

A Fine Line: How Trail Access for Cyclists is Sustainable

A persuasive paper

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Composition 211

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November 21, 2013

Over the past decade, mountain biking has been growing in unprecedented fashion. Technological advances in bicycles have made the sport more accessible than ever, which has increased the number of riders across the country. These better bicycles have given riders the ability to conquer terrain which had previously been inaccessible and to ride much faster than in the past. The increased volume of trail users, along with this faster, more aggressive riding style has resulted in US Forest Service restricting cyclist's trail access. Some of the shutdowns have caused cyclists to sign petitions and take other legal action to try and prevent the loss of some of the finest trails in the country. The Forest Service's mission is to conserve the environment, and it believes that restricting access is the most effective way to do so in regards to cyclists. However, cycling is actually beneficial to the forest and surrounding communities. It allows for the natural land to be used in a minimally invasive manner, gives visibility to conservation issues, and boosts local economies near trails. With the proper etiquette and focus on conservation, cyclists themselves can reduce the negative behavior that gives the Forest Service reason to restrict access. I propose a tangible plan for cooperation between cyclists and the Forest Service, and that utilizing it will eliminate the need for shutdowns in the future.

All across the country, cyclists have lost their legal access to many popular trails. Trails in four of California's largest forests (the Angeles National Forest, Cleveland National Forest, Los Padres National Forest and San Bernardino National Forest) are all slated to become "wilderness" areas, reports Kevin Rouse (Rouse, 2012). By designating a forest as a "wilderness area," all off road vehicle use, including bicycles, is prohibited. This would be a devastating loss to the Californian cycling culture, since the Cleveland National Forest is where some of the best professional mountain bikers began their careers and still train daily (Rouse, 2012). Also, the closure of trails in the Angeles National Forest is very problematic, as it is home to some of the

best riding in Southern California. It includes one of the best loop trails in the state, Marshall Canyon, which is one of my favorite spots to ride. If these forests are closed off, some of the most quintessential Southern Californian riding will be lost.

California is not the only state that is currently affected by closures. According to Jamie Howell, Washington has had its own share of trail access battles (Howell, 2011). Much of the battle is documented in his film *Pedal Driven*, which illustrates the tension between the cycling community and the Forest Service. In Washington, many of the trails affected are known as “freeride” trails. This type of trail has man-made features (jumps, berms, wooden bridges, etc.) and as such is well groomed and maintained by the riders. These trails have been described as having an “art-like” quality, as they have a clean flow to them, both aesthetically and when a cyclist rides the trail (Howell, 2011). The Pacific Northwest is home to many of these trails, since the abundant rain keeps the soil in perfect condition for building jumps and berms. These features have made Washington’s trails some of the best in the nation, and brought cyclists from all over the country to test their skills in the forest. Yet, because they are on public land, the Forest Service restricted cyclist’s access to these popular trails. In a few cases, Howell reports they even went so far as to destroy all of the man-made features of the trails (Howell, 2011). These actions put a severe strain on the relationship between cyclists and the Forest Service in Washington.

In addition to these stories from the Golden and Evergreen States, cyclists in Montana have lost access to over 1200 miles of singletrack (which is a narrow trail only wide enough for one cyclist at a time) (Howell, 2011). Although there have been several legal battles that have brought some of these trails back, many have been lost to cyclists for good. Any legal battle against the Forest Service, a powerful opponent with a bureaucratic structure, is very difficult to

win. Although their mission is to “care for the land and serve the people,” in these situations, it seems as though the land has received all the care, while the cyclists have been ignored (Service, 2013).

The Forest Service has different rationale for shutting down each of the trails. For the freeride trails in Washington, they feel that building a trail is “the same as cutting down the forest” (Howell, 2011). They suggest that building a trail illegally is as detrimental to the conservation of the forest as destroying it entirely. In California, they are “looking to the future” and trying to sustain the wilderness by restricting access to it (Simmons, 2012). The same argument is prevalent in Montana. There is an abundance of wilderness in both states, and portions of which could be allotted to cyclists so they may have access to at least some of the land. California has much more land devoted to urban areas, so the necessity to preserve nature is greater in California. Still, a drive through the Golden State will reveal that there is much undeveloped land, which means closing off all wilderness areas to cyclists in the name of preservation is not as necessary as the Forest Service believes.

