

"The attempt was to set aside undeveloped land for primitive recreation, and that to them was horseback riding, hiking, canoeing, non-mechanized recreation. The question really isn't 'Why not mountain bikes?' It's 'How far do you take technology?'"

The act originally preserved 54 areas comprising 9.1 million acres under the wilderness designation. Today, the United States holds approximately 107 million acres of designated wilderness, amounting to about 24 percent of the nation's land. More than half is in Alaska. The interagency website (www.wilderness.net) shows that the National Park Service manages the most wilderness acreage, nearly 44 million acres.

Of Forest Service land, 20 percent, or 36 million acres, is designated wilderness.

"That means 80 percent is open to mountain biking," says Swain, a mountain biker himself. "Mountain biking is welcome and accepted and a legitimate use of national forest lands."

IMBA is steadfast in its position on wilderness. The organization supports keeping existing protections in place. Furthermore, when mountain bike use is properly recognized, IMBA supports new wilderness proposals. On some national trails, such as the Appalachian Trail, IMBA respects the prohibition against bicycles.

But IMBA's Eller feels that there are "subtleties" on how to protect land; he advocates alternatives to official wilderness designation when considering new protections for a given tract.

"It shouldn't be this one-size-fits-all approach," Eller says.

"If people look at wilderness protection as the only way to protect the land, it's obviously very difficult for mountain bikers to have any negotiating stance," he says. "We want to make sure the lands stay protected but stay open to mountain bikes whenever appropriate."

According to Eller, one of IMBA's biggest hurdles has been "convincing people that wilderness designation is not the only way to protect the land."

Some of the alternative land protections IMBA champions are those of National Scenic Area, Recreation Area or National Protection Areas, categories that both safeguard the land and preserve local mountain biking traditions.

There are success stories in protecting land while also preserving bike access. Swain notes the James Peak Protection Area near Boulder, Colo., and trails in the Boulder-White Cloud Mountains in Idaho. Eller lists the Virginia Ridge and Valley Act, which aims to protect 55,000 acres, with valued mountain biking routes preserved in a National Scenic Area.

Compromise requires all stakeholders to come to the table with acceptable solutions and maybe even readiness for a little *quid pro quo*. Roaring Fork Mountain Bike Association, a recently formed group based in the high-use areas surrounding Aspen, has already hailed a win. Members worked with Forest Service staff from the Aspen-Sopris Ranger District and Roaring Fork Outdoor Volunteers to re-route and mark a classic cross-country ride called the Arbaney-Kittle Trail.

The association is working on a valley-wide master plan for the area from Glenwood Springs to Aspen; maps will highlight existing trails and identify potential new trail development on BLM lands and local ski areas.

One of the association's founders, Len Zanni, says coming to the table as a cohesive association has made a difference in working with other organizations and public entities.

"It's more effective to have a group of well-spoken advocates who understand the

landscape, both politically and geographically, serving as an organized, legitimate voice for mountain bikers," Zanni says. In seeking nonprofit status, the association expects to apply for grants and solicit donations to continue its work.

Whether we're in it to protect the land or get more biking opportunities, what it comes down to is that we all want lasting solutions. In the early 1980s, mountain biking was not a problem, but now with an estimated 40 million in force in the country, Eller says it's too big of a sport and too influential to fly under the radar.

On one of my rides several years ago, I followed two girlfriends up a trail that zig-zagged through the sage on public land. When the trail approached a sagging barbed-wire fence and a rusty, bullet-riddled "No Trespassing" sign, I questioned whether to go on.

As they humped their bikes over the wires, one justified, "Oh, I know the person who built this trail. He wouldn't have done it if it wasn't OK."

And guess what? I followed. I was a little curious but mostly selfish. I wanted to ride. When I think back on it, I don't recall how sweet the trail was; I remember the anxiety I had that we'd get busted and felt distraught that I'd flexed on my ethics. It was a lesson in how we should mind our manners.

Swain of the Forest Service commends mountain bikers for playing by the rules in the shared domain of America's backcountry.

"Every group must be responsible, and mountain bikers have such a good name," he says. "That etiquette is what's going to allow mountain biking to continue to be allowed." 🍌

No bikes allowed. Horsemen relax in the tranquility of the Maroon Bells Wilderness, which is flanked by mountain bike trails of Hay Park Trail to the north and Trail 401 to the south.



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