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## The War for the Future: Mountain Bikes and Golden Gate National Recreation Area

If there is one genuine contribution that the USA has made to the application of the principles of democracy, the most likely candidate is the national park. Prior to the Age of Enlightenment, the eighteenth-century intellectual (and ultimately social) revolution that insisted individuals possessed natural rights and added the relationship between the governors and the governed to human affairs, the idea of a park owned and used by the people was unknown. In most cultures, especially monarchies and other hereditary governments, parks belonged to nobility and the wealthy, and were kept and maintained for their use alone. Common people were excluded from designated lands, often on the penalty of death. Many stood outside the boundaries of such areas and looked in with envy, conscious of the wealth of natural resources and aesthetic pleasures within and equally aware of the huge price to be paid for violating the liege's prerogative. Such parks, like the forests set aside for royal hunts, served as manifestations of power, markers of different standing in a society riven by social distinctions. They were also the flashpoints of class-based tension. The story of Robert of Locksley, the twelfth-century English gentleman who, as Robin Hood, took to the woods after defending a man who killed a deer on restricted land to feed his starving family, illustrated the tension inherent in traditional private parklands (Gilbert 1912, 11-23).

In American ideology, the crucial feature of national parks was the principle of their openness to all. In the eyes of supporters, national parks were testimony to the patrimony and heritage of a country that intended to reinvent the relationships between government and its people. During the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth, people who professed goals of community saw in the national parks not only affirmation of

their nation, but a clear and distinct way to articulate the prime assumption of their time: that a society's institutions should serve the economic, social, spiritual, and cultural needs of its people. This principle, deeply ingrained in the concept of national parks—if not always in the motives behind their creation—became an underlying premise in the evolution of American conservation.

Democracy connotes the concur-

rence of the majority in decision-making, but historically national parks have served a much smaller constituency: the privileged classes of the middle and upper-middle class who accepted the idea of conservation and enjoyed the wealth and leisure to enjoy the parks. By the 1960s, the USA had begun a transformation that asked its national parks to meet new psychic and cultural needs. People who were not far from poverty could regard national parks as trophies for the class of people who got all the perquisites American society offers. The response to that sentiment created the latest in a series of reshaping of the intellectual boundaries of inclusion in the National Park System. One dimension of this became the concept of “parks for the people, where the people are”—an idea attributed to Richard Nixon, but which had its genesis in Lyndon B. Johnson’s Great Society programs (Rothman 2000, 33-64; Foresta 1984, 169-180). From this came urban national recreation areas, which gave recreation a pre-eminence in the park system that it had not earlier achieved.

In this respect, Golden Gate National Recreation Area became the first national park of the 21st century. Its mission, no less than to be all things to all people all of the time, reflected the changing demands of the American public and left the Park Service with the inherent dilemma of determining boundaries for types of use within the park. The park was created atop prior public and private

patterns of use that gave users proprietary feelings about the land in question. Very often vocal representatives of communities in the area, these citizens and taxpayers had to be part of the management equation. Such situations offered a different picture of national parks, as places that combined a sense of national destiny with the needs of local users—people who hang-glide among them—while simultaneously protecting traditional park values.

Golden Gate became the scene of a cultural struggle that articulated the fundamental difficulty of melding these complicated roles. Despite the heavy weight of preservationism in the scholarship about the Park Service, one crucial dimension of agency strategy has always been constituency building. Until the advent of that cultural fault line in American society which was inaugurated by a combination of the Microchip Revolution and MTV, the Park Service relied on a supportive public with whom it shared general goals. The changes in world culture in the past twenty-five years have made that older constituency a demographic relic, valuable support that is dwindling in number and indeed in cultural significance. In a “Nobrow society,” as the writer John Seabrook calls it, where everything is equal in its claim to be unique, the idea of specialness of experience sounds hollow (Seabrook 2000, 210-212). In the new America, people define their own values. For the Park Service, this resulted in conflict with

groups who logically fit under the agency tent, but for reasons of class, cultural position, and other complications, have become adversarial.

