



MTBA Policy on Mountain Bike Access to Natural Areas

Purpose

This policy gives MTBA's position on environmental and land access issues with regard to off-road cycling in natural spaces, with particular reference to protected areas such as reserves, state forests, national parks, urban forests and wilderness areas.

Introduction

MTBA endorses the protection, in terms of physical and cultural heritage, of our bushland. The long-term future of these areas is not only important from a viewpoint of the preservation of wild flora and fauna, but also as important recreational opportunity areas. Recreating within bushland encourages the appreciation and support for bushland.

MTBA promotes mountain biking as a legitimate recreational and sporting activity that encourages a healthy lifestyle. Cycling provides another choice for the way in which people exercise. Active recreation assists our population to have a more healthy lifestyle.

Mountain bike riders enjoy riding through natural areas¹. Cycling through forest locations is part of the attraction of off-road cycling, being close to and experiencing nature. Mountain bike riders also want to see environmental protection; they want to continue to ride in wild places.

In all protected areas, except designated conservation areas, land managers have a charter for both conservation and sustainable recreation. Conservation and protection are balanced with the need for outdoor recreation by applying the principle of acceptable impact on the environment.

MTBA promotes mountain biking as a legitimate recreational and sporting activity that encourages a healthy lifestyle. Cycling provides another choice for the way in which people exercise. MTBA accepts that all users of natural areas will have an impact of some degree and that it is the task of both users and land managers to minimise environmental impact and ensure sustainability. Documented trail design and trail maintenance methodologies that adhere to sustainability principles will protect the environment.

Scope

MTBA's policy can be summarised as follows:

- Mountain bike riding is a legitimate non-motorised, human powered recreational land use and as such, should have equitable access opportunities compared with other users. Environmental impact and user interactions can be managed.
- Trails should be used, managed and developed in a sustainable manner so as to minimise impact on limited natural resources.
- New trail developments should be designed, in the main, as shared, multi-use and built with all legitimate users in mind.
- MTBA recognises that with the increasing sophistication of mountain bikes some situations will occur that will dictate a single use mountain bike trail.
- Land managers should adopt the minimum action or regulation necessary to resolve problems in user interactions.
- Land managers should make access decisions based on sound scientific reasoning.²

¹ A survey conducted by Wellington Park Management Trust (Tas.) found 72% of mountain bike riders visited the park to appreciate the nature and scenery - the highest reason for mountain bike riding at Wellington Park, *Wellington Park Bike Strategy*, Wellington Park Management Trust, September 2000. <http://www.wellingtonpark.tas.gov.au>

² A summary of scientific studies that compare mountain biking to other forms of trail travel, Gary Sprung, International Mountain Biking Association, 2004.

Implementation

Access

Cycling in natural areas is aligned and compatible with the generally accepted concept of 'self-reliant recreation'. It is thus significantly akin to other 'self-reliant' recreational pursuits such as camping, walking, hiking, backpacking, canoeing, mountaineering, orienteering and rogaining. Although bicycles are statutorily recognized as a vehicle, mountain bike riding has far more in common with, and has similar environment impacts as the aforementioned recreational activities than it has with motorised activities such as off-road motor-bike riding and four-wheel driving. Therefore mountain bike riding should be afforded equitable access opportunities to natural areas.

Studies have demonstrated that on correctly designed narrow trails, mountain bike riding has a comparable impact as hiking³. The placement of a trail is more critical in controlling erosion than the type of activity, even low impact trail use. Mountain bike riders tend to remain on formed trails, as such, environmental impact is confined to the localized area of the trails and less vegetation and wildlife tends to be disturbed when compared to hikers³.

Due to a variety of mountain biking styles, age range of riders and rider preferences, a wide range of riding opportunities should be provided for off-road cyclists. The variety of trails should range from single track (narrow trails less than 2m corridor width) to graded dirt roads. Single track through natural bushland is a desirable trail type^{4,5}, hence the development of these trails are important. Properly developed single track has the added advantage of minimal impact on the environment. Single track mountain bike trails, especially those with a shared use theme, should be seen as a viable method of protecting our bushland areas.

MTBA advocates that the following trails should be open to mountain bikers:

- all public roads within protected areas;
- all access roads such as management tracks, fire trails and 4WD roads in protected areas;
- all roads within wilderness areas which cannot be completely rehabilitated; and,
- single tracks should be open to mountain bikers where these trails are of suitable design and construction to enable sustained use by mountain bike riders.

Generally, shared trails are preferable to single-use trails. Shared trails build a community of trail users and shared trails reduce the need to build new trails for each different user group. However, at times, single use trails may need to be developed to cater for different styles of mountain bike riding. Not all styles of riding will necessarily be suitable for all areas.

