

Bicycle Paths

Recreation

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'Mountain Bikers' Skid Into Run-In With Hikers

BICYCLISTS and hikers, both of whom enjoy the serenity of mountain trails, are colliding literally and figuratively over the issue of whether "mountain bikes" should be allowed in the Santa Cruz Mountains.

The problem has come to a head at Forest of Nisene Marks State Park, the 10,000-acre playground above Aptos, where a few of the hundreds of mountain bikers have become notorious for whizzing by runners and hikers at alarming speeds while chipping in a wisecrack or a hoot.

This unpleasant and potentially dangerous scenario (as well as damage to the environment caused by the bikes' knobby tires) has elicited an increasing number of complaints, and has set into motion a series of meetings aimed at finding a permanent solution to the problem.

As it stands now, the 22 miles of trails at Nisene Marks are used by a hodgepodge of recreationalists, creating a not-so-peaceful congested maze. Since June of 1985, however, bikers have been banned from all but the mostly flat portion of the park below the Aptos Creek steel bridge crossing.

The ban, which covers other state parks within the Santa Cruz Mountains, was a shock to the mostly young participants of the proliferating activity, and created considerable resentment.

"The No. 1 reason we imposed the ban was public safety," said state park ranger John Mott, who patrols both Nisene Marks and Henry Cowell. "Mountain bikers like to ramble down very steep slopes very fast (there is another group who like to go up hills), and often there is the potential for bad accidents." (Although no bad accidents have oc-

curred at Nisene Marks, one person was killed in a collision with a biker at Cowell a few years ago.)

Despite the ban, many mountain bikers — including the more reckless downhill racers — admit to using the off-limits trails. With only one park ranger on duty to enforce the ban, only the most law-abiding bikers have stayed off the trails.

"Very few riders have paid any attention to the ban," said Robert Jensen, an "uphill" rider who considers himself among the law-abiding segment. "Nisene Marks is still the plum location to ride, and if anything, more riders are using it than before. I don't know anyone who has gotten a ticket, and it would be difficult to catch a biker even if they were seriously enforcing the ban."

The outlawing of bikers from state park trails combined with the exploding popularity of mountain biking as sport (local bicycle dealers report that an amazing 50 percent of new bikes sold in recent months are of the heavy-duty mountain variety), has resulted in a paradox that nobody has supplied any answer to: Where are mountain bikers supposed to ride?

"There are very few places where it is legal," remarked Jensen, who has been a mountain biker since he was 3 years old. "State parks allow very little of it, and most of the other trails are on private property, so it is trespassing to use those."

Jensen believes the solution lies in cooperation between the bikers, who are organized into various local and national cycling associations, and the park's citizens advisory committee, which is sponsoring the current series of meetings. The first meeting was well attended and initial steps toward a possible solution discussed, but Jensen thinks it is only a start.

Sandy Lydon, Cabrillo College instructor and chairman of the advisory committee, was encouraged by the cooperation shown at the first meeting. The most promising proposal made was a new trail at Nisene Marks to be constructed and maintained by bikers themselves, an idea that has worked at Ano Nuevo State Reserve.

State parks superintendent Gerald Fialho said the new trail idea is probably the most viable alternative. "It has worked successfully before and it doesn't take much money. It just takes volunteer manpower to cut and maintain the trail."

Lydon announced the committee will again address the issue at its regular January and February meetings, and there will be another public meeting the second Wednesday in March, 7:30 p.m., at the Aptos branch library. •

—Kevin Hanson

Greg Pio



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