Another factor in the shutdowns is cyclists being considered a danger to the other trails users. In most states, the trails are used for many different forms of recreation. Most trails in California are multi-use trails, with hikers, equestrians, and cyclists all sharing the trail. This is only possible when all yield appropriately: equestrians to hikers and cyclists to both equestrians and hikers. This yield system is great in theory, but when cyclists get up to speed, they may struggle to yield properly. This leads to situations on a busy trail where cyclists have been known to anger some of the other trail users, which can lead to cyclists losing their access. It is not that all cyclists do not want to yield, but at certain times and on steep or otherwise

challenging terrain, it is difficult for cyclists to stop when the current yield system calls for them to do so.

Conservation is the primary focus of the Forest Service today, and unfortunately, some cyclists are seen as being ignorant to issues of conservation. Conservationists often think that cyclists building and riding causes irreparable damage to the natural environment. Actions such as jumping over obstacles or skidding the rear wheel around turns have caused some to question just how damaging cycling is to the environment. The Forest Service has apparently used this uncertainty to support its closure of cycling trails. Their argument is that if cyclists are allowed access to trails, it will make the preservation of the forest nearly impossible.

Conservation and preservation are very closely related, and both are affected by cyclists. The purpose of preservation is to keep something scarce available for the future, and to allow those who come after us to experience and enjoy it. If a person cannot enjoy or make use of the thing which is being preserved, there is no point in preserving it in the first place. Further, since humans are the only beings that can truly understand and enjoy the beauty of nature, a primary reason for conservation is to allow for the future generation to enjoy nature. There is not a single conservationist who has not seen the beauty the forest, either in person, through photograph, or through the description of it from someone who has seen it. There must be some motivation to preserve the forest, which is to allow for recreation in the future. Recreation takes many forms, cycling, hiking, camping, or simply marveling at the beauty of the forest. Even those who say they want to preserve the forest for its own sake take pleasure from knowing the forest has been preserved. It is from the awe and wonder that is felt from looking at the forest that the desire to protect and use it emerges.

The greatest advocates of conservation are those who use the forest the most. The hunters, fishermen, backpackers, rivermen, forest rangers, and cyclists make up the loudest voice for conservation. In the end, the cyclists and the Forest Service are looking for the same thing: for the forest to there in the future. The struggle between them stems from deciding on sustainable uses for the forest. Cyclists believe riding and building trails is appropriate, while the Forest Service believes there should be some stricter guidelines on usage, especially when it comes to trail building. If a civil dialogue between the cyclists and Service were to take place, the similarities would allow compromises to be made that will allow for safe and ecological cycling. When the Forest Service simply takes action and destroys the trails, cyclists become aggravated, which historically has led to retaliation, further straining the relationship between the two parties (Howell, 2011). In this situation, both the cyclists and the land are left in a worse state. The cyclists have lost access to the land, and the land has lost a very important ally for conservation.

If cyclists are to gain approval of the Forest Service, they must come to realize the issue is far too large to be tackled alone. The Forest Service is looking to interact with an organized, professional group, according to Jamie Howell (Howell, 2011). Such an organization would allow the Service to see that they are leaving the land in the hands of a group who will properly care for and use the land with sustainability in mind. When cyclists act as a group, either locally or nationally through organizations such as IMBA (the International Mountain Bike Association), it helps show the Service that there is structure, not just one guy wanting to cut a bunch of “sketchy” trails through their land. When there is organization and professionalism, the relationship can be built on trust. The Forest Service must feel as though it is leaving the land in the hands of people who care for it as much as they do, instead of someone who cares only for

the thrill of a ride. When trails are built properly, not only are they sustainable, but they also help further the cause of conservation. A professional approach to the issues at hand will point to the sustainability of cycling, which will allow the Forest Service to understand cycling is an important part of today's natural environment. Cyclists of all disciplines know that there must be a mountain to be able to mountain bike, and therefore will fight not only to keep their access to it, but will fight to preserve the forest in general.

