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Comments: ELECTRIC MOUNTAIN BIKES - FRIEND OR FOE?

When a long-time mountain biking friend of mine came down with cancer a few years ago he struggled back to health, minus one lung. Someone suggested he try one of the new high-end, full suspension, electric mountain bikes. So he did, discovering he could once again ride almost as fast and long as he did before his cancer surgery. Bike life reborn.

"This has changed my life," he says with enthusiasm. "Living here in Moab, I'm surrounded by some of the best trails and riders in the world. Now I can once again go out and ride with my friends."

Since I'm now 70 and have been mountain biking for almost 40 years, I simply can't power up steep hills like I used to. So I started riding less and less. Then I got an e-mtn bike and it changed my life. I now ride several days a week, and am able to go much farther afield to avoid the crowded trails near roads.

I have heard many comments about electric-assist bikes, almost all by people who have never ridden one and have no idea how they actually work. These people remind me of gun advocates: strong opinions without really considering any actual facts. So here are some facts.

First, yes, e-bikes have motors attached. These motors are much like adding power steering or power brakes to a car. E-bikes are NOT mopeds, where you use the pedals to initiate forward motion and then the motor takes over. There is no throttle or power control. If you stop peddling while going uphill, the bike stops. Period. There is no motor pushing you forward if you stop peddling. These are electric assist bikes-the motor is only there to make the peddling easier, NOT replace it.

Secondly, while you definitely have more power at your disposal when riding an e-bike vs. a non power-assist bike, that power is regulated by peddling and does NOT provide sufficient power to "spray rooster tails of dirt and rocks from the rear wheel" as purported by opponents. E-bikes no more tear up trails than a normal mountain bike does: it's all dependent on the rider.

Which brings me to my third point: trail etiquette. We've all seen the downhillers, clad in moto-cross armor careening down steep trails, locking up the rear wheels as they skid around corners, turning smooth trails into a chaos of dust, ruts and gravel. These riders will tear up any trail, and they don't need motors. While frowned upon in some areas, there are no rules, regulations or laws about this activity-it's just a part of mountain biking. I have heard the arguments against e-bikes that you can (and will) spin your tires while going up hill, thus digging up the trails. This is pure nonsense. Yes, you will certainly have more power at your disposal that if you were riding a non-powered bike, but there is absolutely no reason why would ever want to spin your rear tire while going uphill. Indeed, the object is to not spin your rear tire if you want to move forward.

Fourth: the environment. In many areas-such as where I live in Oregon, the trails go straight up and straight down. This means that unless you are willing to grind your way up the steep, relentless dirt roads or trails to the top before enjoying a long technical descent, you must arrange a car shuttle to take you to the top.

As this becomes more and more popular (and I'm personally not particularly happy about this trend), it is not uncommon to see lines of big diesel pickups laden with mountain bikes driving up the dusty dirt roads to the top of the trails so that the occupants can hop on their bikes for the trail gouging descent. There are no "rules" or laws against this, yet it is the environmental equivalent of a cross country moto-cross race.

Fifth: noise. E-bikes are completely silent. There is no noise, no pollution, no smoke, no carbon emissions-nothing but smiles. Unless someone looks closely at my bike they would never know that it had a motor.

Several government agencies (local, state & federal) and bicycle organizations have begun enacting (without any real public input or legal precedent) a hodge-podge of rules and regulations concerning electric mountain bikes. The BLM simply decided that they were "illegal" on BLM land (even though motorcycles, ATVs, monster trucks, horses and other various earth-terrorizing vehicles are not).

One proposal sets forth different "classes" of trails where e-bikes are allowed. This is perhaps the dumbest solution I have ever heard-similar to deciding what kind of car can drive on a certain road. Got a Smart car? Drive right here. Cadillac? Nope, can't use this road. Adding classifications to trails will only confuse the issue, and even then, who will enforce these ridiculous rules?

It seems to me that there is a VERY simple answer to the electric mountain bike question (is it a motorized vehicle or not?): if it will propel you uphill without peddling, it's a motorcycle. If you have to pedal to keep it moving, it's a bicycle. Period. It's irrelevant whether it has special gearing (making it easier) or electric shifting (making it quicker) or an electric assist motor (making it faster): it's still a bicycle.

It really doesn't matter how long your bike is, how tall it is, how much it weighs, what components it has or what color it is. If you start trying to regulate specifics of bike design you are opening up a huge pandora's box of unnecessary problems. It is perfectly legal for me to shuttle a "mountain bike" with big steel cleats on the tires to the top of a mountain and to skid around every corner on the way back down. But if I want to use a bike with a small, silent electric motor to help me pedal up that same trail, some people cry fowl.

I have now ridden several hundred miles of trails in four states and two countries on my e-bike and have not heard one murmur of protest. In fact, I have had nothing but interest in my bike, with almost everyone thinking it is very cool. Of course once they take it for a spin, the hook is really set and they want one.

The bottom line is that e-bikes are here to stay. They are fun and hurt no one. Just as skateboards, rollerblades and unicycles are proclaimed by the politically correct police (PCP) to be a dangerous nuisance, so too with e-bikes. It's easy to heap unsubstantiated scorn on something new without any real facts-ignorant people do it all the time.

Can't we all just get along?

end