

WILD EARTH FORUM

# *Mountain Biking in Wilderness*

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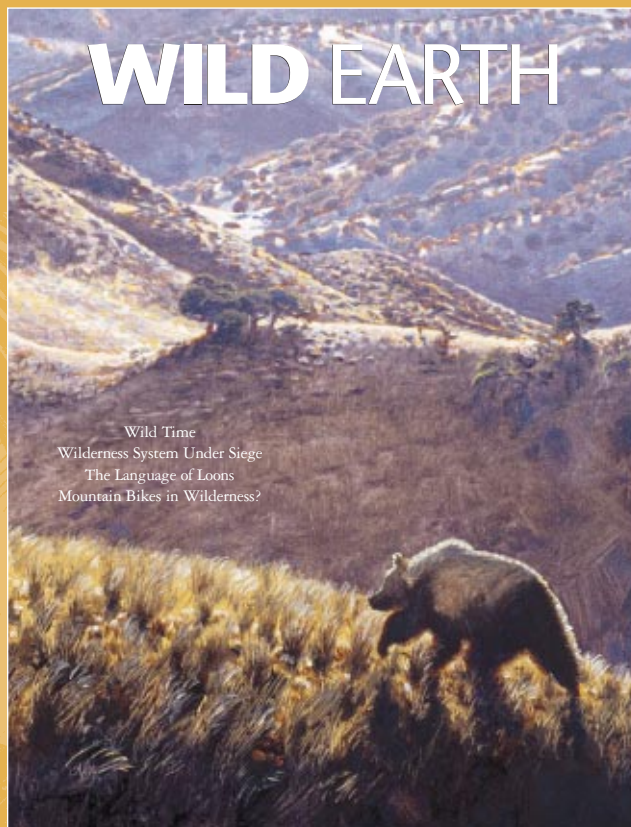
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≈ *from*



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## What Bears Want

SOME MONTHS AGO I spent a glorious autumn weekend exploring a wilderness not far from my home in Vermont. Like many eastern wilderness areas, it is relatively small (about 46,000 acres), and recovering well from historical logging and mining operations. A friend and I shouldered packs and hiked several miles toward a remote lake at the base of the wilderness area's namesake mountain. After a few hours of hiking, we reached the shoreline. There, on a rocky spit jutting into the lapping waters, was another wilderness traveler, sitting alone, enjoying the beauty of the scene.

We stopped and chatted amiably. Wasn't the day lovely? He agreed it was. Had he heard loons? He had. What was his route? He'd come from the south and would be making a loop over the mountain and out to another trailhead that afternoon. Was he aware that he was in the heart of a designated wilderness area, where the bicycle at his feet was prohibited? Here, the conversation grew more wary; the biker feigned ignorance. We suggested that he be more careful where he rode, noting that the surrounding region

contained hundreds of thousands of acres of non-wilderness public land where mountain biking is allowed. He listened politely enough, and we went off to find a campsite for the night.

To be sure, my companion and I would have been far angrier to find the fellow astride a dirt bike or ATV, throwing mud. Illegal (and legal) off-road vehicle use is indeed a large and growing problem throughout North America, and the direct impacts caused by mountain biking pale in comparison. But the biker's disregard for wilderness convention was still annoying, and the next day, when we followed his route and climbed the nearby mountain I was peeved again. The trail was steep, ascending to a rocky summit with sublime views and fragile vegetation. My doughy middle-aged frame could never have pedaled a bike over it, but my anger didn't spring from envy of the biker's steely quadriceps. I simply thought—this is no place for a bike.

BUT WHY DID I think so? Am I a snobby hiker? Was the biker doing any more damage to the trail network than our feet? Was my attitude a ves-

tige of historically accepted wilderness recreation that needs updating for the modern era? Or are there good reasons—historical, ecological, and ethical—to oppose mechanized intrusion into Nature's last strongholds?

I've been thinking about these questions as we put together this *Wild Earth's* expanded forum on mountain biking and wilderness, which begins on page 20. Every group of conservationists working to see wilderness legislation introduced or passed by Congress must now factor the mountain biking community into the political equation. With bikers organizing to oppose some new wilderness designations in California and elsewhere, the conservation community is faced with the vexing issue of how to accommodate a growing recreational constituency without compromising the wild places we love.

Would opening designated wilderness areas to biking exacerbate the "creeping degradation" of the National Wilderness Preservation System that Howie Wolke decries in this issue? Or would the wilderness movement, swelled by millions of mountain bikers, stimulate Congress

to designate vast new swaths of wilderness on federal public lands? The latter argument is argued cogently herein by Jim Hasenauer, a longtime board member of the International Mountain Biking Association. Conservation strategist Andy Kerr expands on this point, dissects the political options, and suggests that wilderness advocates should fully embrace cyclists in an expanded wilderness movement, propelled by muscle-powered recreationists.

Deeply immersed in conservation realpolitik, Kerr's argument is, essentially: Congress designates wilderness. Congress responds to constituent pressure. Mountain bikers, who are truly wilderness lovers at heart, are a huge potential constituency to support—or oppose—wilderness. Thus the wilderness movement (and wilderness areas) should accommodate them. (This line of reasoning adopts the Bush doctrine that “either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists,” although in this case the “terrorists” are the off-road vehicle enthusiasts, clear-cutters, and miners who would terrorize wildlife and degrade the ecological health of America's public lands.)

Other commentators in the forum take a more skeptical and arguably more traditional view of what constitutes appropriate wilderness recreation. There is far from consensus on how wilderness advocates should approach the opportunity—or threat—embodied in the mountain biking lobby. *Wild Earth's* role, of course, is to help foster spirited, respectful debate. We have tried to present a balanced spectrum of views and hope conservationists of all stripes will read them with an open mind—and then keep talking.

I've certainly tried to keep an

open mind, although admit to being skeptical about just how actively the mountain biking community will work for new wilderness designations. Moreover, I'm dubious of Andy Kerr's assertion that “no case [against biking] has been made on ecological grounds.” Really? Opening the wilderness system to millions of bikers will bring them into the wilderness fold as a potent political force, but this expanded group of potential wilderness users will have no negative effects on specific wilderness areas? I don't buy it. Unless this magically expanded wilderness movement can leverage Congress to dramatically and quickly build out the Wilderness System, and the pertinent agencies (U.S. Forest Service, National Park Service, Bureau of Land Management, Fish & Wildlife Service) can efficiently disperse and manage the increased recreational traffic, the ecological effects of mountain biking in wilderness areas are likely to be significant. Large numbers of new wilderness users, whether hikers, bikers, or butterfly watchers, cannot help but nick away at the integrity and diversity of America's last best wild places.

Yes, some research suggests that bikes probably cause little more erosion and soil compaction than hikers, and likely less than horses, which are allowed in wilderness. Yes, some studies suggest no discernible difference in the way hikers and bikers disturb wildlife in individual encounters. Approaching afoot or apedal, people will cause animals to flush. But extrapolating those data points into an assumption of no harm ignores the way technology can amplify human effects on the natural world.

Which brings me back to my encounter with the wilderness biker.

My gripe was not because he had funny looking shorts or rippling muscles or even that he lied (I think) about not knowing his mode of transportation was illegal. *It was because his bike made the wilderness smaller.* The bike's mechanical advantage allowed him to move farther and faster into wild country. In this case, the roadless area was relatively small to begin with, providing only modest habitat security for wildlife. Welcoming more people on machines would shrink it further.

As conservationists wrestle with these questions, it's well to remind ourselves that backcountry recreation, a foundational and still valuable argument for wilderness protection, is no longer preeminent. The overarching rationale for preserving wilderness is to protect Nature's diversity. Specifically, that translates to saving the last refugia for wild creatures like grizzly bears and wolverines that need secure, remote areas to thrive. It means helping restore and connect high-quality natural habitats where martens and otters and other sensitive species can flourish—and opposing extractive or recreational uses that may degrade those habitats.

Certainly everyone can agree that internecine bickering among muscle-powered recreationists is counterproductive. We can and should avoid it. There are ways to accommodate appropriate recreational use of public lands and maintain the integrity of the National Wilderness Preservation System. In thinking about how best to do that, every recreationist—whether hiker, biker, horsepacker, or posey sniffer—should not begin by asking, “What's best for *ME*?” but rather “What's best for the bears?”

≈ **Tom Butler**



# *Mountain Biking*



## A Niche for Bicycles

by Jim Hasenauer

LAST YEAR, in a conversation with a California wilderness advocate, I suggested that a boundary adjustment placing a popular multi-use trail outside a proposed wilderness would enable the mountain bike community to support designation for that parcel. She said, “but then, there wouldn’t be any trail in there to hike.”