The positive impact cyclists have extend from the forests and into the communities that surround them. In addition to being major proponents for conservation, cyclists helps boost the economy, both on a local and national scale (Clearinghouse, 1995). Perhaps surprisingly, cyclists have a substantial impact on the economy. Both the communities around popular riding spots and the national economy are positively influenced by mountain biking. On a national scale, cyclists contribute more than 136 billion dollars to the economy annually (Howell, 2011). This impressive figure includes equipment and bicycles, travel to and from riding spots, food and drink while traveling, to name a few contributions. On a smaller scale, the towns around popular trails experience and economic boost. For example, Oakridge, Oregon was a booming mining town in the early 20th century. As the natural resources were depleted, the town almost died (Howell, 2011). However, once mountain bikers discovered the trails around the town, it suddenly found new life as a sort of Mecca for cyclists. Mountain bikers will travel far and wide to ride a highly recommended singletrack, which gives little towns a chance to have economic growth that they would not have otherwise. Cyclists enjoy a good meal after a long hard ride, and so there becomes a market for restaurants in these small, out of the way towns. A look at towns with good trails around them shows an abundance of mom-and-pop restaurants, bicycle

shops, and pubs to supply the needs of the visiting cyclists. There would be no market for these types of businesses in these areas if it were not for mountain biking.

Cyclists are an important part of today's outdoor culture, and restricting the sport only causes a loss in conservation, and in the economy. The benefits of mountain biking truly outweigh the factors the Forest Service uses to close down the trails. In addition, the negatives associated with cyclists in nature can be greatly reduced if cyclists were to start practicing a few etiquette and common sense standards. This will greatly reduce the problems that give the Forest Service grounds to restrict trail access. A few simple steps include: using proper trail etiquette, building trails in an ecological way, and joining the conservation effort.

Following proper trail etiquette is a simple and easy way to help prevent negative views of cyclists. On multi-use trails, riding is truly a privilege, which can easily be taken away. It is important to help the cycling community realize that there are many other trail users, all of whom have rights on the trail. From the family with small children on a short hike to the equestrians enjoying the afternoon, multi-use trails are very well traveled, and everyone is simply looking to enjoy nature in their own way. Nothing can ruin that experience more quickly than an out of control cyclist scaring a horse or family by riding recklessly. When people feel endangered by cyclists, it is easy for the Forest Service to decide to revoke their trail rights. Cyclists can easily prevent this by understanding when the trails have the highest traffic, and avoiding the trail or at least riding with more caution during those times (Tissue, 2013). If a cyclist does happen to startle a fellow trail user, the cyclist must act calmly and not respond with anger to person they startled (Tissue, 2013). It is even more important to be apologetic and courteous to equestrians, as a startled horse can greatly injure both itself and its rider. Even before an incident occurs, it is beneficial for cyclists to be friendly to those they pass on the trail

(Tissue, 2013). Making sure all users feel safe and welcome is one of the biggest steps to keeping access for all.

Another prevalent issue is trail building. Not all cyclists are skilled at creating trails, and many simply cannot build a sustainable trail. Because of this, it is very important that cyclists take the time to learn how to build a trail that is not damaging to the environment, and will be sustainable for years to come. Through proper building techniques, trails can become works of art that are fun to ride, and also promote healthy use of nature through cycling. Features such as proper drainage, where to divert trails around certain natural elements (low points where mud is common, spots where native plant life will grow, habitats for animals, etc.), and good craftsmanship of the man-made sections all factor in making a sustainable trails (Schutz, 2006). The first step to building a trail that is ecological is to respect the land (Schutz, 2006). I know of stories of gung-ho builders who have plowed new trails right through an endangered plant. Before building, the cyclist must know the land and where it is appropriate to build, and they must take into consideration the lay of the land, and carve the trail in the way that enhances the natural landscape the most (IMBA, 2010). A good trail cannot be built anywhere in a forest; it takes a special eye to find where the most ecological path for a trail lies. After that is determined, it is imperative to have proper drainage, or else certain sections of a trail can be muddy all year long, which leads to massive erosion (Schutz, 2006). Finally, it is always best if trail building is done in conjunction the Forest Service. This allows the Service to have an input to any other ecological issues that may arise. Further, if the Forest Service were included in the trail building process, it helps to bridge the gap between the cyclists and the Service. Working together on a trail will allow that group of cyclists and Forest Service to cooperate, as well as have a chance to dialogue together about making the trails more sustainable. Keeping to these

simple guidelines instead of hacking through a garden of endangered trilliums will show the dedication to the conservation effort, and produce a longer lasting and better riding trail in the end.

