

## The Mountain Biker Dilemma:

# Love Or Hate Wilderness Areas?

by Trina Ortega

## The Hay Park singletrack

route west of Aspen, Colo., is one of those rides that stops the body from functioning properly. Starting at 8,500 feet, the trail climbs a sandy wash speckled with cobbles then gives way to a bright corridor of spruce and aspen. As it skirts the Maroon Bells-Snowmass Wilderness Area, it weaves its way up to the Hay Park Meadow, before opening up to the highlight of the ride: fields exploding with purple lupine that mirror the violet earth tones of the surrounding 14,000-foot peaks. Breathing gets shallow, pupils dilate, senses overload. >>>>



No matter the season, no matter the day, I stop in that field and take several contented breaths. I could pass on happily up there. The coroner would report: “She died of extreme peacefulness—the fast singletrack, the colorful foliage, the sweeping views; it was all just too much of a good thing....”

I learned last fall that the trail could easily have been part of a recent proposal to protect additional portions of the land as wilderness. That’s capital-W wilderness, the officially designated-by-Congress type that excludes mountain bikes.

Since I began mountain biking 20 years ago while studying Natural Resources Management at Colorado State University, I have struggled with this issue: I love undeveloped land, so why shouldn’t I fight to preserve more of it? How could I actually be against wilderness?

Like me, many riders have values that bridge environmental stewardship and a passion for outdoor recreation. As with the Hay Park ride, the surrounding wilderness adds to the spectacular attributes of the journey. That is why I believe mountain bikers can and should promote land designations other than official wilderness—land designations that protect both the land and allow mountain biking access. Ours is a low-impact, human-powered sport, and bikers should not be excluded from riding in the backcountry.

Mark Eller, communications director for the International Mountain Bicycling Association, concurs that mountain bikers can experience the bounty of the backcountry and ride with their heads high.

“Mountain biking is a quiet, low-impact sport that is compatible with being in wild places. There is a difference between wild places and capital-W wilderness,” says Eller. “Why wouldn’t I want more wilderness? If we’re talking about lowercase wilderness, great—the more the better. If we’re talking about capital-W wilderness, then it’s exclusive of other recreational users.”

In essence, mountain bikers and early 19<sup>th</sup> century wilderness activists, along with those who penned the Wilderness Act of 1964, loved wild lands for the same reasons: to escape civilization and the daily grind.

“To us the enjoyment of solitude, complete independence, and the beauty of undefiled panoramas is absolutely essential to happiness,” wrote conservationist Bob Marshall, a cofounder of The Wilderness Society, which later lobbied for the passage of the Act.

As written, the Wilderness Act allows foot traffic, horseback riding and canoeing in wilderness areas. But our chain-and-cog-driven contraptions fall under “mechanical transport” and are therefore excluded from entry.

Ralph Swain, regional wilderness program manager for the U.S. Forest Service, explains that wilderness revolutionaries were not purposefully aiming to keep mountain bikes out. When the movement took foot, mountain bikes weren’t even on the scene. Those visionaries simply were acting on behalf of future generations, Swain says.

**Left:** A rider on Trail 401 coasts on the edge of the Maroon Bells Wilderness’ south boundary. Like the trail treading the edge of the wilderness, mountain bikers balance delicately on the divisive issue of preferring undeveloped land for its riding possibilities or not supporting a wilderness designation because it doesn’t allow biking.