There’s the rub. If wilderness advocates are out to save wild places and the wildlife that depend on them, the mountain bike community is with you. If you’re out to secure hiking trails or to enjoy the wilderness experience at our expense, we’ve got a problem.

There’s a natural affinity between the mountain bike and the mainstream environmental communities. Our bond is a great love of wild places, both the ones we visit for renewal and reinvigoration and the ones that we’ll never visit, but know are there. We love living in a world that is still wild. According to an Outdoor Industry of America report, there are 46 million Americans who rode bikes on a singletrack trail at least once in 2001. These are people inclined to work for habitat, open space, and public land protection—and do.

When it comes to federal wilderness—what bike advocates call “Big W Wilderness”—though, mountain bicyclists are troubled. Current regulations ban bicycles in designated wilderness. That ban distorts the debate. Whenever a wilderness proposal contains a significant riding trail, cyclists work to ensure that the trail does not receive a wilderness designation. We advocate boundary adjustments or alternative land designations. Since wilderness advocates see other land use designations as flawed, any whittling down of a proposal is viewed as a loss. Publicly, wilderness advocates typically discount the cyclists’ loss of a trail. We suspect that privately, many are happy to see us removed. This opposition positions cyclists and wilderness advocates as adversaries.

Both sides get strategic. Wilderness proponents suggest clearly unacceptable proposals in their packages so that they can withdraw them and cite compromise with cyclists. When cyclists fight to maintain access to trails they’re riding, they’re accused of being selfish. Some mountain bike organizations have already decided that the conservation community is the enemy. They’ve adopted the Blue Ribbon Coalition language of the “environmental industry” “locking out citizens from their lands.” These distortions happen at the extremes, but those extremes bring pressures on already fragile relationships. Suspicion replaces trust; hostility blocks cooperation.

This negative energy and divisiveness is tragic. But there is a daring yet conservative way out of this dilemma. The 1964 Wilderness Act did not ban bikes; it banned “mechanical transport” which in 1965 was defined as “propelled by a non-living power source.” Bikes were allowed in wilderness until 1984 when regulations first offered in 1977 went into effect. Revising regulations to accept bicycling as an appropriate use of some trails in some wildernesses would completely transform the wilderness coalition and the wilderness debate.

This would not be an amendment to the Wilderness Act, nor need it be a foot in the door to allowing a number of unwanted activities. It’s a regulatory change that recognizes bicycles for what they are: muscle-powered, human-scale, low-impact devices not significantly different from other recreational equipment that is allowed in wilderness. It’s a regulatory change that acknowledges that responsible bicyclists, like other responsible wilderness visitors, can enjoy the solitude, splendor, adventure, discovery, and awe of traveling through untrammeled land.

The early wilderness philosophers probably didn’t even consider bicycle use in the years leading to the Wilderness Act. Bikes then were seen as toys. What is likely is that the 1977 and 1984 bans on bicycles were rooted not so much in wilderness philosophy, but in the chilly reception bicyclists received at that time when they first showed up on hiking and equestrian trails.

The mountain bike was invented in the mid-1970s and first mass-produced in 1981. As they became popular, deci-

sion-makers were justifiably cautious about their use. Environmental impacts weren't known. There were complaints from existing trail users, especially on the urban fringe. It was often these hikers and equestrians, in concert with environmental groups, that succeeded in closing a number of trails to bikes. The most frequent claim used to demonize bikes was that they were essentially motorcycles. That led to the preferred management tools of separate facilities or outright bans. The dates suggest that the wilderness prohibition was merely one of several early trail closures during this period.

Since then, bicyclists have organized and become ardent supporters of public lands. Many of the early closures have been reversed. Studies show that bike impacts are similar to those of other non-motorized trail users. Some land managers now have more than 25 years of experience managing bikes.

Although relations between bicyclists and other trail users have improved considerably, user conflict remains an issue. Irresponsible behavior by some mountain bikers certainly contributes to this. So do media images of stunts and bike racing. Some people, not used to sharing trails, have vague concerns and fears when approached by a bicyclist. These are human problems that are manageable. Experience and trail etiquette can mitigate this conflict.

Unfortunately, there's a small but vocal number of trail users for whom the very sight of a bicycle ruins their solitude. Many of the wilderness advocates who don't want bikes in wilderness don't want them anywhere. These folks are enti-

tled to their point of view, but that prejudice shouldn't guide a movement committed to protecting North America's quickly dwindling wild land.

There's been a lot of talk recently about new approaches to wilderness and the importance of compromise and new coalitions. A regulation change would certainly empower the wilderness movement in a new way: it would create a new coalition without compromising the fundamental wilderness philosophy of wild land for its own sake, of rich and diverse habitat, of appropriate recreation, of stewardship that is thoughtful and appreciative.

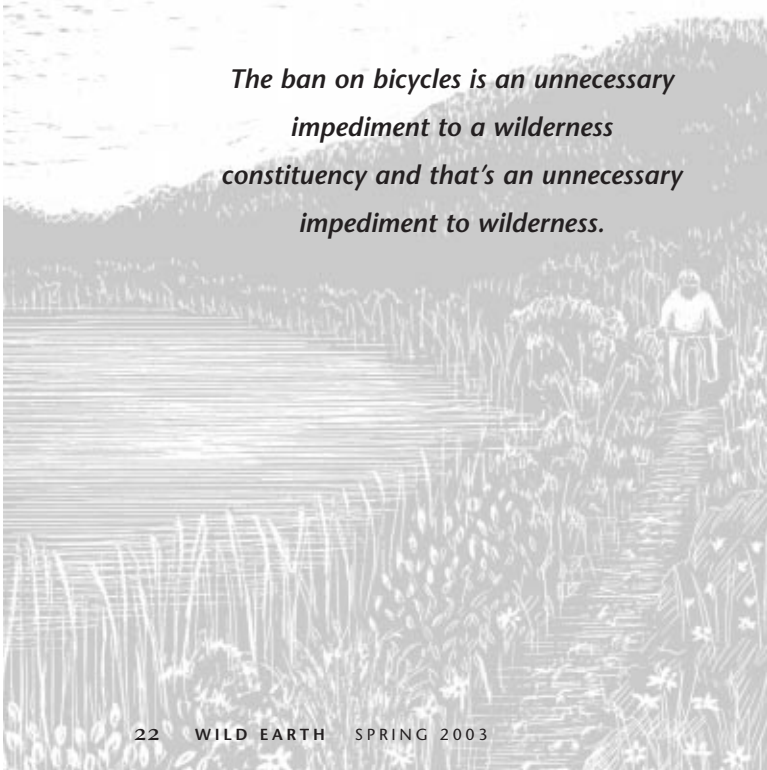
A regulation change allowing bicycles would raise new management issues of both biological and visitor carrying capacity, but there are well-established ways of making those decisions. It would also require a kind of local decision-making that many wilderness advocates historically fear. Which trails in which areas should be open to bikes? How best to disperse visitors? These debates would be lively, but they would take place inside the councils of the wilderness movement, and when decided, we could speak with one political voice.

There are other advantages. Bicyclists volunteer. Often, equestrian groups oppose new wilderness because of concerns that trail maintenance couldn't be sustained. One of the irrefutable contributions of the mountain bike community has been the commitment to trail maintenance. That's a significant benefit. Wilderness advocates often promise wary gateway communities that there are economic rewards to be gained from nearby wilderness recreation. That factor would be multiplied by bicyclist numbers.

In many proposed wilderness areas, there are real people riding real trails. They should not have to give them up. They will especially reject arguments that mischaracterize their trail use as inappropriate.

To allow the natural community to thrive, we must work through challenges in our social community. The ban on bicycles is an unnecessary impediment to a wilderness constituency and that's an unnecessary impediment to wilderness. Lifting the ban would invigorate that constituency. It would mean bikes on some trails in wilderness—and much more wilderness for all. ☺

**Jim Hasenauer** is a professor of communication studies at California State University at Northridge and has served on the International Mountain Bicycling Association's Board of Directors since 1988. He's a member of the California Recreational Trails Committee and the California Roundtable on Recreation, Parks and Tourism. These opinions are his own.