These conservation efforts are the foundation for legitimizing mountain bikers as concerned and educated users of nature. The Forest Service will be more willing to work with cyclists on trail building and access as cyclists become more organized and professional. It is much easier to approach the Forest Service with requests for new trails or increased access when cyclists have already been a part of the conservation effort. Focusing on strategies with the Service to help conserve the forest will be pivotal. An important place to start is by educating the conservationists about the actual environmental impact of cycling. Don Weir, an outdoor specialist from Alberta, found that “research to date has indicated that the degree of impacts from mountain bikes, relative to those of walkers who have their own unique forms of impacts, appear to be similar” (Weir, 2000). This information can be useful in putting to rest the fears that cycling is incredibly damaging to the environment. It also further legitimizes cycling as a recreational option by showing it is on the same level as hiking when measuring environmental impact. The Service wants to see that there is an intelligent group of trail users, and educating people with these facts can help them to establish riders as an intelligent group. When cyclists are perceived as such, they will be given more power and access to the forest.

To this point, all the examples of cooperation between the cyclists and the Forest Service have been hypothetical. However, there are some real world examples of the cycling community and the Forest Service working together. In each of these cases, a group of patient, professional cyclists has approached the Forest Service in the hope of building new trails, and because of their approach, the Forest Service has been willing to help. These results did not happen overnight,

but through civil and intelligent conversations and planning, several communities were able to create a system that allowed for cyclists to have input building legal trails on public land.

Leavenworth, Washington has thousands of acres of forest surrounding it on all sides. It was home to some of the most well-established *illegal* trail systems in the country (Howell, 2011). After the Forest Service repeatedly tore down their trails, the cyclists in the community were understandably angry. Several leaders in the cycling community, a bike shop owner and a couple other well-respected riders, decided to open up a conversation with the Forest Service to see what could be done about having trails near their city. At first, the Forest Service felt there was no way to rectify the trail use situation, and so the community members looked to see if there were any towns that had a similar problem. They found one about 10 hours south of Leavenworth.

Bend, Oregon went through a very similar situation as Leavenworth. After having their illegal trails torn down on multiple occasions, the cyclists of Bend decided to work with the Forest Service to build a set of legal trails that were sustainable so that the Forest Service could have oversight in the building process (Howell, 2011). The result was a trail system with the same level of challenge as the old illegal trails, but with the protection and blessing of the Forest Service. By giving the Forest Service the job of making sure everything was sound ecologically, the cyclists were allowed to build trails that would stand for as long as the forest, instead of being torn back down in a matter of months. The balance was found: giving the Forest Service some control and oversight fostered trust that the cyclists to be ecological with the trails they built.

The residents of Leavenworth took the head Ranger from their branch of the Forest Service down to Bend to see and ride the trails, as well as meet with the ranger from Bend who

oversaw the construction of the legal trails. Using the model of cooperation that Bend utilized, the Leavenworth Forest Service allowed the construction of four legal freeride trails. In addition, Steven's Pass, a local ski slope with lift access, was given permission to build bicycle trails during the summer so that riders could use the lift to access them. Leavenworth is the second success story of what can happen when cyclists are patient and professional when dealing with the Forest Service.

Taking the principles from these examples will set a standard for the Forest Service's relationship with cyclists in the future. It is an example of cooperation and compromise, which allows for both sides to walk away satisfied. The cyclists are happy that they can ride trails they built without fear of being caught on an unsanctioned, illegal trail, and the Forest Service is happy because they know the trails have been built in the most sustainable way possible. They can also trust the cyclists to ride in an ecologically conscious manner. The relationship between the cyclists and the Forest Service is strengthened by the cooperation and civility from these projects.

Can trail access for mountain bikers be sustainable in the long run? The answer is yes, through proper respect and actions on both sides, cyclists can have access to the forest alongside all other outdoor enthusiasts. It takes patience and understanding from cyclists and the Forest Service, as well as the hikers and equestrians who use the trails, but in the end, it is a sustainable activity. Cyclists must understand that their access to the trails is a privilege, and that their actions today will affect their access in the future. The examples of cyclists and the Forest Service working together in the Northwest show that it is possible to have legal, sustainable trails for cyclists. In the end, the community and the forest itself gain great benefits from allowing

cycling. By following the examples of conservation and cooperation set today, mountain biking will enjoy a long future as a legitimate outdoor recreation in America.

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