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First name: Mike

Last name: Vandeman

Organization:

Title:

Comments: "Impacts on and along trails result from the trampling of hikers and pack stock and the effects of trail construction and maintenance. These impacts include the loss of vegetation and shifts in plant-species composition, exposure of bare mineral soil, soil compaction, and changes in microhabitats, including changes in draining and erosion. Where trail construction is carefully planned, most of these changes are of little concern; although pronounced. Most changes are localized and deliberate." Dawson and Hendee, 2009, pp. 423-4

"The study revealed that almost 80% of extinction research in the country focused on cute marsupials such as kangaroos and koalas, whereas not-so-adorable critters such as bats and rodents held only 11% of research time, despite making up almost half of the species examined." <https://mygoodplanet.com/selective-fashion-going-extinct/>

Scientists are generally honest, in what they say but not in what they choose to study. Despite a diligent search in one of the world's best libraries (the University of California, Berkeley), I wasn't able to find a single book or article on the harm done by trail-building. I notice that whenever I see a picture of a trail, I think "Oh, a trail so what?" It takes an effort of will to think about the wildlife habitat that was destroyed in order to build the trail. And the habitat destruction isn't restricted to the trail bed. As Ed Grumbine pointed out in Ghost Bears, a grizzly can hear a human from a mile away, and smell one from five miles away. And grizzlies are probably not unique in that. In other words, animals within five miles of a trail are inhibited from full use of their habitat. That is habitat destruction! If there were no trails, we would be confronted by our own destructiveness every time we entered a park. It is only because the habitat has already been destroyed for us, that we can pretend that we are doing no harm.

So why do we build trails? It doesn't take much experimenting with cross-country travel to see that it is extremely difficult. There are many kinds of hazards biological (e.g. poison oak, poison sumac, poisonous snakes, etc.) and physical (e.g. blackberry thorns, cliffs, rivers, volcanos, etc.). It is extremely difficult to find a passable-, much less an efficient, route. It would be very difficult to communicate our location to emergency personnel, without trails. So it is unlikely that we will eliminate trails in the near future, except from areas designated off-limits to humans.

That leaves only one option compatible with wildlife conservation: minimizing the construction, extent, and use of trails. For example, banning the use of off-road vehicles, such as bicycles, skateboards, and motorcycles would greatly reduce the use of the trails, the distance that people travel, and the harm done to the soil and the small animals and plants found on, under, or near the trails. Mountain bikers complain about being thereby "denied access", but of course they can still walk. They just can't easily travel as far as they can on a bike. On public land, especially, all trail construction should be thoroughly studied, and should be built only when officially authorized by the land manager, and only by thoroughly educated, authorized builders.

By far the greatest threat to wildlife habitat in so-called "protected" areas would appear to be mountain biking. Motorized vehicles are generally not allowed in natural areas. The most destructive use of trails is mountain biking. Knobby tires are perfectly designed to rip up the soil. Mountain bikers, with rare honesty, call their riding "shredding". They also have a much greater range than hikers, and probably also equestrians. They also frequently ride illegally where bicycles are not allowed.

All of this is well known. But what isn't so well known or understood is the mountain bikers' drive to build ever more trails. All park users seem to have a need for a certain amount of stimulation. A hiker or equestrian can satisfy that need on a relatively short trail, because they experience it fully, through all of their senses. They can

stop instantly, and turn 360 degrees, seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, or tasting anything they choose. Mountain bikers, on the other hand, tend to ride fast, often as fast as they can, seeking what they call an "adrenaline rush". But even when riding slowly, the very nature of a bicycle requires one to focus almost 100% of his or her attention on the trail immediately in front of their front tire, or they will crash. The consequence is that they have to travel several times as far as a hiker, to have the same quantity of experience. And after riding the same trail a few times, they get bored with it and want to ride a new trail. And when they've ridden all their local trails, they begin demanding more trails to be built. Or, if their demands aren't met, they begin secretly building illegal trails, or building illegal "trail features" (jumps, berms, log bridges, teeter-totters, etc.). The rain-forests of North Vancouver are the iconic example (which destruction continues to this day), but it has been emulated by mountain bikers all over the world.

If this were a matter of a few sites or a few trails, it wouldn't be too significant. But it's not restricted to one area. Mountain bikers, apparently ignorant of conservation biology, have destroyed thousands of square miles of wildlife habitat, and show no signs of slowing down or recognizing the harm that they are doing. IMBA (the International Mountain Bicycling Association) has been promoting mountain biking tourism, claiming that mountain biking brings economic benefits to communities that embrace it, of course ignoring the economic value of the intact ecosystems they are destroying. The mountain biking infrastructure is called "epic trails", "ride centers", "bike parks", etc. They bait their demands with offers of volunteer trail-building and trail maintenance. (But, of course, their vision of a good trail (lots of humps, twists, and turns) is quite different from what the other trail users want.)

In the San Francisco Bay Area, projects were created to build two huge trails -- the Bay Trail and Ridge Trail - each several hundred miles long, circling the bay near the water and along the ridgetops. The community enthusiastically voted for these projects, waxing poetic about all the "new opportunities" to "connect to nature". Actually, no new habitat was created, and the trail construction (which still continues) destroyed an enormous amount of habitat. Nevertheless, I never heard anyone complain about this. People seem to think that trails somehow thread their way through the wilderness harmlessly, without touching it.

Haven't we already destroyed far too much wildlife habitat? Isn't it time we started telling the truth about trails and our construction and use of them?