*The ban on bicycles is an unnecessary impediment to a wilderness constituency and that's an unnecessary impediment to wilderness.*



## Some History

by Douglas W. Scott

IN DECEMBER 1933, the director of the National Park Service floated the idea that construction of the Skyline Drive parkway along the wild ridgetops of Shenandoah National Park would be a terrific opportunity for that section of the Appalachian Trail to “be made wide and smooth enough that it could serve as a bicycle path.”<sup>1</sup>

Benton MacKaye, father of the Appalachian Trail, was apoplectic. The Appalachian Trail was to be a “real wilderness footpath,” he told the director, and one of the prerequisites was “that it is to be a footway and not a wheelway.”<sup>2</sup> MacKaye was an enthusiastic bicyclist but believed that like any form of mechanization, bicycles did not belong in wilderness. He “first saw the true wilderness” in 1897, he wrote in his journal, during a long ramble through the White Mountains of New Hampshire, preceded by a 10-day bicycle trip from Shirley Center, Massachusetts. As he and his companions set out on the wilderness hike, he wrote: “The country we are about to traverse is one, I am told, undisturbed by civilization in any form... We have said ‘good-bye’ to the bicycles and civilization and will now pursue our way on foot through the White Mountains.”<sup>3</sup>

As these episodes illustrate, from their earliest thinking about a practical program for preserving wilderness, wilderness pioneers were intent on excluding all vestiges of “mechanization” from such areas. And that includes anything with wheels, such as bicycles or wheeled game carriers.

In 1930, Robert Marshall defined wilderness as “a region which...possesses *no possibility of conveyance by any mechanical means.*”<sup>4</sup>

In 1949, Aldo Leopold wrote, “Recreation is valuable in proportion to the intensity of its experiences, and to the degree to which it *differs from* and *contrasts with* workaday life. By these criteria, mechanized outings are at best a milk-and-water affair.”<sup>5</sup>

In 1964, the Wilderness Act set out the essence of federally designated wilderness as being its “*contrast* with those areas where man and his works dominate the landscape” with “increasing population, accompanied by expanding settlement and *growing mechanization.*”<sup>6</sup>

MacKaye, Marshall, Leopold, and the others who founded the Wilderness Society in 1935 saw wilderness as “a serious human need rather than a luxury and plaything,” concluding that “...this need is being sacrificed to *the mechanical invasion in its various killing forms.*” Expressing their concern about human intrusions that bring “into the wilderness a feature of the *mechanical* Twentieth Century world,” the society’s founders identified wilderness areas as “regions which possess *no means of mechanical conveyance.*”<sup>7</sup>

### The words of the Wilderness Act

As historian Paul Sutter notes, “for Leopold the essential quality of wilderness was how one traveled and lived within its confines,” a view shared by the other founders of the Wilderness Society.<sup>8</sup> As he drafted the Wilderness Act in 1956, Howard Zahniser, executive director of the society, drew on this well-understood and fundamental concept of wilderness. In a nationwide radio broadcast in 1949, he had emphasized that “wilderness will not survive where there is mechanical transportation.”<sup>9</sup>

As defined in the dictionary, and as reflected in this whole line of twentieth century wilderness thinking, the term “mechanization” embraces a broader category than just the term “motor vehicles.”<sup>10</sup> Congress adopted this crucial distinction when it enacted the Wilderness Act. Section 4(c) of the act prohibits certain uses, some absolutely and others with limited exceptions:

Except as specifically provided for in this Act, and subject to existing private rights, there shall be no commercial enterprise and no permanent road within any wilderness area designated by this Act and, except as necessary to meet minimum requirements for the administration of the area for the purpose of this Act (including measures required in emergencies involving the health and safety of persons within the area), 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, and no structure or installation within any such area.<sup>11</sup>

The plain words of the statute distinguish between the use of motor vehicles *and* any “other form of mechanical transport”—and separately prohibit both. The canons of statutory construction require distinct meaning be given to each provision and each item in a list of items, preventing the assumption that when Congress chose to use two different words or phrases, these were intended to have the same meaning.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, distinct from the phrases involving motors per se, the prohibition on any “other form of mechanical transport” must mean some class of transport devices other than those with motors.

### The Forest Service initially got it wrong

Despite the clear words of the law, the first Department of Agriculture regulations (drafted by the U.S. Forest Service and finalized in 1966) violated the canons of statutory construction on this point. This error was highlighted in the first law review analysis of the Wilderness Act, published just a month later.

Commenting on the identical wording as it appeared in the draft form of the regulations, Michael McCloskey noted:

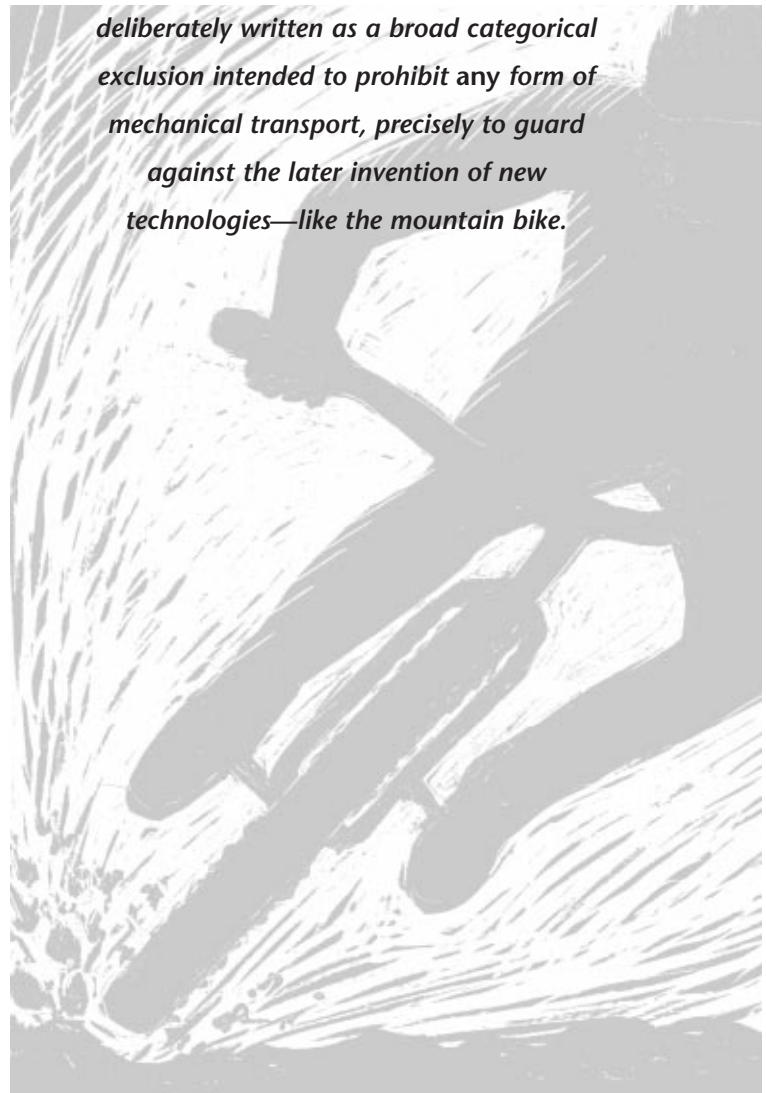
In its regulations to implement the act, the Forest Service has defined “mechanical transport” as “any contrivance...propelled by a nonliving power source.” As a nonliving power source is the same as a motor, mechanical transport is thus defined as being the same as “motorized transport,” and there is no exclusion of horse-drawn vehicles, bicycles, or cargo carriers. The wording of section 4(c) is that there shall be “no use of motor vehicles, motorized equipment or motorboats, no landing of aircraft, no other form of mechanical transport...” In an effort to give meaning to each item enumerated, the rules of statutory construction would suggest that duplicate definitions should be avoided. For this reason, the Forest Service would appear to be in error in saying that the phrase “mechanical transport” means no more than the preceding phrase “motor vehicles.” The meaning of the sentence would appear to be that the final phrase refers to modes of mechanical transport that are not motor vehicles, motorboats, or motor-driven aircraft. By a process of elimination, this would seem to leave only items such as bicycles, wagons, and cargo carriers as the referent for the phrase.<sup>13</sup>

Responding to the draft regulations in September 1965, both the Wilderness Society and Sierra Club—the national organizations most intimately involved in the drafting and enactment of the Wilderness Act—had put the Forest Service on notice of its error. In comments for the Wilderness Society, its executive director wrote:

The definition of mechanical transport...should specifically include contrivances powered by living power sources (such as wagons drawn by horses, bicycles, and wheeled cargo carriers) as well as contrivances propelled by nonliving power sources. (See Paragraph 4(c) of the



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Act, which distinguishes between motor vehicles, motorboats, and “other forms of mechanical transportation [*sic*.]”) The use of various types of wheeled equipment should be specifically prohibited within the regulations to conform with this provision of the Act.<sup>14</sup>

To correct their obvious error and clarify exactly what is included within the phrase “other form of mechanical transport,” the Forest Service subsequently perfected its regulatory definition in the sections of the *Forest Service Manual* that direct its implementation of the Wilderness Act:

