THE IMPORTANCE OF SINGLETRACK

From the International Mountain Bicycling Association

"Mountain biking on singletrack is like skiing in fresh powder, or matching the hatch while fly fishing, or playing golf at Pebble Beach." —Bill Harris; Montrose, Colorado

"On singletrack I meet and talk to lots of hikers and bikers and I don't do that nearly as much on fire roads. Meeting people on singletrack brings you a little closer to them."
— Ben Marriott; Alberta, Canada

INTRODUCTION

In recent years mountain bike trail advocates have increasingly needed to defend the legitimacy of bicycling on singletrack trails. As land agencies have moved forward with a variety of recreational planning processes, some officials and citizens have objected to singletrack bicycling, and have suggested that bicyclists should be satisfied with riding on roads – paved and dirt surfaced. This viewpoint misunderstands the nature of mountain bicycling and the desires of bicyclists.

Bike riding on narrow, natural surface trails is as old as the bicycle. In its beginning, all bicycling was essentially mountain biking, because bicycles predate paved roads. In many historic photographs from the late 19th-century, people are shown riding bicycles on dirt paths.

During World War II the Swiss Army outfitted companies of soldiers with bicycles to more quickly travel on narrow trails through mountainous terrain. In the 1970's, when the first mountain bikes were being fashioned from existing "clunkers," riders often took their bikes on natural surface routes. When the mass production of mountain bikes started in the early 1980's, more and more bicyclists found their way into the backcountry on narrow trails. The geometry of mountain bikes was changed to improve handling on narrow trails. At first cyclists used existing hiking trails, motorcycle trails, game trails and livestock trails. In recent years many new trails have been designed with mountain bike use in mind.

Narrow trails that are properly designed, constructed and maintained can accommodate hikers, mountain bikers, equestrians, and motorcyclists. But even the best physical structure may fail to resolve conflict arising from social values and desires.

DEFINITION OF SINGLETRACK

Today, the term “hiking trail” is an improper synonym for singletrack. It defines a type of user, not the physical structure of the trail. The Sierra Club in 1997 invented a better definition: “A single-track trail is one where users must generally travel in single file.” (The hyphenated form of the word is obsolete.)

The trailbed of singletrack trails is typically 12 to 18 inches wide. Singletrack trails tend to wind around obstacles such as trees, large rocks and bushes. Compared to roads, singletrack blends into the surrounding environment, disturbs much less ground, and is easier to maintain. The tread of singletrack is almost always natural surface, in contrast to the gravel or pavement of roads.

THE SINGLETRACK EXPERIENCE

All experienced trail users prefer narrower trails. For cyclists, it’s a favorite experience. Most other trail users similarly value this limited resource, and when they compete for it, conflict sometimes arises. Making peace on the trails requires that all trail users and land managers understand the importance and meaning of singletrack.

Land managers and trails activists need to know that mountain bikers desire singletrack for very similar reasons as hikers. Every cyclist who progresses beyond a beginner level eventually seeks to ride on trails. Why?

Most trail users want to experience a close connection to Nature. Singletracks provide this better than roads. Trees and shrubs may envelope you in a tunnel of green. Tall flowers may reach eye level and higher. The experience just isn’t the same when you are walking or pedaling on an open, wide road. When you are pedaling slowly on singletrack, you feel the wind, you smell the flowers, and you feel connected to the natural world.

Singletracks separate recreationists from the world of the automobile. Cars cannot use singletracks. Even jeeps are too wide. In some places singletracks run parallel to adjacent roads, and non-motorized recreationists will often prefer to travel the narrow trail, even though it is slower and more difficult.

More often, singletracks run far from roads, providing the transportation systems of backcountry areas. The mountain biker’s desire to ride and protect singletrack correlates with the hiker’s desire to walk through wild or roadless areas.

The higher degree of challenge inherent to singletrack appeals to many trail users.

PRESERVING “NARROWNESS”

The essential character of singletrack — the narrowness of the tread — is threatened by the

growing numbers of four-wheel-drive, all-terrain-vehicles, which have a tread width wider than that of most singletracks. These machines trample vegetation adjacent to singletracks, causing widening of trails. This greatly disturbs cyclists, hikers, and even many motorcyclists.

All singletrack users can widen these paths by traveling off the tread on adjacent vegetation. Therefore, it's important for all users to stay on the trail as much as possible.

Land managers must give high priority to preserving the narrow character of singletrack. Trail-user groups must educate their ranks about proper trail etiquette to preserve singletracks.

SHARED USE

Since the singletrack resource is highly valued for similar or identical reasons by many kinds of trail users, land managers should try to offer ample singletrack experiences. Their policy for managing singletracks should start with shared-use. Shared-use builds the family of trail users, causing a need for cooperation. Shared-use reduces the pressure to build additional trails for each type of user, thereby reducing the ecological impacts of trails.

This means that they should start with the assumption that a singletrack can and will be used by a wide variety of trail users (soon to include off-pavement roller bladers!). There may be legitimate reasons to close some singletracks to user classes (for example, Wilderness), but managers should begin with the presumption that these routes are open to every narrow travel method. Roads are not enough.

For more on sharing trails, see:

> "A Trail Of One's Own?" by Jim Hasenauer; International Mountain Bicycling Association, 1994.

For more on resolving user conflicts, see:

> "Conflicts on Multiple Use Trails: Synthesis of the Literature and State of the Practice," by Roger L. Moore; US Dept. of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration; 1994;
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> and
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> "Managing Mountain Bikes," Gary Sprung, ed.; International Mountain Bicycling Association; 1995.

All are available at www.imba.com.