two million members strong, the Sierra Club boasts an impressive record when it comes to protecting the wilds of America, one of their most notable accomplishments being the instrumental role they played in defeating a government effort to dam up the Grand Canyon in the 1960s (Fedarko 83-88). At the time of the Sierra Club’s efforts to deny bikers access to the wilderness, the sport was new and untested, and the impact that bicycles would have on trails was yet to be revealed. Caution was rightly necessary during mountain biking’s formative period, but after just a few short years, it could be easily observed that mountain bikes had no more of a detrimental impact on trails than hikers, and certainly less than those on horseback, as several subsequent studies have shown.

One of the earliest such studies was conducted by John Wilson and Joseph Seney, whose findings were published in the academic journal *Mountain Research and Development* in 1994. Using empirical methods, the study examined sediment and water runoff as measures of erosion on hiking, equestrian, biking, and motorized trails, respectively, and compared the results of each type of trail to the others. This paper concludes that the largest contributing factor to erosion by users is due to sediment yield behaviors local to each individual trail, lending credence to the importance of location choice for the construction of any trail. However, Wilson and Seney also reported that “hikers and horses… made more sediment available than wheels,” and went on to ascertain that equestrian use resulted in far higher levels of erosion than any other group examined (77, 88).

A similar experiment was administered by Nathaniel Olive and Jeffrey Marion and reported in the *Journal of Environmental Management* in 2009. Trail damage, erosion, and soil loss were examined at systematic transects along a biking trail, hiking trail, equestrian trail, and an all-terrain-vehicle trail, respectively (1485). Through well-established procedures for measuring the selected variables, and using empirical methods for data analysis, Olive and Marion concluded that “substantial tread erosion was documented on trails where horse and ATV uses are predominant while hiking and mountain biking trails are generally in good condition” (1491).

It is worth noting that in an examination of this study conducted by Pickering, Hill, and Leung that was published in the *Journal of Environmental Management* in 2010, Pickering and her colleagues reported that the data contained within Olive and Marion’s study may be skewed due to frequent maintenance of the bike trail in question by a local bicycle club (556). However, rather than detracting from the argument for bicycles in the wilderness, mountain biking’s case is strengthened by this fact. Bicycle clubs such as this are extremely common to any location with access to bike trails, and many are chapters of the International Mountain Bicycling Association, which, in 2012, reported that club chapters were facilitating an estimated 700,000 hours of volunteer work annually, the overwhelming majority of which was spent on trail maintenance (IMBA). This number is for IMBA club chapters alone; if the estimation included hours contributed by other groups such as clubs unaffiliated with the IMBA or individuals and groups not affiliated with any club, the total number of hours contributed would be magnitudes higher. If any conclusion is to be drawn from Pickering’s concerns about the validity of Olive and Marion’s data, it is that mountain bikers take exceptionally good care of the trails they have access to.

An experiment conducted by Eden Thurston and Richard Reader in 2001, which examined exclusively the effects of hiking and bicycling on trails, produced similar results to Olive and Marion as well as Wilson and Seney, stating in their findings that the severity of damage inflicted on trails by both groups was not significantly different (407). Their results also led them to speculate that “when vulnerable plants are directly contacted by a weight-bearing surface they will be affected no matter what the weight-bearing surface is, once a certain weight threshold is met,” further affirming the conclusion that mountain bikers produce no more adverse effects to trails than any other user group (Thurston and Reader 407).

Despite these findings, some critics still argue against the allowance of bicycles in the wilderness. George Wuerthner, an avid mountain biker himself, writes:

The contention that mountain biking does less damage to trails than a pack string of horses is a specious argument.  The idea that some activities do more damage than another is not a reason to expand damaging activities… We must remember the main goal of wilderness designation is to protect and preserve wild nature, not to preserve any particular recreational opportunity. (Wuerthner)

While Wuerthner is emphatically correct in his assertion that the purpose of having a wilderness designation is to preserve the natural state of a location, his logic lends itself to the criticism that if certain wildernesses can be judged as being especially delicate, perhaps public access to those areas ought to be forbidden outright, and recreational use as a whole should not even be considered in order to truly protect such an ecosystem. This would lead to a secondary argument for the determination of particular parcels of land within existing wilderness that deserve an even higher level of designated protection, thus making Wuerthner’s argument entirely irrelevant to the debate at hand. Mountain bike access to wilderness would obviously exclude such areas.

Unfortunately, the ban on bikes in the wilderness still exists to this day despite the ever-mounting evidence that bicycles have no more adverse effects on trails than other types of outdoor recreation. Even worse, however, it is still expanding. While the U.S. Forest Service does not have the explicit power to expand wilderness areas, the organization need only suggest that an area might become wilderness in the future, and in the blink of an eye, an entire community of outdoor enthusiasts are shut out of hundreds more miles of pristine singletrack. (Felton, “Why Bikes are Banned”). This occurrence was demonstrated in 2015 when the Forest Service declared that nearly 200 miles of singletrack located in Montana’s Bitterroot National Forest would be managed as an extension of adjacent wilderness areas (Felton, “Why Bikes are Banned”). This designation came as an unpleasant shock to members of the local International Mountain Bicycling Association chapter, the Bitterroot Backcountry Cyclists, seeing as conflict or even contact between bikers and other recreationalists on these sections of trail was nearly non-existent. In addition, they and other outdoor cycling groups had played an active and integral role in the maintenance and clearing of these trails for the last several years (Felton, “Why Bikes are Banned”).

The unfairness of this and other similar situations has not been lost on the mountain biking community. However, even the fiercest advocacy groups for the sport have been unable to match up to the gigantic influence over the Forest Service that the Sierra Club and similar organizations hold. The National Off Road Bicycle Association (NORBA), and later International Mountain Bicycling Association (IMBA) subsequently were and are resigned to working around the ban by lobbying for adjustments “to proposed wilderness boundaries… and for alternative preservation designations… that offer similar levels of environmental protection while still allowing for mountain biking” (Felton, “Banned Part 2”). However, the sport and its advocates are no longer neophytes to the world of outdoor recreation. Mountain biking has grown substantially in the past few years, and now has the strength to fight for the fair trail access it deserves.

The Sustainable Trails Coalition (STC) was formed to do just that. Founded in 2015, this non-profit organization believes that the time is right to end the ban on mountain bikes in the wilderness. The organization’s board is truly a coalition of great minds from the outdoor community. Every member has a long record of trail and wilderness advocacy under their belts, and many have extensive legal experience. The group’s website states that their goal is to see wilderness managed with “rational and reasonable rules to ensure that America's trail network can be enjoyed by all and is sustainable for future generations” (Sustainable Trails Coalition). The STC hopes to achieve these goals through direct political action, and urges all those who share their vision to write their congressmen and congresswomen. Through donations, the STC is also financing a government affairs firm located in Washington D.C. that will take the fight for sustainable and fair wilderness advocacy to congress through a professional reform campaign. Since their founding, the STC has been able to secure funds to sustain this campaign for over a year (Sustainable Trails Coalition).

It is time for reform in the interpretation of the Wilderness Act. Mountain biking has been shown many times to be no more harmful to trails than any other user group, and likely less harmful than some who currently enjoy full access to the wilderness. The mountain biking community has also shown itself to be hard-working and dedicated to the maintenance of its trails, and if allowed access to the wilderness, will do its part to see that such unspoiled beauty is properly cared for so that generations to come also may enjoy the pristine wildlands of America.

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