

Contested trails

By NATHAN WELTON
South Coast Beacon
Nathan Welton Photos

March 13, 2003

Click [here](#) for editorials on this issue

CONTESTED TRAILS



Santa Barbara's Tunnel Trail shoots up between the peaks of the Santa Ynez Mountains like a space-bound rocket. The silver miners who built the rocky path surely never imagined their road to the Gibraltar mine would ever become popular for anyone — it was a steep, unrelenting and narrow road to just about nowhere. But now, on a typical Saturday afternoon, hordes of SUVs fight for parking at the bottom, hiking occupants spilling out across the street, while truckloads of mountain bikers drive to the top and pedal down the slopes as fast as possible.

With the trail cluttered with lines of users, someone is bound to get annoyed with someone else.

Tunnel Trail is at the center of a heated debate over who should be allowed to recreate on the fabled front range. Hikers believe a new breed of mountain biker is responsible for massive trail erosion and safety hazards, while cyclists contend inconsiderate riders are just a few bad apples and that the problems can be mitigated through education and outreach.

But the real heart of the problem may be the popularity of outdoor pursuits in Santa Barbara. Traffic jams abound in the woods, and the chance of people butting heads is growing.

"Santa Barbara is growing as tourist destination," said Jonathan Maus, a spokesman for the Santa Barbara Mountain Bike Trail

Volunteers, or SBMTV, a local group that rallies mountain bikers around outdoor community service efforts. "There are large numbers of people (on the trails), and that's a concern."

In addition to the popularity of outdoor pursuits is the popularity of the 45-pound downhill bicycle, which compress up to 10 inches, has been blamed by hiking groups for the problems.

Downhill bicyclists tend to expedite erosion by customizing trails to make them more challenging, according to biologist and founder of SafeTrails, an organization aimed at closing the front side to bikes.

But that's not to say bikes cause all — or even a majority — of the damage, and according to Kelly Kellogg, a local district ranger for the U.S. Forest Service, knobby tires are no worse for the trails than horses' hooves or hikers' boots.

"On the whole, there's not a lot of difference between the (impacts of the) primary user groups," he said. "All three can cause damage: a big heavy horse on a wet trail can do a lot of damage, a biker skidding can create a v-groove, and hikers can get off trail and wander through the vegetation."

Kellogg's position is bolstered by a wealth of scientific literature indicating that all users contribute to the breakdown of trails. One study, published in a 2001 issue of the Journal of Environmental Management, found hikers and bikers cause comparable vegetation loss and soil degradation. The researchers ran bikes and hikers down different trails equally as steep as Tunnel, and 500 passes later noted no significant impact difference.

It may be that the real culprits behind the poor state of Santa Barbara's paths are Mother Nature and a political system that starves the Forest Service of money, according to Kellogg. "Most of our trail problems out there result from the natural cycle of heavy rains and the lack of maintenance dollars to maintain the trails and correct the problems," he said, explaining that budget cuts have resulted in trails falling into disrepair.



cuts have resulted in trails falling into disrepair.

"Our funding has steadily declined for the past 10 years," he said, noting that building new trails was not an immediate option due to finances and protracted environmental review processes.

"I use Adventure Pass money to do (minor) maintenance, and then I rely on volunteers," he said.

A significant amount of trail work comes from the cycling community itself, and Kellogg acknowledged his district organizes 20 volunteer weekends per year. Mountain bikers, equestrians and hikers heavily support local trail-maintenance activities.

"Mountain bikers have even done work on Rattlesnake Canyon, and that's not even open to bikes," said Maus, adding that the trail is one of the most heavily worn in the area.



Aside from erosion questions, another complaint is the risk of collisions on multiuse trails.

"I just don't think downhill bikes are compatible (with Santa Barbara's trails)," said Childress. "The bikes are made to be ridden really fast, and the technology hasn't stopped. Next year's bike will be faster and will go over rougher terrain."

Local mountain biking activists acknowledged the complaints and said they are working to solve the problems. They said they've already seen positive results from passing out miniature cowbells to bikers at the top of trails to warn hikers, and from patrolling the top of the mountains on the weekends doing outreach and etiquette education and telling bikers to turn around after heavy rains.

"There are a few people who are really causing a problem because they're basically riding their bikes like a bunch of psychos, and they need to be stopped," said SBMTV's Maus. "Some of them put a bell on their bike and think it gives them carte blanche to zoom down the trail, and that's not right."

To smooth things over, trail user groups are having quiet roundtable discussions with the Forest Service to discuss compromises, including rebuilding trails to make them more sustainable.

Chuck Anderson, SBMTV's president, has attended trail construction conferences across the nation, and has a handful of suggestions that would allow local trails to resist erosion, maintain the perceived difficulty for cyclists while slowing them down and increase visibility around blind corners.

"If you build it right, the trail user doesn't even realize you've done it because it looks natural, but it's something you've engineered to control your users," he said.

He explained that design modifications include cutting back vegetation on corners and adding big boulders on the trails to force cyclists to slow down.

If redesign or education doesn't improve the situation, another possibility would be to build a down-hilling Mecca near Tajiguas that would be so alluring that cyclists would happily drive out of town.

"What we'd put in there would make Tunnel Trail look like a paved sidewalk," said Anderson. "If you design a trail specifically for downhillers, they'd be clawing over themselves to get out there."



Other options are more extreme: some call for biker-only and hiker-only days on the trails, while others — like those advocated by SafeTrails — ban bikes entirely, a solution the cycling community doesn't believe is appropriate.

"If someone were to get hurt, it would be an unfortunate situation that obviously the SBMTV would be totally bummed about, but I still don't think that would be enough to ban an entire group of people from the trail," said Maus. "If someone gets run over on State Street,

you don't ban cars; if a surfer gets hit by a boat you don't ban boats. It doesn't make sense. It really just comes down to self-regulation and responsibility, and we need to ride responsibly."