*Mechanical Transport.* Any contrivance for moving people or material in or over land, water, or air, having moving parts, that provides a mechanical advantage to the user, and that is powered by a living or nonliving power source. This includes, but is not limited to, sailboats, hang gliders, parachutes, bicycles, game carriers, carts, and wagons. It does not include wheelchairs when used as necessary medical appliances. It also does not include skis, snowshoes, rafts, canoes, sleds, travois, or similar primitive devices without moving parts.<sup>15</sup>

Other agencies that manage wilderness never made this mistake. In its original regulations, the Bureau of Land Management expressly listed bicycles as a prohibited form of mechanical transport.<sup>16</sup>

## Mountain bikes: Exactly the sort of mechanical transport the law intended to prohibit in wilderness

Mountain bicycles did not exist until long after the Wilderness Act became law. It is understandable that drafters of the earliest Forest Service regulations did not name bicycles as a likely form of mechanical transport. At the time, they could not reasonably have been expected to foresee technological developments that would adapt bicycles to mountainous terrain, both on and off trails. In any case, the words of the statute itself are the controlling law, not the agency’s interpretation.<sup>17</sup> A bicycle is obviously a *mechanical* device and obviously a *form of transport*. The plain words of section 4(c) of the Wilderness Act prohibit bicycles in wilderness areas. Ditto for wheeled game carriers.

The Wilderness Act’s prohibition of any “other form of mechanical transport” was deliberately written as a broad categorical exclusion intended to prohibit *any* form of mechanical transport, precisely to guard against the later invention of new technologies—like the mountain bike. ☹

*A long-time student of the history of wilderness preservation, Doug Scott has been a lobbyist and strategist for the Wilderness Society, Sierra Club, and Alaska Coalition. He is policy director of Campaign for America’s Wilderness. His briefing papers on Wilderness Act interpretation and precedents and a longer paper on mechanization and wilderness can be found at <http://leaveitwild.org/reports>.*

## NOTES

1. Arno Cammerer to Myron Avery, December 2, 1933, quoted in Paul Sutter, 2002, *Driven Wild: How the Fight against Automobiles Launched the Modern Wilderness Movement* (Seattle: University of Washington Press), 185.
2. Benton MacKaye to Arno Cammerer, December 30, 1933, quoted in *Driven Wild*.
3. Journal quoted in Larry Anderson, 2002, *Benton MacKaye: Conservationist, Planner and Creator of the Appalachian Trail* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press), 34–35.
4. Robert Marshall, 1930, The Problem of the Wilderness, *The Scientific Monthly* 30: 2 (February): 141, emphasis added.
5. Aldo Leopold, 1949, *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There* (New York: Oxford University Press), 194, emphasis in original.
6. 16 U.S.C. 1131(c), emphasis added.
7. These quotations are from a 4-page pamphlet, *Reasons for a Wilderness Society* (January 21, 1935), emphasis added.
8. *Driven Wild*, 72.
9. Howard Zahniser, script of radio broadcast, January 13, 1949, on “Newsreel Digest” program, Mutual Broadcasting Company, 1.
10. The word “mechanical” is not defined by presence or absence of a motor. *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition* defines this family of terms: MECHANICAL: “1. Of or pertaining to machines or tools.” MECHANISM: “A machine or mechanical appliance.” MECHANIZE: “To equip with machinery.” MACHINE: “1. a. A device consisting of fixed and moving parts that modifies mechanical energy and transmits it in a more useful form. b. A simple device, such as a lever, a pulley, or an inclined plane, that alters the magnitude or direction, or both, of an applied force; a simple machine.”
11. 16 U.S.C. 1133(c), emphasis added. This wording was virtually identical in the first wilderness legislation introduced at the outset of the 8-year campaign leading to the Wilderness Act. That first version provided that

- “there shall be no road, nor any use of motor vehicles, nor any airplane landing field or other provision for mechanized transportation...” Section 3(b) of S. 4013, 84th Congress, 2nd Session, June 7, 1956, 15.
12. “It is the “cardinal principle of statutory construction”...[that] it is our duty “to give effect, if possible, to every clause and word of a statute”...rather than to emasculate an entire section.” *United States v. Menasche*, 1955, 348 U.S. 528, 538, 75 S.Ct. 513, 520, 99 L.Ed. 615 (quoting *NLRB v. Jones & Laughlin Steel Corp.*, 1937, 301 U.S. 1, 30, 57 S.Ct. 615, 621, 81 L.Ed. 893 and *Montclair v. Ramsdell*, 1883, 107 U.S. 147, 152, 2 S.Ct. 391, 395, 27 L.Ed. 431).” Cited in *Bennett v. Spear*, 1997, 520 U.S. 154, 137 L.Ed.2d 281.
13. J. Michael McCloskey, 1966, The Wilderness Act of 1964: Its Background and Meaning, *Oregon Law Review*, 308, emphasis added. McCloskey was referring to the Secretary’s proposed regulation, dated July 12, 1965. The portion of that draft quoted in the law review did not change in the final regulation as adopted a year later.
14. Stewart M. Brandborg to Edward P. Cliff, Chief, Forest Service, September 28, 1965, 3. Similar concern was expressed by the Sierra Club in a statement dated September 30, 1965.
15. Forest Service Manual 2320.5(3). This is the current manual provision, which was adopted sometime in the early to mid-1980s.
16. These BLM regulations were adopted in 1985 (43 CFR 8560.0-5). They were superseded by an updated set of wilderness regulations in 2000 (43 CFR 6301.5). The revised regulations expressly prohibit “bicycles, game carriers, carts, and wagons.”
17. The courts have ruled that “An administrative agency is permitted to change its interpretation of a statute, especially where the prior interpretation is based on error, no matter how longstanding.” *Chisholm v. F.C.C.*, 538 F.2d 349, 364 (D.C. Cir.), cert. denied 429 U.S. 890, 97 St.Ct. 247, 50 L.Ed. 2d 173 (1976).

## Which Way?

by Andy Kerr

IN OUR EFFORT to designate additional federal wilderness areas, conservationists face a fork in the trail. The political alliance of traditional, muscle-powered recreationists who have historically supported wilderness preservation is splitting. While this constituency is united in opposing motorized recreation in wildlands, new technology now allows the enjoyment of the backcountry using non-motorized mountain bikes, a mechanized form of transport prohibited by the Wilderness Act.

The proliferation of mountain bikes in the backcountry—including many areas conservationists are proposing for wilderness protection—is resulting in mountain bikers organizing to oppose new wilderness designations. If not handled properly, this important faction of the human-powered recreation constituency may be driven into the willing arms of off-road vehicle enthusiasts.

Wilderness advocates have several options to address this challenge: (1) advocate to maintain the current prohibition against “mechanical transport” in the Wilderness Act; (2) create or modify proposed wilderness boundaries to avoid mountain bike conflicts; (3) amend the Wilderness Act to allow bicycle use; (4) except the Wilderness Act prohibition against mountain bikes on a trail-by-trail basis (while maintaining the ability of wilderness managers to regulate such use); (5) propose alternative congressionally sanctioned protective land designations that avoid the wilderness-mountain bike conflict; or (6) propose a new congressional designation of “wilderness lite.”

Every choice, including maintaining the status quo, has consequences and involves tradeoffs. However, I suggest that alternative 4 is the best strategy and political choice to maximize both the number and size of new wilderness areas and—more importantly—maximize the protection against greater, impending threats to public wildlands.

### Mountain bike impacts

The impacts of mountain bikes on wilderness can be categorized as (1) human safety, (2) social, (3) ecological, and (4)

political. All are distinct, though sometimes confused in the minds of wilderness advocates and users.

**HUMAN SAFETY.** My casual interviews of other wilderness users often yielded concerns about the safety of mountain bikes. Many feared collisions between hikers and careening mountain bikers. When prodded, most did not volunteer a similar fear about a human runner or fast-moving equestrian. Nevertheless, the interviews uncovered no actual cases of collisions of any kind, but “close calls” with runners or equestrians.

**SOCIAL.** Not unlike the social differences between human-powered pedestrians and horse-powered equestrians in wilderness, there are also differences between human-powered pedestrians and human-powered bicyclists. Because it is socially unacceptable to simply state that one doesn’t like a general kind of people (e.g., “eco-jocks”), dislike is often expressed as disdain for their activity, whether mountain biking, horsepacking, dirt-biking, etc. Adding a new, popular recreational use of designated wilderness may lead to additional cultural schism between user groups.

