

Mountain Bikes in the Boulder Mountain Parks Area

By Tim Hogan

One of the more controversial issues to be resolved in the West Trail Study Area planning process concerns the matter of mountain bike access to the Boulder Mountain Parks and surrounding lands. These comments address many of the arguments proffered by the mountain biking community for increased access to this natural area. My primary source for the mountain biking perspective comes from the website of the Boulder Mountain Biking Alliance (<http://www.bma-mtb.org/>).

Mountain biking began to emerge as a public lands issue in the early 1980s, and at that time the Boulder Mountain Parks (a separate entity from Open Space at the time) decided not to open up its lands to this new use. Then, as now, the concern was as much about visitor conflict as ecological impacts. In the last 25 years riding has become a huge industry and an activity that many outdoor enthusiasts enjoy. We now find ourselves in a position where a well organized and insistent group of riders are clamoring for access to one of the most treasured and popular natural areas in the Front Range. There is no wonder why they would love to ride through the forests and grasslands in the shadow of the Flatirons. The question is whether the most heavily used portion of this relatively small area can support mountain biking without undermining the experience of other visitors and the welfare of plant and animal communities.

Under-served: Riders claim they are under-served in Boulder. This claim is meant to draw attention to their exclusion in the Mountain Parks, but ignores the number of trails available to riders on public lands in Boulder County as a whole. (Surrounding counties provide additional opportunities.) Nearly 200 miles of trails, or 52% of non-motorized trails in the county are open to riders. [USFS numbers are skewed due to the number of trail miles in designated Wilderness Areas from which mechanical conveyance is legislatively excluded.]

The numbers for the three major public land agencies in Boulder County:

Agency	<u>Mileage [Total/Biking] (Biking %)</u>
· City OSMP	144/49 (34%)
· County OS	106/89 (84%)
· USFS	135/61 (45%)
· Total	385/199 (52%)

If Boulder mountain bikers are under-served, one might also ask why there are so many riders in the Boulder area? And why have such organizations as the International Mountain Bicycling Association (IMBA) and Bikes Belong chosen to headquarter

themselves in Boulder?

Unfair to Exclude: Riders claim it is unfair to exclude them from trails, without seeming to recognize their presence on trails effectively excludes many other users who do not feel comfortable with bikes. The high numbers of riders as a percentage of users on certain trails (Hall and Walker – 56%) reflects this exclusionary effect more than anything else. Calling for “Multi-Use-Trails” leads to trails dominated by bikes.

Ecological Impacts: The BMA website includes a review article that cites numerous studies giving ambivalent results regarding the impacts of riders vs. hikers. The author of the review states: “The two comparative studies discerned minimal differences between bicycling and hiking. These studies may not resolve the continuing debate over who does what to trails. This scientific inquiry needs to be repeated in other geographic locations, on other soils, with more passages by each user group.” For Boulder residents, a visit to Hall Ranch Open Space, and a simple look at the difference between the Bitterbrush (bikes) and Nighthawk (no bikes) Trails makes the difference in impacts dramatically clear.

In many places this may be more of an esthetic issue—trail width—than a truly ecological one. Riders are probably correct when they claim that dogs and horses have more of an impact on plants and animals than bikes.

One non-controversial point is that new trails in previously undisturbed habitat do have ecological impacts. If the mountain bike community proposes a new route between the Shanahan Mesa area and Big Bluestem, or the establishment of loop trails proximate to South Boulder Creek, these should be vigorously opposed by conservationists.

Finally, an ecological effect not usually recognized arises from the observation that “the faster you go, the smaller the area.” Ten miles for most walkers is a pretty long day. Everything else being equal, a rider would probably want something twice as far. This dynamic is another reason the demand for trails from mountain bikers is so high, and, to some extent, why the impacts of riders across the landscape is greater than walkers.

Carbon Footprint: It is repeatedly heard that a north-south mountain biking route between Chautauqua and Eldorado Springs would result in fewer miles being driven by cars, and a reduction in CO₂ emissions. Again, it is easy to understand why riders would desire such a route, but this particular claim is a bit labored. No doubt, some hardcore Eldorado residents might ride such a route on a regular basis, and many locals would ride it routinely. But the net result would be a dramatic increase in automobile use by out-of-town riders from up and down the Front Range. Such an attraction would not only result in more driving and emissions, but also significantly increase parking demand at the Chautauqua and the South Mesa trailheads – two of the most heavily used trailheads in the system. Of course, this increased demand would have both economic and visitor-management impacts as well.

Trail Work: The mountain biking community, like other off-road user groups, has learned the value of being good citizens, and has put in significant time and labor

toward the construction and maintenance of trails on which they ride. This is commendable, and in these fiscally troubled times, a real contribution. But their implicit argument that such a contribution gives them a greater right than other users is disingenuous. From the Appalachian Mountain Club on the east coast to the Sierra Club on the west, hikers have been working on trails for over a century. In my experience, this was always viewed as more of a “gift exchange,” freely given out of appreciation, rather than as a bargaining chip. To be frank, the manner in which this chip is being played by BMA and others is a bit unseemly.

Visitor Master Plan (2005) and Charter (1986): The quotes culled from the Visitor Management Plan on the BMA website recognizes “unmet desires” by the biking community, a recommendation to “consider a possible mountain bike (multi-use) trail corridor from the frontside to the backside of Mountain Parks,” and an openness to work with the biking community to explore their requests and reduce visitor conflict. There is no mention of a north-south route between Baseline and Eldorado, nor is there any mention of building new trails to accommodate riders.

The Open Space Charter placed a strong emphasis on the “preservation” of open space lands for their natural values, and made specific provisions for “passive” recreation defined by example as “hiking, photography, or nature studies;” and, if “specifically designated,” “bicycling, horseback riding, or fishing.” This categorizing of bikes as a special designation indicates that by the time riding had emerged as a significant land-use issue (1986), the city was doubtful about its inclusion as a passive activity.

Conclusion:

- A well organized and vocal sector of the mountain biking community is keen to gain access to these parklands.
- Exploring an east-west connection between Eldorado Canyon State Park and Walker Ranch may be reasonable.
- It is much harder to see how a north-south trail between Boulder and Eldorado might be routed that would not result in unacceptable visitor conflict.
- Mixing bikes with families, runners, and unleashed dogs in the passive recreation areas along the east side would be a visitor-management debacle.
- Their impact on trails is indisputable, and proposals to construct new single tracks have significant economic and ecological costs.
- It is not due to a dearth of mountain biking opportunities that the Boulder area is one of the most renowned places in the country for riders.
- Many people who enjoy a more quiet experience of the Mountain Park would be genuinely distressed if bikes were permitted.
- Not every parcel of public land needs to be available to every recreational use.

25 February 2010