

# face•off



## Mountain bikers bring more to trail than ruts

By JONATHAN MAUS

There's a good chance you know a mountain biker. They're a diverse group that make up a large portion of our trail user community. I know riders who are real estate agents, professors, hikers, graduate students, teachers, architects, hair-dressers and auto mechanics, just to name a few. Most mountain bikers I know also enjoy hiking; maybe that's why they're courteous and respectful when they come across hikers on the trail.

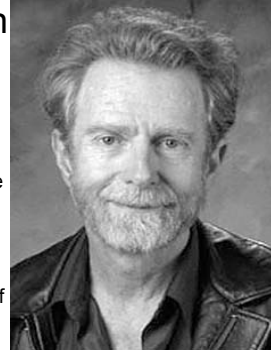
But not all mountain bikers are model citizens; a few are less considerate than others. Come to think of it, bad apples exist in every user group. However, irresponsible trail use by a few bad apples, does not justify throwing away the entire bunch. But this is precisely what a few hikers calling themselves "SafeTrails" hope to do. Their goal is to try to convince you that all mountain bikers are hell-bent, adrenaline-crazed, downhill racers that are out to run over anything that gets in their way. Luckily, you know better.

If you've been out on the trails recently, you've seen that mountain bikers have actually done more to make our trails safe than any other group. Who posts signs at trailheads reminding users about proper right of way techniques? Who implores trail users to not use the trails when they're muddy? Who passes out bells to cyclists to help make their presence known on the trail? Who spends their weekends on the trails talking with hikers and bikers about their concerns? Who organizes community-wide events to repair, rebuild and maintain our trails for the benefit of everyone? Who works with the U.S. Forest Service, equestrian groups and lawmakers to find rational solutions to trail issues? As you can see, our mountain bike community, led by the nonprofit Santa Barbara Mountain Bike Trail Volunteers, or SBMTV, is essential to ensuring a safe and sustainable future for all trail users.

The SafeTrails group is more concerned with pushing its anti-mountain-bike agenda than actually doing something to help make our trails safe. If it really cared about our trails, why have its members completely removed themselves from the political process aimed at finding sensible solutions? Despite the catchy name, its goal is not to make our trails safe but to eradicate mountain bikes from them. Like any group desperate for support, it'll try just about anything to make it happen.

One way it attempts to promote its agenda is to say our trails are not geologically sustainable for mountain bikes. The truth is, according to sustainable trail guidelines, our trails are not even appropriate for hikers! Technically, they need to be redesigned before anyone uses them. This fact was made frighteningly clear when a woman nearly fell to her death recently on a precarious section of Jesusita trail. Perhaps SafeTrails should spend more time helping us fix dangerous trails instead of wasting time with its anti-bike agenda.

Imagine if its logic was applied to the issue of un-leashed dogs (The following is only to illustrate a point and doesn't represent my true feelings): Some people don't leash their dogs while



## Trail segregation may be the best for all users

By JIM CHILDRESS

We believe mountain bikes are not compatible with hikers and equestrians on Santa Barbara County's front country trails. This is because of the combination of the character of the trails, their high level of usage, mountain bike technology and fundamental differences in the activities.

These trails are steep, narrow and very rocky with road access at the top. Manufacturers have developed specialized bicycles with elaborate suspensions and rugged frames for riding down such trails at speeds in excess of 30 mph. These bikes are essentially motorcycles without engines, are heavy and have only limited gearing so they cannot be ridden to the top of the trails. Their riders wear full body armor and helmets. The very appearance of these riders and their bikes on a narrow trail is intimidating to a hiker. To have one coming at you at 25 mph from 10 feet away, as recently happened to me, is terrifying.

Such bikers account for about 80 percent of the riders on Tunnel Trail on weekends, according to my own survey over 15 weekend days last fall. This is a gravity-driven thrill sport like downhill skiing. The front country trails have an international reputation thanks to the Internet and commercial videos that draw riders from near and far. There is nothing wrong with such sports and their participants can be good people. However, this sport is incompatible with hikers seeking solitude and exercise. There is a safety issue as documented by several reports of collisions in the last year and numerous reports of near misses avoided only by hikers jumping off the trail. Equestrians were driven off long ago by the danger of speeding bikes scaring horses. Hikers, too, are increasingly avoiding these trails out of fear for their own safety.

Mountain bikers know they are taking considerable risk as indicated by the covering of armor they wear. Hikers, on the other hand, expect little risk in their activities and wear no protective gear. They also move much more slowly than bikes. The bikes also effectively destroy the solitude of the trail when they come racing by, rattling loudly with their bells ringing. Although the cyclists who stop to talk can be friendly and are likely well-intentioned, this, too, is destructive of the solitude. Hikers rarely do more than greet each other when they meet on the trail.

Mountain bikes are also destructive of the trails. To control their speed they skid the cleated tires to brake, displacing rocks and loosening the trail surface. The erosive effects of water are greatly accelerated by this damage. Bikers also often ride up on the sides of trails, widening them and destroying vegetation.

One might think only fast riders should be excluded, but given the harrowing character of our trails they are not very good for most mountain bikers. The riders are predominantly of the gravity-driven, thrill-sport variety. We believe separate trails would be appropriate as is done for other thrill sports like

poses a serious safety risk, not to mention their barking is loud and detracts from my experience of nature. The trails are just too narrow for dogs and humans to happily co-exist without some degree of interaction and discomfort. Therefore, all dogs should be banned from our trails.

This irrational hypothetical scenario is actually quite similar to SafeTrails' case against mountain bikes.

So, if you'd like to help keep our trails safe and beautiful, I hope you don't stoop to pointing fingers and divisiveness. Instead, contact the SBMTV, and help out with its Trail Education Program, or sign up for its upcoming trail maintenance event and see what it feels like to be part of the solution instead of part of the problem.

*Jonathan Maus is a concerned hiker, mountain biker and new father.*

access has been limited in many areas where trails are heavily used, as shown on the [www.safetrails.net](http://www.safetrails.net) Web site.

And some responsible elements within the mountain biking community agree. Referring to gravity cycling (downhill and free-ride bikes), Richard Cunningham, editor at large of Mountain Bike Action magazine, says, "... neither represents passive use of natural resources, nor can they be considered remotely compatible with other nonmotorized user groups like hikers, equestrians, or even your average mountain bikers."

Mountain bike advocates have long contended the problem could be dealt with through education. This method can no more work on our trails than it would work on our highways for dangerous drivers. We have had years of education on our trails and we're still having many serious incidents. Closure of these trails would greatly improve the experience and safety of the majority of users.

*Jim Childress is a representative of Safetrails.net.*