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Closing trails to bikes would be unfair, illogical

VOICE FROM SANTA BARBARA: Steve Francis

8/11/03

There have been numerous viewpoints expressed about mountain biking on the frontcountry trails of Santa Barbara. Those against such biking base their arguments on two main reasons: trail erosion and trail safety.

I believe the erosion argument is largely a red-herring. The real damage to an ecosystem is attributable to whoever created the trail in the first place.

Once a trail exists, it will be used (and widened), regardless whether any class of users is given exclusive access. The bulk of the erosion will be caused by runoff from rainfall. It has been said that "doing trail maintenance is not a requirement of using the trails."

While this is true in the short term, if no one does the maintenance, nature will reclaim the trails for herself. The more correct statement would be "some group doing maintenance IS a requirement for everyone to use the trails."

Most people, including the U.S. Forest Service, agree that mountain bikers are currently contributing the most volunteer trail maintenance hours. Eliminating bikers' access to frontcountry trails would reduce the motivation for those bikers to contribute to those trails, leading to fewer passable trails on the frontcountry in a few years (unless the under-funding of the Forest Service is remedied).

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The safety issue is a more valid concern, but seems to be vastly overstated. In over 10 years of mountain biking and hiking around Santa Barbara, I've never seen an unsafe interaction between hikers and bikers, never seen any hikers that were less than friendly when I have been biking. I pull over to let hikers pass, and everyone I ride with does the same.

An argument based on hikers "being there first" is specious. The first road networks in the U.S. were built for bicycles, as they predated the mass use of automobiles. Bicyclists have learned to share the road with cars, and I see no reason that hikers cannot share the trails with bikes.

Mountain bikers have launched extensive biker education efforts to ensure cyclists respect hikers, and it seems that cyclists have gotten the message.

Given that recreation mountain bikers outnumber hikers, it would seem unreasonable to close trails to a large segment of the population and make the pursuit of outdoor exercise harder to undertake.

The Sierra Club's proposal, to create a new trail specific to cyclists, is a nice idea, but unless it is also close to Santa Barbara, I object on the basis that I try to avoid driving. I can currently ride to a few of the frontcountry trails -- forcing people to get in their cars to enjoy recreation is not something society should be encouraging.

Closing the trails to cyclists will also likely result in more overall traffic -- less cyclists discovering mountain biking (due to inconvenient cycling-specific trails and no local access) will likely lead to less people commuting by bike -- again, the opposite of what society should be encouraging.

While I do not believe that closures to any group are necessary, the Sierra Club would gain credibility if they were willing to compromise, such as having trails closed to hikers on odd days, and to bikers on even days. I hope that it will not come to that, and that my son will be able to hike and ride any trail in Santa Barbara as he grows up.

Steve Francis lives in Santa Barbara.

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