One of the best examples of this conflict occurred at Golden Gate and the nearby San Francisco Bay Area (Figure 1). There, mountain bikers, a constituency that the national parks will need in the future, grappled with the agency over the use of trails. When the national recreation area was established in 1972, bicyclists made up only a small percentage of park users. Bicycling was then considered mainly a child's activity. Among adults, only the unusual, adult commuters, and enthusiasts rode bicycles. As Americans aged, bicycles fell by the wayside. Between 1975 and 1985, Judith Crown and

Glenn Coleman observed, "many aging buyers of ten-speeds hung up their road bikes in garages, not far from the fondue pots and Pocket Fishermen." American bicycles were largely made by Schwinn and Huffy, suitable for youngsters but hardly the raw material of adventure. Even the famous Raleigh ten-speed was little more than a basic transportation device. The advent of mountain biking in the early 1980s revolutionized bicycling and created a new sport with much symbolic cachet. Mountain bike races became cultural events that expressed a heightened individualism, and the races helped build constituency. Mountain bikes were carefree and even anarchic, and they allowed baby boomers a taste of the freedom of their youth, symbolically



**Figure 1. The Marin Headlands and the Golden Gate, looking south towards San Francisco.**

located in the anti-authoritarian 1960s. To the generation raised on environmentalism, mountain bikes offered another advantage: they gave riders a claim to environmental responsibility as well (Crown and Coleman 1996, 114-115).

Mountain biking had its genesis in the Bay Area, which Gary Fisher, Joe Breeze, Charlie Kelly, Michael Sinyard, and Tom Ritchey, who together founded the sport, called home. Mount Tamalpais was the center of the universe to mountain bikers, the place from which their cultural ethos sprang. Converting bicycles to hard, off-road work meant going back a generation to the sturdy, thicker bikes of the 1950s with their balloon tires. Known affectionately as “clunkers,” these became the progenitors of mountain bikes. By 1977, Joe Breeze had already built a frame tailored to mountain riding; within one year, Fisher and Kelly were selling items called “mountainbikes” for \$1,300 apiece. By 1982, Michael Sinyard and his Specialized Bicycle Components had produced the Stumpjumper, and sold 500 of them at a New York trade show in February 1982. The “Rockhopper,” an inexpensive version of the Stumpjumper at \$399, quickly became the most popular of the new bicycles. By the middle of the 1980s, mountain biking had become a fad with particular attraction for disaffected youth (Crown and Coleman 1996, 116-130; Berto

1998, 21-27).

At Golden Gate, mountain bikes presented a new dimension to the on-going questions of park and constituency management. Adjacent to Mount Tamalpais State Park (and, indeed, with the state park inside its legislative boundaries; Figure 2), the national recreation area was close to the center of the mountain-biking universe. Bikers quickly discovered the park, and their presence challenged other users. Their new technology visibly redefined the outdoor experience and etiquette. Instead of being green, brown, and understated, mountain bikers seemed loud and brash, adorned in their bright blues, reds, and yellows. Mountain bikes freed cyclists from the roads, allowing them to ride the same trails where people rode horses or hiked. To those who had long enjoyed the trails, mountain bikers seemed to crash through the woods without respect for others. This led to the inevitable: a series of on-going conflicts between users with equally valid claims to park trails, but little tolerance for one another. Another clash of cultures in which the Park Service was to serve as referee began.

The hikers and horse riders quickly gained the upper hand in the hiker-biker wars, as they came to be called. Hikers and equestrians were a constituency familiar to the Park Service, and they tended to be far more sedate than bikers (Figure 3). They dressed in earth tones, were

quiet, and moved at a pace to which the Park Service was accustomed.



Figure 2. Location of Golden Gate National Recreation Area and Mount Tamalpais State Park.

