

# Mountain Bikes: Not For Every Mountain

The controversy continues on where all-terrain-bikes do—and do not—belong.

By Ted Eugenis

**T**he 88th Congress passed the Wilderness Act in September, 1964 to "establish a National Wilderness Preservation system for the permanent good of the whole people, and for other purposes . . ."

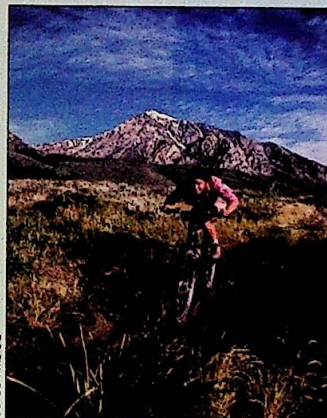
But if there was, and is, general agreement about the desirability of wilderness areas, there is not as far as how to use it. And one key section has stirred strong emotions in the continuing mountain bike controversy. Section 4(c) of the act: "There shall be . . . no other form of mechanical transport . . .", i.e., bicycles.

Sounds simple enough—to keep wilderness areas free of mechanization and encroachment. Since then, however, different policies of various government agencies have contradicted the act.

Take, for example, a rule in the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) which stated that mechanized transport was not permitted in the wilderness if it had a non-living power source, i.e., motor. Some cyclists interpreted this as meaning that because they were living, they could ride their bikes in the wilderness. That CFR rule, however, was struck from the books last summer, because it conflicted with the Wilderness Act and other existing CFR rules.

But that initial waffling by federal authorities had had an affect—some cyclists apparently felt that what was once in the books could be again. A case in point is the controversy involving bicycles on wilderness trails at Pt. Reyes National Seashore, which falls under the jurisdiction of the National Park Service. Technological improvements in bikes made it possible to use steeper trails, and a group of bicyclists went to the Golden Gate National Recreation Area Advisory Commission (GGNRA) last summer to see why they were being excluded from the newly created wilderness area. They felt that they weren't being dealt with fairly even in the face of the withdrawal of the non-living power source rule, and asked the GGNRA to look into the situation.

In February, the GGNRA held a hearing at which several environmental groups expressed their belief that because it was a wilderness area, the matter



Freewheeling, or treading terrain meant only for boots?

was closed: Bicycles didn't belong.

Many cyclists, however, claimed that the issue still wasn't clear, and that they wouldn't take no for an answer. Today, clandestine riding is still done at Pt. Reyes.

Patty Hedge, who's a lobbyist with the Wilderness Society and serves as their Regional Director for California and Nevada, said, "Bicycles were precluded from use in wilderness, but since that was not made clear by GGNRA on day one to a group of mountain bicyclists, their initial wavering gave time for the conflict to grow."

So, several things are happening at Pt. Reyes: The cyclists are citing old CFR rules that are no longer in effect; the GGNRA is planning hearings in the near future; and the Park Service, while not ignoring the problem, is waiting for instructions from Washington that show no signs of coming.

Clay Peters, Director of the National Parks Program of the Wilderness Society, states, "Our principle concern is with regard to wilderness. The Wilderness Act makes it very clear that bicycles are a form of mechanical transport. We'd like to see the agencies comply with the law. If the heads of agencies would set a clear policy, then it would put out all the brush fires."

While the situation at Pt. Reyes is not out of control, it does emphasize the

question: What rights do cyclists have in the woods, and what rules are they expected to follow?

For starters, bicycles are not allowed in Federal Wilderness Areas. Now, 163 new Wilderness Areas were created last year, so it's a good idea to check with a regional office if you're unsure about the area you plan to ride in. Trails where riding was permitted a year ago might be off-limits now.

Second, bicycles are permitted on numerous government trails and roads, providing there isn't a sign stating otherwise. The Forest Service alone has 96,000 miles of trails of which only an estimated 10,000-15,000 miles are in Wilderness Areas. If you also add in the thousands of miles of roads, then you realize that there are plenty of miles to cover.

