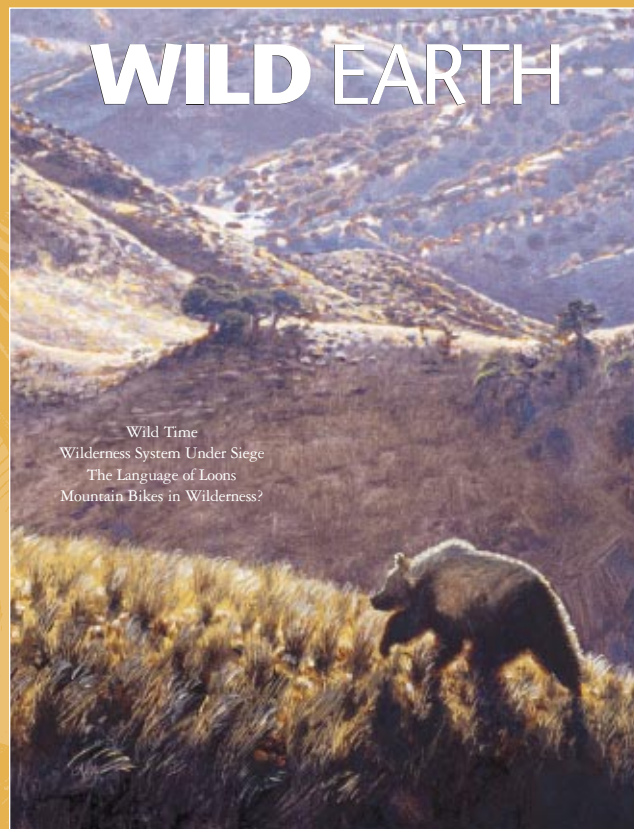


Mountain Biking in Wilderness

Which Way?

by Andy Kerr

≈ from



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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.¹ 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.²

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).

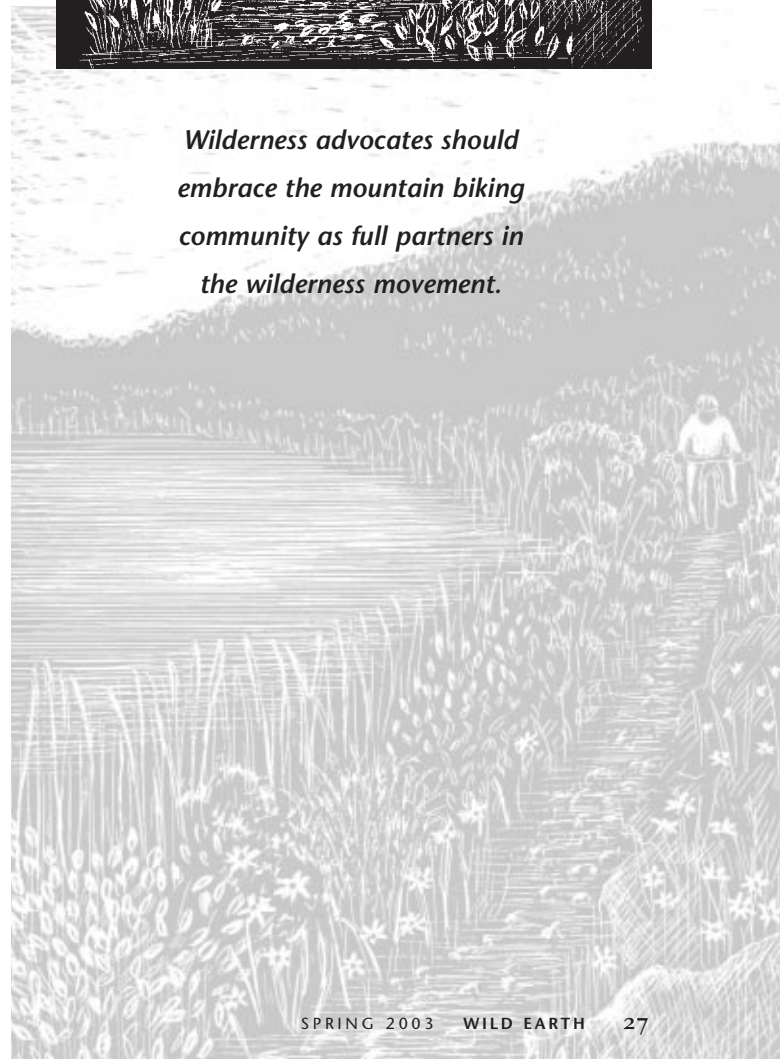
Some citizen wilderness proposals include roadless units of 1,000 acres in size. This doesn't leave many remaining natural recreation opportunities for mountain bikers. Do we want the public to view the wilderness debate as one of rapacious loggers, voracious road-builders, gluttonous miners, and obnoxious 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),³ 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.⁴

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.⁵ 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.⁶

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) 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.
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 (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.