Hikers and equestrians seemed to be of the age and class of the people who set park policy, who served on the Golden Gate National Recreation Area Citizens' Advisory Commission, and who attended public hearings. Mountain bikers, by contrast, seemed out of control. They were young, wore bright colors, and raced around with abandon. The parallel between mountain bikers and skateboarders, with their plaintive "skateboarding is not a crime" slogan, was clear. The difference between con-

stituencies was age and inclination. If hikers in their lightweight garb represented the back-to-nature ethos of appropriate technology that stemmed from the 1960s, best exemplified by Stewart Brand and the *Whole Earth Catalogue*, mountain bikers represented a new future, the embrace of technology to free the self in nature (Chan 1986, A3; Danz 1999, 26-35; Kirk, n.d.).

It was little surprise that the Park Service found affinity with the hikers and equestrians. A little staid by the



**Figure 3. Horseback riding: A traditionally popular activity at Golden Gate National Recreation Area.**

1980s, and unsure of itself during the Reagan-era assault on the federal bureaucracy, the Park Service held close to its oldest friends, those who fashioned the park system and who prized it for its democratic purposes—which they casually translated as being aligned with their own perspective. In a social and technological climate that tilted toward new values, the Park Service possessed few of the intellectual and cultural tools to sort out the new terrain. Despite its efforts to shape a future in urban parks, much of agency policy still focused on the crown jewels, the expansive national parks of lore. When faced with new and adamant constituencies, the Park Service relied on its past. This decision may

have been a tactical reflection of the agency's fears instead of its hopes, for by the middle of the 1980s, the Park Service was in chaos. The Reagan years were hard for all federal agencies. Without adequate resources or the chance for the new parks that remained the lifeblood of agency constituency, and under the leadership of new director William Penn Mott, who had been a potent adversary as head of the California state park department, the Park Service felt exposed and vulnerable. Only its old friends, the ones who had always saved it, seemed able to bring the agency back from the morass into which it appeared to slide (Rothman 1998, 58-63; Foresta 1984, 68-73; Godino 1988, 59-66).

Organized and influential equestrians and similar users seemed far more dependable allies than anarchic young mountain bikers.

Golden Gate was a test case for the development of a new park ideal, and the existing formulas for management did not always meet the needs of the three million people in the Bay Area. The tensions that the hiker-biker conflict created illustrated one of the primary issues that constantly haunted park managers: at Golden Gate, the Park Service continually faced the uncomfortable situation of having to divide up different kinds of uses on essentially qualitative, that is to say value-based, terms. As long as American society accepted specific ideas about the hierarchy of values—when common culture asserted that a certain kind of experience was expected from national parks areas—these distinctions were easily made and upheld. As cultural relativism—the idea that values are all the same—became one of the byproducts of the upheavals of the 1960s and their aftermath, the certainty of earlier definitions became harder to sustain. A national recreation area had many of the same features as a national park, but its purpose was different. Technologies changed the nature of possible experience, and sorting those differences became the Park Service's nightmare.

Public response revealed this fundamental difference in perception. By 1985, Mount Tamalpais had become a battleground between mountain bikers, the state park sys-

tem, and other park users. The conflict spilled over into Golden Gate. Harold Gilliam, a Bay Area columnist, agreed that bicycles should be allowed in the national recreation area, but advocated restricting mountain bikes in the designated wilderness in Point Reyes National Seashore. The Wilderness Act of 1964 banned mechanical traffic in wilderness areas, but the original 1965 U.S. Forest Service regulations defined "mechanical" as "not powered by a living source." As a result, bicycling was permitted in wilderness areas and bicycles did travel wilderness trails in Point Reyes National Seashore until 1985. That year, the Park Service followed a Forest Service revision of the rules that banned all "mechanical transport" from designated wilderness. The ruling set off a storm. Administrative discretion ruled out an activity with twenty years of legal sanction, biking advocates averred, precisely because the activity became more popular. The number of off-road bikes, as mountain bicycles were then called, changed the terrain, Gilliam believed, and bikers needed to abide by the rules and restrictions that governed public conduct (Frost 1985; Dickerson 1985; Gilliam 1985b; Sprung 2000; Boxer 1984; 36 CFR 4.2c, 4.3; 16 USC 1133c).

