


Bill Opening Wilderness Areas to Bikes Also Opens Debate

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Brandon Mann, 43, rode his mountain bike this month on the Rosy Boa trail north of Leavenworth, Wash. Legislation in Congress would require managers of wilderness areas to assess whether cycling is appropriate. Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

By Kirk Johnson

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5 MIN READ

BELLINGHAM, Wash. — Rose Wakeland, 13, who got her first two-wheeler at age 2, flew over a jump on a dirt trail here one recent morning like an old hand. “Good one, Rose!” a friend shouted.

Taking to the rocky, root-tangled trails of northwest Washington on a mountain bike is a rite of summer in this outdoor-obsessed corner of the nation, where the North Cascade foothills kiss the edge of town.

But now in areas like this across the West where communities and wild places meet — from Colorado’s Front Range to the necklace of towns around Lake Tahoe — a debate is raging over what the future should look like out on the trails, and whether hiking boots and knobby tires can coexist.

A bill in Congress would open up biking in federally designated wilderness, where “mechanical transport” has been banned since President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the [Wilderness Act](#) in 1964. Conservation groups have mostly lined up in opposition to the change, fearing an erosion of land protections, and some cycling groups are opposing the bill for similar reasons. But many other riders, including Rose’s mother, Char Waller, argue that wilderness rules must adapt to a generational shift in how young people like her daughter recreate. Wild places get saved and protected, she said, only when people love them and use them.

“It’s time to reinvent the wheel,” said Ms. Waller, the director of education at the Whatcom Mountain Bike Coalition, and a leader of the weeklong bike camp Rose was attending.



A sign in the Alpine Lakes Wilderness in Washington State indicates that only those on foot may proceed.

Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

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What complicates the debate for people on both sides is that Senate Bill [3205](#) — the Human-Powered Travel in Wilderness Areas Act — is sponsored by two Republican senators from Utah, Mike Lee and Orrin G. Hatch, neither of whom is known as an environmentalist. The [League of Conservation Voters](#), an environmental advocacy group, ranked them near the bottom of Congress last year in its scorecard.

Some wilderness supporters say they believe the bill is in fact a kind of stalking horse, purporting to do one thing while really doing another.

“We think the bill is a fundamental attack on one of our bedrock conservation laws — it’s championed by two of the most anti-environmental members of the Senate, and it has language in it that is really designed to drive a wedge between the recreation community and conservationists,” said Michael Carroll, the senior national partnership director at the Wilderness Society, a Washington-based group.

Some cyclists said that such a wedge was nothing new.

Many are still wincing from last year’s creation of a 431-square-mile wilderness complex in central Idaho called the [Boulder-White Clouds](#). Before it was wilderness, the area was popular with mountain bikers, who had advocated a national monument designation that would have allowed riding to continue. But then a political shift turned momentum toward a wilderness designation, and with the [stroke of President Obama’s](#) pen, the trails were closed and the cyclists were out.

“It left a bad taste in a lot of peoples’ mouths,” said Eric Brown, the trail director at the Whatcom Mountain Bike Coalition.



Maintaining a bike trail on Galbraith Mountain near Bellingham, Wash. Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

Now, the new wilderness bill has brought some of those tensions back to a boil. The [International Mountain Biking Association](#), for example, one of the nation’s biggest cycling groups, supports an expansion of cycling in wilderness, but at the same time opposes the bill that might achieve that end.

“Our membership is split nearly right down the middle,” Bruce C. Alt, the group’s vice president for government relations, said in an email. “While we commend Senators Lee and Hatch for their interest, we also have deep concerns that there are other agendas that this bill could facilitate, especially a public land seizure agenda.”

The [Sustainable Trails Coalition](#), by contrast, a Colorado-based



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nonprofit, has gone the other way — raising concerns about the sponsors, but ultimately supporting the bill itself.

“It behooves people to look at the legislation with extra caution,” said the group’s president, Ted Stroll. But the important thing, he added, is not who put it on the table, but, “the merits of what the bill calls for.”

Political efforts to shift federal lands into state or local control, or seize them outright, have percolated for years in some conservative Western states, notably Utah. In January, armed militants, acting on that impulse, took over the [Malheur National Wildlife Refuge](#) in Oregon for more than a month, arguing that the federal government had essentially stolen the refuge land from ranchers and the State of Oregon.



Bike tracks on trails maintained by the Whatcom Mountain Biking Coalition on Galbraith Mountain. Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

A spokesman for Mr. Lee, Conn Carroll, dismissed the idea raised by conservation groups of a connection between the Wilderness bill and efforts to take back federal land as “a cuckoo conspiracy theory.” The goal, he said in an interview, is simple and plain, “to open up more public lands for enjoyment by Americans.”

Under the bill, he added, there would be no blanket opening up to bikes, but rather only a requirement that managers of each wilderness area make an assessment of whether uses like cycling were appropriate. Making no assessment at all would automatically allow “nonmotorized transport.” Wheeled vehicles with engines would still be banned.

One academic who has written widely on wilderness policy, Martin Nie of the University of Montana, said the bill would undermine federal wilderness protections. But he said that no matter what happens with the bill, fights over wilderness are going to get more tangled in the future because the easy issues have been addressed.

“Those high, alpine environments have already been protected,” said Mr. Nie, a professor of natural resource policy and director of the university’s Bolle Center for People and Forests. “What we are doing is moving down the landscape into some of these roadless areas that have more pre-existing uses,” including cycling, he added, “so the future wilderness battles will become more intense.”

Federally designated wilderness — about 110 million acres, an area bigger than California, much of it in Alaska — includes about half of all National Park Service lands, plus property managed by the Forest Service, the Fish and Wildlife Service and the Bureau of Land Management.

But there is no doubt, people on both sides of the issue said, that young people are not going into those places in the same numbers,

or ways, as their granola-carrying backpacker parents and grandparents who pushed through the original law in the 1960s.

“They are less connected to the outdoors than they ever have been,” said Mr. Carroll at the Wilderness Society. “Whether it’s a recreation group or a conservation group, we’re all trying to tackle that.”

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