**ECOLOGICAL.** Little research has been done, and the few studies that exist are inconclusive, with most researchers suggesting that the impact of heavy boots or a fat tire on a wilderness trail is comparable and mostly depends on how the devices are used.<sup>1</sup> At most, mountain bikes might cause more erosion than hiking boots, but less than horseshoes. The concern that too many tire tracks cause environmental damage is no different than too many boots or too many horseshoes.

**POLITICAL.** The potential political contributions of the mountain biking community to wilderness designation are very significant and the topic of the remainder of this article.

### Who are these mountain bikers?

A national study concludes:

Mountain bike leaders are overwhelmingly biocentric in their thinking, believing that nature has intrinsic value exclusive of what it does for humans, that humans do not have the moral license to infringe on this right, and that many of our environmental problems are rooted in our societal tendency to dominate, control and exploit nature.<sup>2</sup>

Mountain bikers are essentially the same as many other wilderness advocates. They love Nature; they hate exploitation of the land. They grieve when they see clearcuts like other wilderness advocates. They simply prefer a somewhat quicker trip into and out of wilderness areas than do wilderness traditionalists. (The above excerpt may be somewhat less

applicable to the equestrian community, but they nonetheless are usually allies with conservationists in wilderness politics.)

### Facing the real enemies

Conservationists face enough real enemies when working to preserve and protect wilderness: loggers, road-builders, miners, grazing permittees, and off-road vehicle users are the primary destroyers of wildlands, not mountain bikers.

Mountain bikers, hikers, and horseback riders are all products of different times. Fewer people ride horses today, but it was once a common method of traveling through wild country. Lighter camping equipment and more leisure time facilitated the explosion in wilderness hiking beginning in the 1960s. Most recently, new technologies have facilitated another kind of muscle-powered access to the wilds. The “mountain bike” was reportedly invented in 1979. Their popularity has since exploded. (Have you noticed the floor space devoted to mountain bikes at your local REI or EMS store lately?) New wilderness proposals in many states include areas with trails increasingly used by mountain bikers. Since mountain bikes are prohibited in designated wilderness, it is logical that mountain bike use would have become established in *de facto* wilderness (wildlands that are as wild and as important as designated wilderness, but without legislative protection).

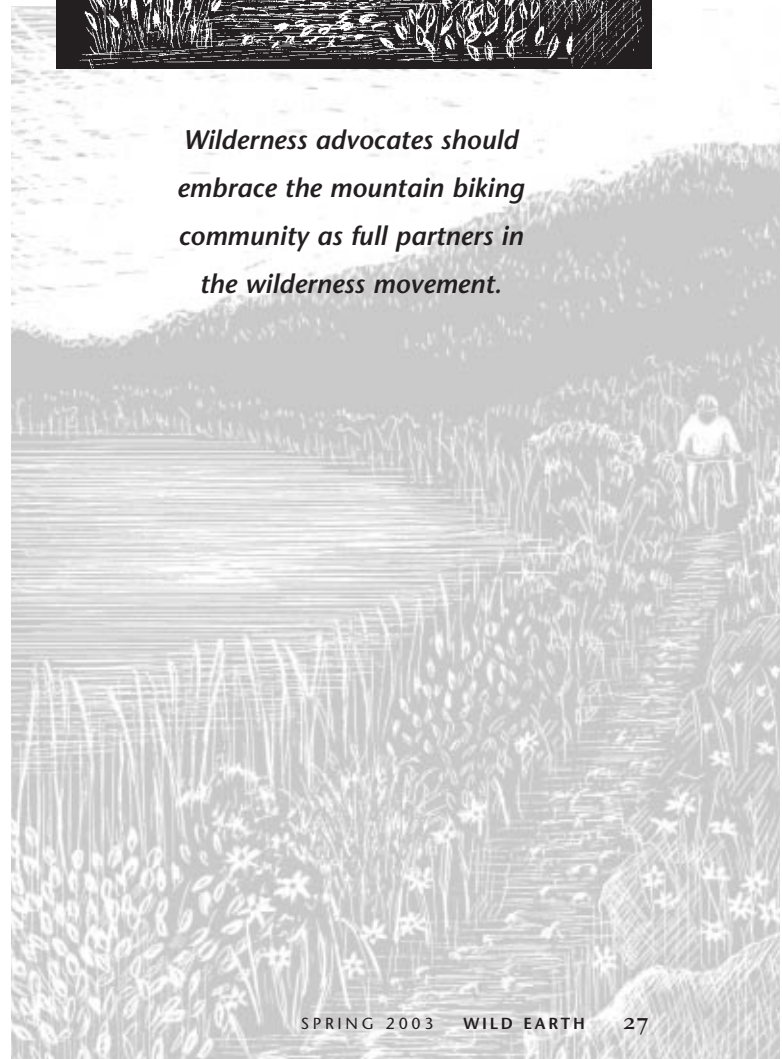
Some citizen wilderness proposals include roadless units of 1,000 acres in size. This doesn't leave many remaining natural recreation opportunities for mountain bikers. Do we want the public to view the wilderness debate as one of rapacious loggers, voracious road-builders, gluttonous miners, and obnoxious off-road vehiclists versus water quality and quantity, fish and wildlife, and future generations of young children *or* a pissing match between elitist hikers and equally elitist mountain bikers? We may be forced to choose.

### Alternative courses of action

As mountain bikers become increasingly organized and understandably concerned about their access to federal public lands, the wilderness movement will be forced to respond. The threshold question for wilderness activists is: with whom do you want mountain bikers to ally in future wilderness battles? If you really don't like them (for social reasons and perhaps concerns about human safety, because no case has been made on ecological grounds), and you believe that you can win new and adequately sized wilderness areas without the mountain bikers—then do nothing. Sit back and watch to see if the ORV crowd can make common cause with cyclists.



*Wilderness advocates should embrace the mountain biking community as full partners in the wilderness movement.*





However, if you believe that the mountain biker lobby is expanding in size and clout and that this major pro-wilderness constituency must be accommodated—or if you believe that bikers aren't now a major player but it would be politically disastrous for them to join anti-wilderness forces, and/or you believe that mountain bikers *could be* important allies in defeating anti-wilderness efforts—then you must choose another approach.

I am aware of at least one national conservation organization that has the goal of keeping mountain bikers “neutral” on wilderness designation. Usually in politics (as often in war), a constituency remaining neutral undoubtedly benefits one side more than the other (the “neutral” Swiss were more useful to Germany during World War II, while “neutral” Sweden was more helpful to the Allies). Neutrality is easiest for the neutral if the party no has interest in any particular outcome. However, when a neutral party does have an interest in the outcome, they can be expected to (quietly) support one outcome over all others even as they continue to publicly affirm their neutrality.

The political neutrality of the mountain biking community generally harms wilderness advocates and aids anti-wilderness forces. Indeed, how can wilderness advocates expect mountain bikers to remain neutral about legislation that could exclude them from the wild places they love?

Mountain biker interests, as manifested through the International Mountain Biking Association (IMBA),<sup>3</sup> have generally shown patience, thus far, in dealing with wilderness advocates and their proposals that could eliminate mountain biking from tens of millions of acres of public land.

IMBA's strategy regarding wildlands protection consists of engaging mountain bikers on the issue by broadcasting popular mountain bike routes that would be lost by wilderness designation and advocating for alternative non-wilderness protective designations that would both retain mountain biking and preserve Nature. IMBA has been restrained in its opposition to wilderness because most of its members are wilderness lovers. However, how long can mountain bikers support a law and concept that rejects their chosen form of enjoying wildlands, especially in cases where wilderness proposals include lots of favorite mountain biking areas?

Below are six alternative courses of action open to wilderness advocates regarding mountain bikes and the cases for and against.

**1) MAINTAIN THE STATUS QUO.** Wilderness advocates could simply lobby for new wilderness areas and ignore any conflicts

with the mountain biking community.

*Case For:* The Wilderness Act bans “mechanized transport.” Wilderness management agencies have interpreted this provision as banning mountain bikes in wilderness. Later, three agencies modified their regulations to explicitly ban bicycle use. Perhaps fewer wilderness acres will be protected under this alternative, but the integrity of the National Wilderness Preservation System will be maintained.

*Case Against:* The Wilderness Act is neither the 11th Commandment nor the 28th Amendment. It is a law with flaws that has allowed livestock grazing in most western wilderness areas, mining in many, even road-building and logging in extraordinary circumstances. Wilderness advocates need to work to concentrate on closing the loopholes that allow bulldozers, chainsaws, and bovines into designated and *de facto* wilderness, rather than defend a provision that keeps relatively harmless mountain bikes out. Wilderness needs mountain bikers as defenders, not opponents or “neutrals.” Wilderness advocates will end up with fewer areas, and less protected acreage, if we let ourselves be diverted by this trivial collateral issue.