Gilliam's columns brought the battle to Golden Gate. Although Gilliam's perspective reflected a legitimate interpretation of statute, biking enthusiasts responded as if their very sport was under attack. Despite the

official designation, "Point Reyes and Golden Gate National Recreation Area are not wilderness areas in any sense," observed June L. Legler of Oakland in a response. "You have mountain bikes confused with motorcycles," Bob Shenker pointed out in a sentiment typical of biking advocates. "We are not a group of oil drillers," another insisted, linking the mountain bikers to the environmentalist ethic of the park (Gilliam 1985a; Parks 1985). The lines were clearly drawn. Despite support for the bikers in the newspaper, the Park Service had uneasy relations with a constituency that was crucial, in its demography and future voting patterns, to the future of open space in the USA.

The transformation was driven by changes in mountain bike technology. While racing initiated the development of the new bicycles, the aging of the people who might ride them contributed greatly to their popularity. Mountain bikes had larger gear ratios and more gears than the conventional three- or ten-speed machines, making it easier to climb hills and removing just enough of the physical difficulty from the activity to convert it to a recreational pastime. In essence, mountain bikes did what mass technologies had always done for the recreation user: they made an activity easier to enjoy by making it less physically demanding. For the Baby Boomers who seemed to want their youth to continue forever, the mountain bike answered a deep need. It contributed to a sense of un-

diminished vigor, the illusion that age did not need to slow anyone even a little bit.

Most mountain bikers were law-abiding adults who enjoyed the sport as recreation, but like any technology that promotes speed and daring, the new bikes appealed to youth, especially young males. They could be found careening down the roads of Marin County at breakneck speeds and soon were riding "single-track" trails and paths in Golden Gate as well as Mount Tamalpais. Their etiquette and culture were different than those of the Baby Boomers, and they became a source of contention that illustrated the difficulties of managing a national park area in an urban setting. To many of the park's conventional users, mountain bikers did not respect nature or other users of the resource. Despite organizations such as the Bicycle Trails Council of Marin, a mainstream group devoted to bridging the gaps between mountain bikers, hikers, and other constituencies, the tension in the Bay Area about the appropriate use of open spaces mounted.

The Park Service generally sided with traditional users. Mountain bikes had become popular with far more people than the brightly colored racers who defined the sport to the public and shaped park opinion about mountain biking in general. By the mid-1980s, bicycling had been reinvented as a widespread pastime. As cyclists spread through the population, a series of decisions cast their activity out of one of the pri-



mary open spaces in the Bay Area. In 1987, the National Park Service ruled that all trails in national park areas were closed to bicycles unless park officials designated them as open. This ruling gave park administrators considerably greater leeway than before on an important policy issue, allowing managers to respond to local needs but simultaneously creating inconsistency in the National Park System. It left Golden Gate with a severe problem: two active and vital constituencies disagreed and resource management and other guidelines did not offer a clear solution.

At Golden Gate, in the middle of the heart of mountain biking country, park staff made a concerted effort to fairly assess the impacts of different kinds of use. In a series of meetings and memos in early 1988, the natural resources staff assessed the impacts they believed they could attribute to different kinds of use. Dogs chased and killed wildlife, marked territory and possibly affected wildlife behavior, bothered people, and left waste. Horses started new trails, left manure on trails and in other use areas, accelerated erosion on and off trails, and deteriorated riparian areas. Bicycles and their riders widened and deepened minor social trails, made their own trails, caused ruts and water channeling in tire tracks, rode through endangered and rare plant habitats, scarred areas too steep for other users, and caused severe loss of topsoil. Hikers and other pedestrians also created social trails, disturbed

sensitive flora, initiated erosion, poached, and left garbage (National Park Service 1988a, 1988b). Assessing the collective impacts from a resource management perspective and regulating use presented an enormous challenge (Figure 4).