Trail User Interactions

Everyone should have the opportunity to enjoy green, open space. Mountain bike riders, walkers, hikers and backpackers seek similar experiences of the natural environment and it is possible for them to share trails. Harmonious interactions between trail users are possible through the use of sensible trail design, education and familiarity of user groups. Familiarity and education strategies are required to allow all trail users to feel safe and comfortable with each other.

In many cases user conflict has been a convenient excuse to exclude mountain bike riders. However, it is widely reported that trail user conflict is rare^{6,7,8}, and in many cases, trail user interaction is a positive experience. Potential for trail user conflict can be minimised by a

³ The Impacts of Mountain Bicycling – A summary of the Science, Donald W. Weir, Gary Sprung and Lee Adamson ed.

⁴ Mountain Biker Rider Preferences and Perceptions in the South-West of Western Australia., U. Goeft, and J. Adler. CALM Science Vol. 3, No. 2, 2000.

⁵ Off-Road mountain biking: A profile of participants and their recreation setting and experience preferences, Gordon R. Cessford, Science & Research Series No. 93, Department of Conservation, Wellington, New Zealand. 1995.

⁶ A report to the Government on recreational trails, Ministerial Taskforce on Trails Network, Second Edition, October 1995.

⁷ Perception and Reality of Conflict: Walkers and Mountain Bikes on the Queen Charlotte Track in New Zealand. Gordon R. Cessford, Journal of Nature Conservation, 2003.

⁸ Off-Road Impacts of Mountain Bikes – A review and discussion, Gordon R. Cessford, Science & Research Series No. 93, Department of Conservation, Wellington, New Zealand,

combination of user education, including a code of conduct and trail design. It should be noted that many trails in North America and Europe are multi-use, have greater numbers of users but have virtually no user conflict issues. Mountain bikers who feel that they have some 'ownership' of the trail will allow effective peer group management of riders who rebel against the accepted code.

The least managed rule should be applied to solving user interaction issues. Managing conflict should start with educational efforts, advance to the use of peer patrols, move to time, season or location restrictions, and only as a last resort should management close trails to bicycling.

Trail Building Principles

MTBA subscribes to the trail building principles advocated by the International Mountain Biking Association (IMBA). These principles have been used to build enormously successful trail networks throughout the world. The guiding principle is that trails be sustainable, i.e. the trail^{9,10}:

- supports current and future use with minimal impact to the area's natural systems;
- produces negligible soil loss or movement while allowing vegetation to inhabit the area;
- recognizes that pruning or removal of certain plants may be necessary for proper maintenance;
- should not adversely affect the area's animal life;
- accommodates existing uses and will allow appropriate future use; and,
- requires little re-routing and minimal long-term maintenance.

Biodiversity

Due to the limited knowledge about the impact of trails on wildlife, management decisions about access should be applied equitably to all trail users.

MTBA promotes progressive conservation management policies. By permitting greater suitable patronage to natural areas, the community will perceive greater ownership and, as a consequence, value the region more highly. Conservation and protection of a region is an outcome due to this community ownership. By encouraging greater managed usage, natural areas will be preserved for our future generations. One way of encouraging users to an area, which has been demonstrated in many regions throughout the world, is by providing a desirable location for mountain bike riding.

In natural areas that have times of the year important to the local fauna or flora access should be appropriately managed for all users.

Where there are particularly sensitive environmental areas, or areas that are affected by soil-borne diseases which must be contained, all recreational access to these areas should be prohibited.

MTBA Code of Conduct

MTBA promotes the responsible use of our natural resources in order to minimize environmental impact and ensure compatibility with other user groups. MTBA encourages all mountain bike riders to adopt the internationally recognised International Mountain Bike Association's (IMBA) "Rules of the Trail".

The MTBA code is based on mutual respect for other visitors, respect for the environment and supports minimising impact on trails.

- Try not to scare animals. Respect that the forest is the home of many native species. Try not to run livestock.
- Ride on open trails only. It is your responsibility to find out where you can ride. Respect land managers decisions about closures and respect private land.
- Always give way. Bicycles are faster than other trail users. When approaching others slow to pass. Respect that they are after the same nature based experience. Be friendly.

⁹ Building Better Trails, International Mountain Biking Association, 2001.

¹⁰ Trail Solutions, International Mountain Biking Association, 2004.

- In all situations, control your bicycle. Avoid skidding, and ride within your ability.
- **Leave no trace.** Pack out everything you take in. Stay on the track. Do not cut new trails.
- **Self-reliant** mountain bikers carry enough water, snacks and basic tools to deal with common situations during their journey, They plan ahead and let others know where you they going.