**2) MODIFY WILDERNESS PROPOSAL BOUNDARIES TO AVOID MOUNTAIN BIKE CONFLICTS.** Wilderness advocates could propose new wilderness boundaries that exclude popular mountain bike routes.

*Case For:* Excluding high-conflict mountain bike areas avoids the fight with the mountain bike community. The integrity of the Wilderness Act is maintained. Mountain bikers could then join wilderness advocates in seeking protection for these areas.

*Case Against:* Cherry-stemming and building corridors into and through wilderness proposals to exclude popular mountain biking routes will leave the wildlands more vulnerable to road-building, mining, logging, and off-road vehicle use. Unless the corridors are very, very narrow (wide enough for a mountain bike, but too narrow for a motorbike), four-wheeled motorized vehicles could use them. In addition, if wide enough to contain timber, the corridors could be logged as well. Whatever the width, mischievous mining claims could be filed and cause problems.

**3) AMEND THE WILDERNESS ACT TO AVOID GENERAL CONFLICT WITH MOUNTAIN BIKERS.** Wilderness advocates could support an amendment to the Wilderness Act allowing mountain bikes.

*Case For:* Wilderness advocates must focus all of their attention on the real threats to wilderness (logging, mining, off-road vehicles, etc.). Mountain bikes are likely no worse than hiking boots and less damaging to trails and watersheds than horses. We need the mountain biking community to be wilderness champions—not sitting out the fight, or worse, joining the other side.

*Case Against:* The Wilderness Act has never been amended. Re-opening the law for this issue is risky (because it could also result in further changes to the act) and unworthy because mountain bikes are inconsistent with the wilderness ideal. It is better to proceed on a case-by-case basis with the mountain bike community to minimize or avoid conflicts in wilderness proposals.

**4) EXCEPT THE WILDERNESS ACT PROHIBITION AGAINST MOUNTAIN BIKES FOR CERTAIN EXISTING ROUTES WHEN DESIGNATING NEW WILDERNESS AREAS.** Wilderness advocates could agree that specific mountain bike routes be included in new wilderness areas by providing for their continued use in designating legislation, subject to direction by wilderness managers to further regulate use, including banning mountain bikes if necessary to prevent resource damage.

*Case For:* Legislating mountain bikers' interests into future wilderness areas would convert mountain bikers into advocates for new wilderness. It avoids a political confrontation with mountain bikers that the wilderness movement cannot afford. Congress now makes statutory reference to maps to depict official wilderness boundaries. A new color could be added to depict specific existing trails that would be open to mountain bikes in new wilderness areas with specific statutory language defining the width of the routes.

*Case Against:* Legislating exceptions to the Wilderness Act is a slippery slope that could open the law to further amendment. It is better to designate less, but more pure, wilderness if politics dictate that mountain bike routes must be left outside of wilderness boundaries. Conservationists may have to choose quality over quantity for our Wilderness System.

**5) PROPOSE AND SUPPORT OTHER PROTECTIVE DESIGNATIONS AS ALTERNATIVES TO WILDERNESS.** Wilderness advocates could avoid the conflict by proposing existing congressionally sanctioned alternative designations such as national recreation area, national conservation area, national scenic area, wild and scenic river, or national monument

to protect areas where mountain biker conflicts cannot be avoided or resolved.

*Case For:* The integrity of the Wilderness Act is maintained.

*Case Against:* Alternative protective designations should be in addition to (or overlay)—not in place of—wilderness designation and should protect and restore adjacent non-wilderness quality lands that still have natural and other public values worth conserving. Wilderness quality lands should be designated as wilderness.

**6) PROPOSE AND SUPPORT A NEW CONGRESSIONAL DESIGNATION, PROBABLY NOT CALLED, BUT ESSENTIALLY, "WILDERNESS LITE."** Wilderness advocates could propose a new conservation designation that is wilderness in every way except as pertains to mountain bikes.

*Case For:* The integrity of the National Wilderness Preservation System is maintained.

*Case Against:* If a "wilderness lite" category was accepted by Congress to accommodate mountain bikes, what else could such a designation allow that is not allowed in wilderness (logging, roads, mining, off-road vehicle use, aerial transportation)? If a weaker, politically easier compromise designation to wilderness becomes available to Congress, few, if any, additional wilderness areas will be established in the future.

### The debate in context

The ramifications of any of these choices are many and varied. Below are some issues to bear in mind.

**THE PRISTINE WILDERNESS ACT MYTH.** Some wilderness activists assert with pride that the Wilderness Act has never been amended. Congress has periodically amended most environmental protection laws such as the Endangered Species Act, Clean Air Act, and Clean Water Act, but the original Wilderness Act remains as originally enacted by Congress in the United States Code. However, while not explicitly amending the statute, numerous provisions in subsequent wilderness bills do affect certain provisions in the Wilderness Act on an area-by-area basis. Exceptions have been made for water developments, livestock grazing, mining, motorized access, religious and cultural purposes, fire prevention, trail maintenance, management of hydrological, meteorological, and communication facilities, law enforcement, and other uses.<sup>4</sup>

**THE ROLE OF WILDERNESS MANAGEMENT PLANNING.** If allowed in wilderness, mountain biking—like hiking or equestrian use—would be subject to agency management

planning. So, if mountain bikes are too numerous and cause harm where they are legally allowed, then management restrictions would be appropriate to preserve wilderness character (just as for hikers and horsepackers).

**OVERPOPULATION.** An often unacknowledged factor in wilderness issues is the excessive number of people who use designated or *de facto* wilderness areas. Population growth is increasing while wildlands are decreasing. Our attempts to preserve more wilderness, without simultaneously addressing population growth, will preclude our efforts to protect, as the Wilderness Act calls for, “an enduring resource of wilderness.” The reluctance of wilderness advocates to also be population control advocates results in our appearing elitist by attempting to limit the number people who enjoy wilderness areas.

### Recommendation

Wilderness advocates should embrace the mountain biking community as full partners in the wilderness movement. Like the hiking and equestrian communities, mountain bikers are natural wilderness supporters.

Edward Abbey famously noted that wilderness needed no defense, but only more defenders. It is a disservice to the wild and to the future of wilderness advocacy to get embroiled in a petty dispute between hiking and biking interests. Wilderness has real enemies that must be defended against.

The people who would build roads, dig mines, log wild forests, graze cows, and drive off-road vehicles in the last strongholds of wild country on our public lands are the true wilderness enemies. They are powerful, but not as powerful as the rest of us—if we can only avoid internecine cat fighting.

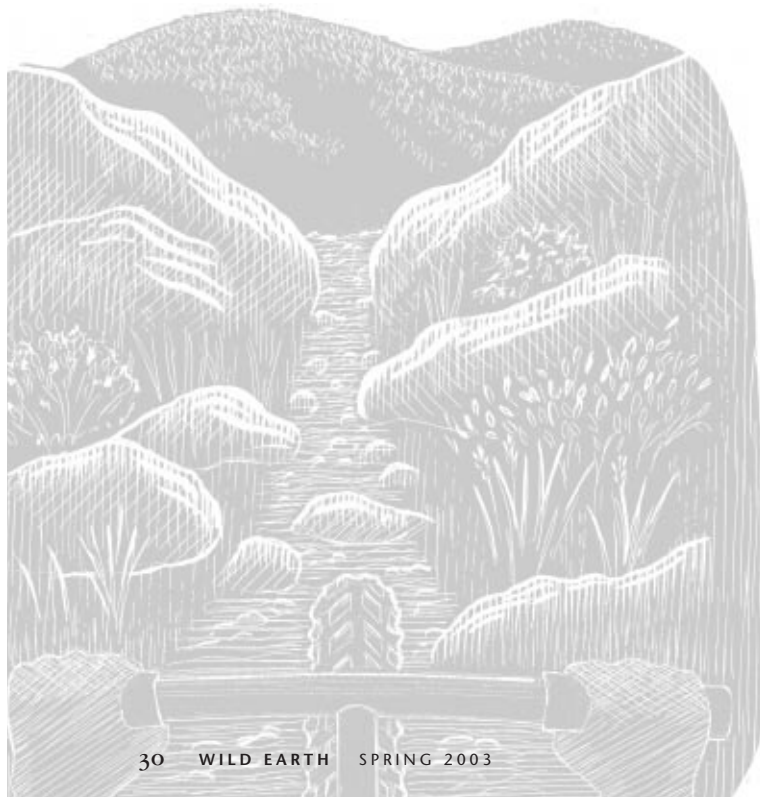
Culturally, mountain bikers are much closer to hikers than to motorized recreationists. However, if the wilderness tent isn't large enough to accommodate mountain bikers, what choice do they have but to oppose wilderness to protect their interests? The enemies of wilderness are trying to exploit the mountain biking issue for their own gain. The Blue Ribbon Coalition would love to peel mountain bikers away from the wilderness advocacy camp.<sup>5</sup> Representative Jim Hansen (R-UT), former chair of the House Resources Committee, has attempted to amend the Wilderness Act to allow mountain bikes, and other politicians could try again in yet another cynical attempt to divide wilderness advocates.<sup>6</sup>

Wilderness advocates should ask themselves this question: *Am I first a recreationist or a conservationist?* If you answer “conservationist,” then you should embrace mountain bikers as political allies. If you are a “recreationist” first, then you need to decide if you prefer automobile-filled roads, stump-dotted clearcuts, open-pit mines, cow-bombed meadows, and screaming two-stroke engines over having to step aside for an occasional mountain biker dude puffing by. ☺

**Andy Kerr** ([www.andykerr.net](http://www.andykerr.net)) was in the fourth grade when the Wilderness Act was passed. He has been involved in every one of the seven wilderness bills creating new wilderness areas in Oregon in the past quarter century. He has a “citized” mountain bike for use in town, and has no intentions to ever bike in the wilds.