Local discretion forced the Park Service's hand. Despite the effort to broadly assess impact, the park remained captive of its most powerful constituencies, the environmental groups that had been its mainstay since they helped found the park in 1972. These were the single most consistent supporters of the park. After three years of assessing possible programs, the park followed NPS history and the tacit inclinations of park personnel. On October 24, 1990, Golden Gate banned bicycles from all but designated trails in the Marin Headlands and Point Reyes National Seashore. The response was entirely predictable. Protests abounded. Bikers and their friends howled at the ruling, seeing it as class and cultural warfare. "Dog owners: the GGNRA staff plans to restrict you next! Help us stop them!" read one mountain biker broadside that sought to identify other constituencies threatened by the ruling. Mountain bikers thought that they were persecuted by a confederation of older, wealthier users. "Some hikers and equestrians can't get used to a new user group," observed Tim Blumenthal of the International Mountain Bicycling Association (IMBA), a group formed in 1988 in Bishop, California, to promote re-



**Figure 4. Multiple trails and trail erosion.**

sponsible riding. "Bikes go faster and are more colorful, so it's easy to see how they can be unsettling." Statistics failed to demonstrate to Blumenthal's satisfaction that mountain bikes were hazards on the trails and he could not accept the restrictions. The lines were drawn, as clearly as ever (National Park

Service 1990a; Beyeler 1991, 37-44; Anonymous 1991; Sprung 2000).

The resolution of this issue became a question of politics. Again the letters poured in; again a combination of self-interest (enlightened and otherwise) and concern for the condition of the resource dominated the perspectives. Hikers felt threatened

by mountain bikers, and many of those who sought limits on bicycle use were people of power and influence. Their complaints addressed to the park usually were forwarded to U.S. representatives, senators, and other political leaders. Hikers also used bicycles in the park. Many of their letters supported the new policies but asked for specific exceptions for the writer's favorite biking trail. Equally as many angry letters from bike advocates reached the agency, and the ban put the Park Service in the position of siding with one constituency against another—anathema in the complicated politics of the Bay Area (Malcolm 1990; Howell 1991a, 1991b; Galland 1990).

The sheer volume of concern forced Golden Gate officials to re-evaluate their policy. After long and tortured deliberations, in December 1992 the final mountain bike policy at the national recreation area was announced. The policy kept much of the park closed to mountain bikes. In the view of Jim Hasenauer, IMBA president, the final policy was “virtually unchanged” from the original proposal. “It cuts existing riding opportunities by half,” Hasenauer observed. The Park Service offered its decision as a compromise, but many among the mountain bikers regarded the policy as victory of privilege over ordinary people. While the Park Service showed that 64% of the 72.6 miles of trails in Golden Gate were open to biking, mountain bikers pointed out that every single-track trail in the park, the narrow tracks

mountain-bikers favored, was closed to them. Mountain bikers thought that the rules discriminated against them. They were even excluded from some fire roads that NPS trucks traveled, eliminating even the widest trails within the park. The Park Service countered by pointing to erosion that bikes caused on fire roads. “There’s no good reason to ban bikes in the GGNRA,” Hasenauer exclaimed, rallying the mountain biking constituency (Hasenauer 1993a, 1993b).

