

Cyclists challenge ideas of what a trail should be

Singletrack advocates hit rough patches in their movement toward stewardship

BY JOSH WILSON
Special to Venture

Moved to action by rancorous trail-use conflicts, more mountain cyclists have begun taking responsibility for the well-being of the trails they depend on, embracing volunteerism and stewardship to prevent the closing of more of their beloved singletrack routes.

In the Bay Area, ROMP (Responsible Organized Mountain Pedalers) and the Bicycle Trails Councils of Marin and the East Bay — affiliates of the Colorado-based International Mountain Bicycling Association — coordinate regular volunteer trail-maintenance workdays, advocate for singletrack access, and educate their members in trail etiquette and low-impact riding techniques.

But even as bicycle trails advocacy breaks down barriers, new challenges arise. Consider the case of El Corte de Madera Open Space Preserve, just west of Woodside.

In 1985, when the Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District started acquiring the property that would become the 2,788-acre preserve, the territory was crisscrossed by logging roads and motorcycle trails. "Obviously with that kind of activity there was a natural resource degradation problem," said Midpeninsula spokesman Malcolm Smith. "We were in the process of trying to let this preserve restore itself through non-use."

What Midpeninsula didn't know was that El Corte de Madera, with its unusually steep slopes, forested runs and technical singletrack, had become a mecca for mountain bikers. But of the roughly 38 miles of trails in the preserve, only 17 were designated by the district. According to Smith,

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MIDPENINSULA REGIONAL OPEN SPACE DISTRICT

Cyclists were involved in the trail plan for El Corte de Madera, but some still wish for wilder, narrower paths.

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Bicyclists, park managers forge prickly alliance for trails' sake

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the other 21 miles hadn't been closed, but weren't exactly open, either.

"They weren't recognized as trails by us," said Smith. "To the bicycling public it was a great place to ride, but it starting turning back into the kind of place it was before the district bought it."

Safety and erosion were concerns, as were the abundance of "unofficial" routes. "We started finding that people were building their own trails, taking loppers and garden shears with them," said the district's open-space planner, Mary deBeauvieres. "We would find trees that were cut and removed or brush that was cut, to clear out some of these routes. It was getting out of hand."

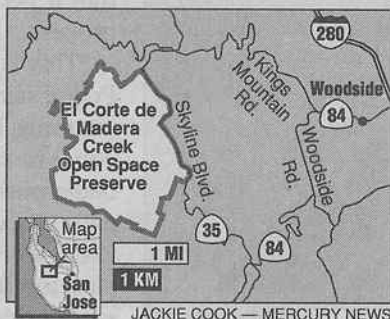
It was the sort of situation that prompts land managers to ban bikes from singletrack. But Midpeninsula recognized off-road cyclists as a significant use group for El Corte de Madera, and in 1994 the district organized a task force of mountain bikers, hikers, and horseback riders. For 14 months, the group hiked the preserve, held meetings, and came up with a trail plan with plenty of access for bicyclists.

The plan, now being carried out, has gone a long way to standardize and repair the preserve's once unruly trail network. But Midpeninsula's dependence on heavy machinery has frustrated bicyclists, who complain that even the most narrow bulldozers and trail-cutting machines overwiden singletrack, smooth out the most challenging technical sections, and have a high erosional impact.

Building by hand

Who knows best? ROMP's director of public relations, Peter Donohue, faults the district for overwidening trails and causing erosion problems near some streambeds. "We just have trouble believing their argument on erosion, especially when they turn down our offers to see what can be done with the current trails, and instead (bring in machinery)." Donohue wants more cyclist participation in building and maintaining trails, especially by hand, to preserve the narrower trails' "wild character."

Berry Stevens, ROMP's trail work coordinator, said Midpeninsula has been "very cooperative and supportive" of the one volunteer trail work



project in the preserve. The real problem is coming up with enough time, money and labor. "There needs to be a large base of skilled volunteers, and the district needs a larger operating budget to manage and train these volunteers," he said.

"The trail plan is a fair compromise," he continued, "but definitely is not what most mountain bicyclists would like, myself included. Most trails have been reworked. Some would call it sanitizing; more objectively they have been changed and the challenge they pose is different. They aren't 'technical' anymore. They are faster and require skill to ride at a faster pace."

According to IMBA executive director Tim Blumenthal, this is exactly the wrong kind of trail. "A natural trail may require less maintenance, and tends to slow cyclists down in ways that wide, flat trails don't. Removing all rocks and logs makes (a trail) into this dirt freeway. That actually increases user conflict."

These criticisms do rankle a bit. "Our emphasis is resource protection and wildlife habitat preservation," said Midpeninsula's Smith, "and when someone says you're destroying the natural scenic beauty, that is a little painful. Our staff has been doing this for years and years, and really makes the decisions on the best mechanisms for creating these trails."

But disagreements seem almost inevitable. Another case in point is the East Bay Regional Park District's decision to grade out a storm-damaged stretch of the West Ridge trail in Redwood Regional Park. "The trail had eroded down to sandstone," said parks spokesman Ned MacKay. "The park district essentially pulverized the top layer of sandstone to get rid of the ruts and make it more passable for people on horseback and on foot. In the course of doing that the trail was widened to bring the heavy equipment in. When the next rains come around the vegetation will come back; the trails are not permanently widened."

Brad Edmonds, president of the IMBA-affiliated Bicycle Trails Council of the East Bay, has a different opinion. "The grading of the West Ridge Trail destroyed a natural sandstone formation, which was one of the most striking characteristics of Redwood Park." Cyclists are also concerned, he said, about "the large amount of loose earth" on the trail, which he said impairs cyclists' steering and also could wash into creeks and down to the bay.

A time of rift

Despite the differences of opinion, groups like ROMP and the East Bay bike group continue to make use of the park agencies' opportunities for volunteer participation and public comment.

A pioneering step toward involving trail users as stewards has been taken by the Golden Gate National Recreation Area. The "site stewardship" program is launched at a time of uneasy relationships between GGNRA and the Marin cyclists who battled in court for trail access. "I just think there's a lot of ill will and hard feelings between the park and mountain bikers. Not to say that it won't happen, but I don't see it happening in the near future," said Golden Gate NRA spokeswoman Chris Powell.

Still, Todd Ourston of the Bicycle Trails Council of Marin contended that despite some unhappiness over the trail plan, his group "remains committed to working positively with all land management agencies in Marin."

That sort of cooperation is the goal of site stewardship, under which, said program director Sue Gardner, a group of people will continually work the same part of the park, maintaining not only a particular trail, but the surrounding habitat.

"Community members can feel like they have a real sense of ownership, an investment in improving the environment," Gardner said. "... Instead of just walking through the park and kind of visiting it, you actually participate in the park in a meaningful way."

Such a change in roles plays into the desires of many park users. "Mountain bicyclists are new to trail access and trail politics," said ROMP's Berry Stevens, "and we are just beginning to learn the ropes and take our fair place in the trail community; we are the stewards of the open spaces in the future as the Sierra Club hikers were for a past generation. We need to become more skilled in that role."