### NOTES

1. M. Lanza. 2001. Trail shock: Studies weigh mountain biking and hiking impacts. *AMC Outdoors Magazine* April: 19–21.
2. S. J. Hollenhurst, M. A. Schuett, M. S. Olson, D. Chavez, T. Mainieri. 1995. A national study of mountain biking opinion leaders: Characteristics, preferences, attitudes and conflicts. Report PSW-93-0029CA, PSW-99-0034CA. Albany, California: USDA Forest Service.
3. See [www.imba.com](http://www.imba.com).
4. Ross Gorte. 1998. *Wilderness Laws: Prohibited and Permitted Uses*. Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 98-848 ENR.
5. Tellingly, the web address for the Blue Ribbon Coalition is [www.sharetrails.org](http://www.sharetrails.org) (emphasis added).
6. H.R. 3172 (101st Cong., 1st Sess.). This bill consisted of one sentence: “Section 4(c) of the Wilderness Act (16 U.S.C. 1133(c)) is amended by striking ‘mechanical transport,’ and inserting ‘mechanical transport (except for nonmotorized bicycles).’” The purpose of this bill, cosponsored by more than a dozen Republican representatives, was to encourage mountain bikers to ally with conservatives and adopt their views on wilderness. This legislation died in committee; no bill has been introduced addressing bicycle use in wilderness since 1989.





# Don't Tread Here

by Brian O'Donnell and Michael Carroll

RECENTLY A NUMBER of mountain bike organizations, a few members of Congress, and even some long-time wilderness activists have suggested that mountain biking should be permitted in congressionally designated wilderness areas. Such a change would require Congress to amend the Wilderness Act. Even if such exceptions to the Wilderness Act's prohibition on mechanized use were narrow, and not a wholesale opening of the National Wilderness Preservation System to cyclists, we believe the notion is dangerous: Mountain bikes are simply incompatible with designated wilderness.

We may seem like an unlikely duo to be making this argument. After all, we live in what is arguably the mountain bike capital of the world—Durango, Colorado. Our friends, colleagues, and neighbors are mountain bikers. Both of us are avid trail users and one of us is an active mountain biker. Neither of us comes from the “purist” camp of the wilderness movement. That being said, this debate has implications beyond mountain bikes and wilderness. It addresses a more fundamental question: Will we keep some parts of the American landscape natural and wild and free—or must every acre be easily accessible to people and their toys?

## Mechanization is not consistent with wilderness

Wilderness areas not only protect Nature, but also provide an opportunity for people to experience and connect with wild places at a basic level, using muscles, not machines. Wilderness values—the reasons for protecting wilderness—go far beyond the traditional recreational uses of wilderness such as hiking, hunting, fishing, and camping, despite these activities' importance to millions of Americans.

We need to keep in mind what the Wilderness Act says. In its definition of wilderness, the act refers to protecting the “earth and its community of life” and “outstanding opportunities for solitude” before mentioning the word “recreation.” Further, it refers to “primitive recreation,” not just “recreation.” This is no accident or oversight, but the very heart of the Wilderness Act.

Protecting a portion of our land from mechanized recreation was one of the main reasons that the National Wilderness Preservation System and the wilderness movement were created. As Aldo Leopold (a founder of the Wilderness Society) wrote in *A Sand County Almanac* in 1949, “Mechanized recreation already has seized nine-tenths of the woods and mountains; a decent respect for minorities should dedicate the other tenth to wilderness.” While mountain bikes were not around in Leopold's era, dramatically increased mechanized use in the backcountry was. Wilderness areas offer an escape and provide a primeval experience for the wilderness visitor.

Some argue that allowing mountain bikes in wilderness is a decision that is open to the discretion of area managers. However, Section 2 of the Wilderness Act of 1964, which established the National Wilderness Preservation System, was clear about the intent of the system:

In order to assure that an increasing population, accompanied by expanding settlement and growing *mechanization* [emphasis added], does not occupy and modify all areas within the United States and its possessions, leaving no lands designated for preservation and protection in their natural condition, it is hereby declared to be the policy of the Congress to secure for the American people of present and future generations the benefits of an enduring resource of wilderness.

Once wilderness areas are designated, the Wilderness Act requires that the areas be managed in a manner that “will leave them unimpaired for future use” and ensures the “preservation of their wilderness character.” The mechanized nature of bicycles runs contrary to the concept of “wilderness character.” This is especially true with today's high-performance, off-trail mountain bikes.

## Not your father's mountain bikes

Mountain bikes' impacts on the land are large and getting worse. Since mountain bicycles were invented, technological changes have completely transformed the cycling industry. These changes include the development of lighter and stronger materials for frames, wheels, and components; suspension systems similar to those on dirt bikes, all-terrain vehicles, and SUVs; and gearing that enables riders to conquer slopes once thought too steep to ride. This new technology has made terrain previously open only to experts accessible to average riders, enabling more than just top athletes to ride through highly technical terrain deeper and deeper into the backcountry.

While most mountain bikers have continued to ride on dirt roads and well-established multiple-use trails, technological innovations have enabled bicyclists to engage in off-road and off-trail activities similar to those of dirt bikers and off-road vehicle users. This new style of riding has resulted in a dramatic cultural shift in the mountain bicycling community towards the “extreme” aspects of the sport including “downhilling” and “freeriding.” This shift from the “backpackers with wheels” image to the extreme is apparent in all aspects of the sport. One need only to flip through the pages of the latest mountain bicycling magazine to see examples of this shift—a shift in *how* and, more importantly, *where* people are riding. From downhillers dropping off cliffs to freeriders skidding down steep washes like extreme skiers, the image and direction of mountain biking is being shaped by this new trend.

Coupled with this shift toward extreme riding, many mountain bicycling organizations have also launched aggressive trail construction programs. Like other trail-building groups, mountain bikers identify one-way loop trails as the ideal systems for their users. Loop trails are designed to have one control point or trailhead where the system begins with a wide variety of trails built off of that point that vary in length, terrain, and difficulty. The aggressive push of mountain bike organizations to build ever-growing webs of trails poses serious problems of habitat fragmentation, increased erosion, and wildlife conflicts.

As interest in extreme riding continues to grow, as trail networks burgeon, and as new technology makes it possible for ever-more mountain bicyclists to participate, even the most remote wild landscapes may become trampled—and trampled—by knobby tires.

### **Mountain bikers are not excluded from wilderness areas**

In a recent letter titled, “Mountain Bikers Beware,” former U.S. House Resources Committee Chairman Jim Hansen (R-UT) wrote, “Mountain bikers would be prohibited to visit these areas if they are made wilderness.” Not true.

While admittedly the technology has advanced, mountain bikers are not yet cyborgs. They are not welded to their bikes. Wilderness designation does not exclude mountain bikers, wilderness only excludes mountain bikes. This is an important distinction. Most mountain bikers pursue numerous recreational activities such as skiing, climbing, and hiking. They are not shut out of wilderness. Wilderness is meant to remain free from mechanical recreation, whether it is conducted on an ATV, motorcycle, or mountain bike.

### **Political landscape**

Mountain bike organizations have on several occasions proven adept at organizing their members *against* new wilderness areas when they have feared a loss of access for bicycles. It would be a mistake, however, to believe that this



*Mountain bikes are simply incompatible with designated wilderness.*

organizing work would be transferable to advocacy for wilderness should the Wilderness Act be modified to permit bicycles in wilderness areas.