The different sides had become polarized during the fray and the final policy, an attempt at compromise, satisfied no one. Golden Gate and Mount Tamalpais evolved into the “most extreme mountain biking conflict ever,” Gary Sprung, IMBA communications director, recalled a decade after the scrape. “It was ironic that it happened in the birthplace of mountain biking.” The Bicycle Trails Council of Marin (BTCM), which in 1989 organized volunteer mountain bicycle patrols to help educate bikers in Mount Tamalpais State Park and also developed a “Trips for Kids” program to take inner-city children on bicycle trips, took the lead in battling the new policy. Working with IMBA, the Bicycle Trails Council of the East Bay, and other bicycling organizations, BTCM spearheaded a lawsuit that charged that the “Designated Bicycles Routes Plan” violated the National Environmental Policy Act and the Golden Gate National Recreation Area authorizing act. The

suit charged that the decision was reached without sufficient public involvement and did not meet the terms of statute, and the supplicants requested an injunction to prevent implementation of the plan Sprung 2000; National Park Service 1990b; Hasenauer 1993a).

The mountain biking community was split into three broad categories: radical riders who flouted the system, mainstream riders who sought to work within the system, and bikers who engaged in other activities and sought to bridge gaps between the different groups. Responses to the park policy varied according to the groups' political stance. Angry cyclists cut "guerrilla trails," unauthorized paths through areas that the park designated as off-limits to cyclists. The pinnacle of this was the "New Paradigm Trail," a trail initiated in 1994 that was an overtly political statement. The trail was built in secret without government authorization and kept hidden from all but those in the mountain biking community. Cyclists used the trail for two or three years until it was discovered and destroyed. The trail became a cause célèbre for Bay Area cyclists, who regarded its development as civil disobedience and its destruction as perfidy. Wilderness Trail Bikes, which built its own bicycles, had been involved in bicycle advocacy since the beginning of fatigue bicycling. The company issued a widely reproduced broadside that championed the cyclists' cause, arguing for a strong relationship

between cycling and environmental ethics (Cunningham et al, n.d.).

The New Paradigm Trail was guerilla theater as well as a bike trail: the energy, enthusiasm, and clearly articulated perspective of its advocates signaled a constituency that the Park Service could and likely should have cultivated. The link between cyclists and environmentalism offered a new and potentially powerful constituency for NPS, but the agency and its friends rejected the concept. In response, the Sierra Club joined the agency against the mountain bikers, furthering polarizing the situation and alienating mountain bikers. Although the bicycling groups lost their lawsuit against the park, the implications for park management were clear (Meyer 1993; Thurman 1989; Anonymous 1993; Wayburn and Meyer 1991). At Golden Gate, the Park Service could expect challenges from activity constituencies it chose not to accommodate. Anywhere in the park system such a situation presented a political risk, but in the politics of the Bay Area, its dimensions were accentuated.

The mountain biking fiasco represented the limits of policy. In part because the park's general management plan did not address bicycling and in part because mountain bikers did not form the kinds of groups that other constituencies did, the agency could not bring enough mountain bikers into the process to achieve the kind of buy-in that made planning a success at Golden Gate. Unlike conservation and environmental groups

and even kennel clubs, mountain bikers did not respond to the invitations to participate that the agency offered. Their reticence and the close ties between the Park Service and mountain-biking opponents left the cyclists outside the loop. Some mountain bikers were happy there; they could engage in Edward Abbey-like anarchism without any responsibility for the results. But the disintegration of relationships meant that the issue continued in an adversarial fashion—a less-than-optimal result.

The story of mountain biking at Golden Gate speaks volumes about future management of national parks. As the common values of American society are less widely shared, and as new constituencies who represent a large share of voters in the future, but

seem problematic in the present, become more common, the Park Service must find ways to include such people and their uses in support of national parks. The changing demography of the USA requires an agency that is flexible to the needs of broader public groups in certain kinds of areas, such as national recreation areas that are designated for use. Without that flexibility, the Park Service runs the risk of appeasing the privileged of the present at the expense of the vast majority of the future. Clashes of cultural values, such as the mountain-biking wars at Golden Gate National Recreation Area, pose serious questions about the nature of Park Service policy-making.

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