Currently, the Forest Service and the other government agencies are grappling with the issue.

Paul Barker, Assistant Director for Recreation Management with the Forest Service in Washington, D.C. said, "The bicycle is becoming a very popular mode of travel on our trails and use has been increasing the last few years as technology improves. That increase is occurring outside of Wilderness Areas because they (bicycles) are prohibited inside. I'm not aware of flagrant disregard of that."

Dick Joy, Recreation Group Leader in the Forest Service's Northeast regional office concurs that there's been an increase in the National Forests but not in the wilderness. "We're trying to make people aware that riding bikes is a violation of wilderness law and there are other areas they can ride."

But Dick Spray, Assistant Director for Recreation and Wilderness Management with the Forest Service's Southwestern Region, said, "There's a large number (of mountain bikers) who are not complying with wilderness regulations. Two or three years ago it would be a rare day that you saw a mountain biker on the trail. Now, it's the rule rather than the exception. I see them in wilderness as well as outside of wilderness. The tracks are just about everywhere."

"Mountain bikers divide quite sharply into two different groups: environmentally aware riders who accept the ruling, and enthusiasts who see only an obstacle between them and what they want to do. There are mountain bikers who are very

strong wilderness advocates. They believe mountain bikes don't belong in the wilderness and usually do other activities. On the other side of the aisle are these guys who are usually more mechanically minded and feel that their rights are being abridged by keeping them out of Wilderness Areas. They strongly believe that mountain bikes weren't considered during the 1964 Wilderness Act deliberations and they shouldn't be prohibited."

But the question also remains: How many areas currently open will remain open to cyclists.

John Byfield, a member of the National Off-Road Bicycle Association (NORBA), is a bike shop owner and has organized and promoted an off-road cycling event in Oregon since 1980—often with the cooperation of the Forest Service. "The wilderness is, and will be, closed to bicycles. I think everyone in NORBA understands that and is working to keep the areas open that are now open. We are cooperating and working with the Forest Service to help ensure that."

Another dealer who's active in off-road cycling had this to say, "Most people who ride mountain bikes have already been involved in wilderness or mountaineering activities, and are sensitive enough to try to prevent objectionable behavior."

Glenn Odell, president of NORBA, said, "According to the responses from our questionnaire, a NORBA member has the ethics of a hiker. We are like other cyclists—conservation-oriented and environmentally aware. We don't want anyone to think we believe throwing a bike in the back of a pickup truck and driving to the top of a hill, only to come screaming down the backside trail at breakneck speed, is accepted behavior."

Ok, but what about the effects of bicycles on trails?

A study recently done for the Forest Service found that the motorcycle was the most destructive of the three uses (hikers, horseback riders, motorcycles) in an ascent of a trail. In a descent, the motorcycle was the *least* harmful. Even a hiker was worse than a motorcycle.

"The typical human can generate about 1/2 horsepower," comments Odell, adding, "You don't get the spinning wheels with a bicycle the way you do with a motorcycle. A muddy environment is where the mountain bike makes its worst impact. But I've also seen trails where horses have been in those same wet situations and found them unacceptably destructive."

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But listen to Jim Sjulín, who maintains about 63 miles of trails in Portland, Oregon's extensive city park trail system in the soggy rainforest overlooking the Columbia river. "Any time that a wheeled vehicle is on a trail, especially when it's soft from rain, it creates a linear track that can carry water. Then, over time, the trail starts carrying water instead of shedding as it's designed to do, and there's an erosion problem. We haven't actually sighted enough bikers to prove that, but judging from the width of the tracks, we think that's what's going on.

Obviously, some real studies on the use and effects of bicycles on trails is needed.

Gene Coan of the Sierra Club, puts it this way: "There will be resolutions before our board in May. One will deal with prohibiting mountain bikes in Wilderness Areas and is essentially reiterating what the Wilderness Act already says. The other leaves it open, and deals with off-road vehicles in general. It essentially says that areas should be open to them if studies ever prove that they aren't harmful." ♣

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