Would this new biking constituency swell the ranks of wilderness advocates, directly leading to congressional designation of significantly more wilderness? We contend that mountain bikers are, for the most part, more passionate about biking than creating new wilderness areas. They have organized most effectively when their individual riding opportunities on specific trails are at risk of being eliminated. It is a major stretch to argue that bikers, when not facing the immediate threat of closed trails, would participate in the political wilderness process (in favor of wilderness) with equal passion and effectiveness as they have previously demonstrated in opposing wilderness.

We must not forget the current political climate. Some congressmen who would amend the Wilderness Act or change its original meaning have an ambitious anti-wilderness agenda aimed far beyond the issue of mountain bike access. Opening the Wilderness Act to amendments that allow mountain bikes would provide a smokescreen behind which all manner of extractive industries and off-road vehicle organizations—think Blue Ribbon Coalition—would sneak in their own gutting amendments.

There is a better approach to resolving this issue than amending the Wilderness Act. Leaders of the mountain biking community and grassroots wilderness advocates have built a solid and mutually respectful dialogue. After a series of meetings, key leaders of the International Mountain Biking Association and of state and national wilderness groups have recently issued a joint statement of agreements. While we will not agree over every acre sought by both bikers and wilderness advocates, we can talk and find a reasonable meeting of minds. All over the country, local dialogue is proving successful. As a result, mountain bikers are a part of coalitions supporting numerous wilderness proposals, while key trails (often along the edges of the wilderness) offer access for bikers to enjoy wilderness vistas.

### **Increasing emphasis on habitat protection**

With the growing sophistication of the ecological sciences we have learned a great deal in recent years. Conservation biology has rightfully entered the wilderness movement. In many states conservationists are prioritizing the protection of biologically diverse places over areas with scenic or recreational qualities. Wilderness areas are now seen as cores in

connected networks of wildlands that serve many values, but with ecological integrity as the central goal.

The destruction of wilderness and the fragmentation of habitats and ecosystems is death by a thousand cuts. Will introduction of mountain bikes—and their penetration farther into wilderness—promote additional fragmentation and human conflicts with the natural world? Yes. In a time when ecosystem protection and wildlife habitat conservation has become the overriding rationale for saving wilderness it is inappropriate to consider weakening wilderness protections. The need is for more wilderness, protected all the more strongly.

### **Wilderness requires humility**

Dave Foreman has written, “No other challenge calls for self-restraint, generosity, and humility more than Wilderness preservation.” Protecting wilderness is truly about humility. Public lands policy should not be driven by a “what’s in it for me?” ethos—for backpackers or bikers or any other recreational constituency. It should be about sustaining the health of the land community.

An ecological revision of President Kennedy’s famous words should guide us: “Ask not what wilderness can do for you, but what you can do for wilderness.”

Some have argued that the Wilderness Act needs updating. Yet this one piece of legislation has been a powerful, effective bulwark for nearly 40 years. It is folly to imagine a wilderness law that simultaneously protects wilderness ecosystems and provides the opportunity for a primeval wilderness experience but does not exclude mechanized uses.

A line must be drawn somewhere between which activities are appropriate in wilderness and which are not. The Wilderness Act correctly drew that line based on mechanization. We will grant that mountain bikes are much closer to that line than dirt bikes and other off-road vehicles. Nonetheless, a strong line has been drawn in the Wilderness Act, and it must be strongly defended. ☪

**Brian O’Donnell** is associate director and **Michael Carroll** is communications director for the Wilderness Support Center in Durango, Colorado. *The Wilderness Support Center* ([www.wilderness.org/ourissues/wilderness/wsc.cfm](http://www.wilderness.org/ourissues/wilderness/wsc.cfm)) works with grassroots groups across the nation to build and implement successful wilderness protection campaigns.



## A Modest Proposal

by **Dave Foreman**

SOME THINGS ARE OBVIOUS: mountain bikes do more damage to the land than hikers. To think otherwise ignores the story told by the ground. Although I have never ridden a mountain bike, I am very familiar with their impacts. For the last seven years I have regularly run three to six miles several times a week on a network of trails in the Sandia Mountain foothills two blocks from my home (recently, I've been walking these trails because of a back injury). These trails receive use from walkers, runners, and mountain bikers; they are closed to motorized vehicles.

Because I'm clumsy, I keep my eyes on the trail in front of me. I run or walk in all seasons, in all kinds of weather. I have watched the growing erosion on these trails from mountain bike use. The basic difference between feet and tires is that tire tracks are continuous and foot tracks are discontinuous. Water finds that narrow, continuous tire tracks are a rill in which to flow. Also, because many mountain bikers are after thrills and speed, their tires cut into the ground. Slamming on the brakes after zooming downhill, sliding around sharp corners, and digging in to go uphill: I see the results of this behavior weekly.

Some advocates claim that mountain bikes don't cause significant erosion on trails designed and engineered for their use. This may be true. On the one trail I run that seems to have been built for bikes, there is much less damage from tires. But what percentage of trails meets such standards? Few. Moreover, I regularly see mountain bikers cutting off cross-country, even on steep slopes, for more of a challenge. They seem blind and deaf to the damage they cause.

Admittedly, backpackers and horsepackers can cause damage to wilderness trails. But this is a poor argument to suggest that we add another source of damage to those trails.

Are mountain bikers conservationists, a powerful political constituency ripe to become wilderness advocates? I smell wishful thinking here. I suspect that most bicyclists don't go into the backcountry for contemplation or to experience self-willed land. They want an outdoor gymnasium. They're after speed and thrills. This doesn't mean they are bad people or

can't be responsible when they pay attention. Some mountain bikers are conservationists and even support wilderness areas. I know a few of these folks. They are perfectly happy to walk in wilderness; they do not want to open wilderness areas to bicycles any more than they want them open to snowmobiles or ATVs. This is another point. Wilderness areas are not closed to mountain bikers any more than they are closed to me. Any mountain biker can hike in wilderness as easily as I can. (On the other hand, some of the macho fellows who ride motors in the backcountry have arteries that look like cheese-filled manicotti. They might be able to walk into wilderness, but will they walk out?)

Then there are active mountain bikers who are part of the anti-wilderness movement. One southern California mountain bike website spouts the John Birch Society lies about the Wildlands Project. One prominent mountain biking magazine is published by Hi Torque Publications, which also publishes five dirt bike and ATV magazines with strong anti-wilderness editorial policies.

Nonetheless, the growing number of backcountry bicyclists is an important political issue, and one that conservationists need to handle with care. (Other editorials in this forum show that wheels of any kind have never been considered appropriate in wilderness areas. I need not repeat their arguments.) We are faced with the possibility of many mountain bikers opposing additional wilderness areas. Can we continue to maintain the integrity of the wilderness idea, protect tens of millions of ecologically important acres as new wilderness areas, and keep most of the mountain biking community from joining motorheads and other opponents of wilderness? I suggest an open discussion within the wilderness community on the following strategy:

- 1) Existing wilderness areas must remain completely closed to bicycles and other human-powered wheeled contraptions.
- 2) No amendments should be made to the Wilderness Act.
- 3) In legislation establishing new wilderness areas, certain trails currently in use by mountain bikers and where resource damage is minimal may be specifically designated as open to continued mountain bike use in very narrow corridors excluded from the wilderness, but closed to motorized vehicles and extractive use. There are precedents for such corridors. For example, the Cebolla Wilderness Area under Bureau of Land

Management jurisdiction in New Mexico has several narrow vehicle corridors with locked gates open only to the grazing permittee. Such nonwilderness corridors are not ideal, but they are better than no new wilderness area being designated.

- 4) Such trail use should not be permanently mandated in law, but allowed at the discretion of the relevant manager so long as damage does not become excessive. Enforcement against motorized trespass and self-policing by the mountain bike community will be linked to continued access.
- 5) Where there are public land roadless areas laced with existing and popular mountain bike trails and where the impact is within acceptable limits, conservationists may

want to propose designations such as national recreation areas or national conservation areas, instead of wilderness areas. (We do not need a new special designation.) These designations should still close the area to motorized use, timber cutting, and other extractive uses. We should be very conservative in making these alternative designations, however. Wilderness—not “wilderness lite”—is still the best option for protecting wild places for Nature and traditional backcountry recreation.

These guidelines could form the basis for honest talks between wilderness conservationists and responsible mountain bikers on how to protect and restore the ecological health of our public lands while allowing reasonable access for muscle-powered recreation. ☪

**Dave Foreman** is publisher of *Wild Earth* and chairman of the *Wildlands Project*.



*In new wilderness areas, certain trails currently in use by mountain bikers and where resource damage is minimal may be specifically designated as open to continued mountain bike use in very narrow corridors excluded from the wilderness.*