

DOES CONSTITUENCY MATTER? (THE BLUE LINE)



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By Gary Sprung

I want bicycling in the Boulder open space because I care deeply about the natural environment and about the environmental movement that works so hard to protect nature. It may seem contradictory to say that, since it seems many environmentalists and hikers don't want bicycling in the open space, or at least not anywhere in the lands in front of the Flatirons. But I'm asking the hikers and nature-lovers to embrace bicyclists, to welcome us as fellows who share your love for nature and your concerns for its protection.

From the beginning of mountain biking, some have argued that bikes cause harm to nature. Bicycling does affect the natural environment, for sure, in small ways... in ways that are much the same as hiking. Science has increasingly demonstrated that the effects of bicycling and hiking on critters, on flora, and on trails are not that different. You cause impact when you're hiking, when you're riding a bike, when you're riding a horse, when you climb, when you watch the birds, when you fish or boat the rivers, and even when you stop and smell the flowers. Generally, though, such non-motorized, peaceful activities cause impacts that are trivial compared to the real threats, such as urban sprawl, weeds, and pollution.

Many people have come to understand the rough equivalence of our recreational nature impacts. The arguments against bikes today have more to do with sharing trails.

Yes, cyclists do affect hikers in ways that hikers do not affect cyclists. The difference in speed is the primary reason. There is an asymmetric nature to user conflict. Yet in most places where people have really tried to get along they have succeeded. Cyclists — even the young, hot

headed, super-enthusiastic ones — can be taught to properly yield the trail. They should not assume hikers will move aside. They should slow down when passing and give friendly notice when approaching from behind. Hikers can decide to accept that it's reasonable to share the trails with people whose activity is silent, non-polluting, muscle-powered, health inducing, and likely to breed appreciation of nature. Managers can take actions that reduce conflict. The Open Space and Mountain Parks Department recently proposed some good ideas.

Management and courtesy can go only so far and it's reasonable for hikers to want some hiking-only routes. I know how when hiking a trail with a lot of cyclists on a busy weekend, one sometimes must step off the trail rather often. Bicyclists certainly don't want access to all the trails. I want plentiful hiking-only trail resources.

But you can imagine how cyclists must feel when there are people saying bicycling does not belong AT ALL in the open space. What justifies total exclusion from the Flatirons? Are bicyclists bad?

Consider the impact of bike bans on young people who don't have the hiking background I grew up with. The conservation movement obviously must reach and teach youth, but there are obstacles. Kids play in natural places a lot less these days. The streets have become less safe to ride a bike, so kids are in cars that much more.

My young friend Jason asked me, "Have you ever played any of the new video games?" No, I spend enough time on a computer working and when I play I like to go for a hike, run, or bike in nature. "Well take a look at them," he said, "the games are super-cool, rich, fun, exciting, and entertaining. That's what kids have in their lives these days. To many young people, hiking is boring." But mountain biking, we agreed, can be exciting and challenging enough to actually compete with the huge world of indoor entertainment. And maybe some of those cycling youth might learn that hiking is cool, too. Riding horses, too.

Consider a recent, peer-reviewed article about nature experience and support for environmental organizations. A team of sociology scholars from the University of Illinois, the Nature Conservancy, and the Red Rocks Institute last year published "The Impact of Nature Experience on Willingness to Support Conservation." Studying recent outdoor recreation and visitation trends, they found that "all major lines of evidence point to an ongoing and fundamental shift away from nature-based recreation," particularly among young people. Their studies show "a steady decline in nature recreation since the late 1980s correlated strongly with a rise in playing video games, surfing the Internet and watching movies."

They found a strong correlation between hiking and backpacking and giving to groups such as Sierra Club and Nature Conservancy. "Environmental groups depend on a very narrow base of support from elite, active outdoor enthusiasts — a group that is predominantly white, college-educated, higher income, and over 35," they reported in a press release. The decline in hiking "portends a coming decline in the ranks of conservation backers.... people who engage in

vigorous outdoor sports, like hiking and backpacking, tend later to become supporters of mainline conservation groups, while those who only go sightseeing or fishing do not.”

“There’s a much broader market — more diverse and urban — that can be tapped by conservation organizations,” said researcher Patricia Zaradic. “Those groups haven’t been spoken to in a way that attracts them.”

That sounds like a pretty strong case for getting both kids and adults onto bikes in nature, and doing it close to where they live.

Protectors of nature need to pay more attention to the constituency for conservation. Most mountain bikers — okay, maybe not the armor-clad downhillers, but yes, most mountain bikers — appreciate nature and care about protecting it. We are an obvious constituency for the movement, perhaps more like the environmental movement than any other group.

Bicyclists have been enthusiastic volunteers for public lands. Some of us are learning to go beyond trail maintenance by volunteering for the wonderful projects of the Wildlands Restoration Volunteers. I think this could happen much more. Bicyclists could become a big source of new political energy for the environmental movement. The leaders of mountain bike advocacy definitely want that.

I would much rather spend my political time protecting the Earth than fighting trail closures. But I do work for bike access because I think it means so much to the future of the conservation movement. Since the beginning of mountain biking, the environmental movement — particularly its public lands and wilderness aspect — has pushed cyclists “? away. Meanwhile, motorized advocates have beckoned cyclists to oppose preservation efforts. The fact that very few mountain bikers have moved into the anti-enviro camp says a lot about the nature of the cyclists. We care about the Earth!

Can the conservation movement afford to alienate bicyclists? Do we want young cyclists to think of environmentalists as “just those people who want to kick us off the trail”? It’s time for a change. It’s time for hikers and environmentalists to embrace mountain bikers. We can build a beautiful partnership.

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