Comments on U.S. Forest Service Project: Trails at Mena (63649)

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I will focus in on numerical data and projections supplied in the project, but other comments follow below.

1. The proposed Ward Lake Zone includes a few arrows as if to depict casual bike trail impact but .3 miles/acres means that if all the trails were uniformly spaced they would be an incredible 26 feet apart (even less if roads and infrastructure are included). This means the Ward Lake Zone is essentially a no wildlife zone. It is hard to imagine that significant erosion will not occur.

The Forest Service must know that they are turning over 1570 acres of forest (minus state land) to an urban theme park managed by who? State Parks, the Forest Service, private concessionaires?

The basic model seems to be akin to ski resorts which charge high equipment rental, trail and lift fees to remain in business even given free usage of public lands. Are there realistic models for this kind of bike/lift enterprise, preferably good academic studies?

1. The other three project areas all assume that bike trails have only a “disturbed” corridor 8 feet wide. Perhaps as a footprint but are there references for this parsimonious usage of trail land. My experience with 1500 miles of the Appalachian Trail and elsewhere is that the user footprint is generally wider – downed trees, bikers and hikers creating new paths regularly, etc. Besides it seems as if the path of the lifts and resulting access roads are not included. The wildlife disturbance footprint is much more than 8 ft. There must be university studies that show the wildlife footprints of these projects. I would expect that a bicycle going 20 mph through woods is more disruptive than 8 feet, maybe 80+ feet?
2. Is there a survey of expected users? I am assuming that the lifts will cater to bicycles in some fashion, like skis and poles, but in a much less proficient fashion. Is it expected that bike riders will scoot down a 15 mile downhill in half an hour, jump on a lift and repeat for hours on end?
3. 4 lifts seems excessive given the extremely high cost per lift (3 to 12 million each) and a project in its infancy with minimal to non-existent experience in managing such an enterprise. A more prudent approach would be to proceed with the Ward Lake Zone to assess the viability of bike theme parks on public land, before committing to any other land use.

In addition, I ask

1. That no bike trails, chairlifts, parking lots, or other developments be built in the Ouachita National Forest in area to the north and northeast of Highway 88. I also support keeping the overall footprint of this project as small as possible to prevent the loss of wildlife habitats, and also to not unnecessarily eliminate or impact other uses of the Ouachita National Forest in this area.
2. I request that the parties financing this project provide individual surety bonds for each of the four phases, so that if any single phase becomes economically unsupportable, there will be financing available to remove constructed lifts, supporting infrastructure, and provide for any necessary restoration work.
3. I ask that this new bike development be done in a way that keeps traditional forest uses and does not diminish them. For example, I ask that the hiking only trails in Queen Wilhelmina State Park, remain as hiking only. We also request that the Ouachita Trail, which is now hiking only from Highway 88 in Arkansas to Highway 259 in Oklahoma, remain as hiking only. Hiking and biking can be compatible even mutually beneficial with low density usage but the 500 car capacity in the lodge parking lot suggests that low density usage is not the expectation.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this project.

David Peterson

