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Trailblazers

Park agencies and mountain biking groups collaborate to build exhilarating trail systems for their communities Page 48



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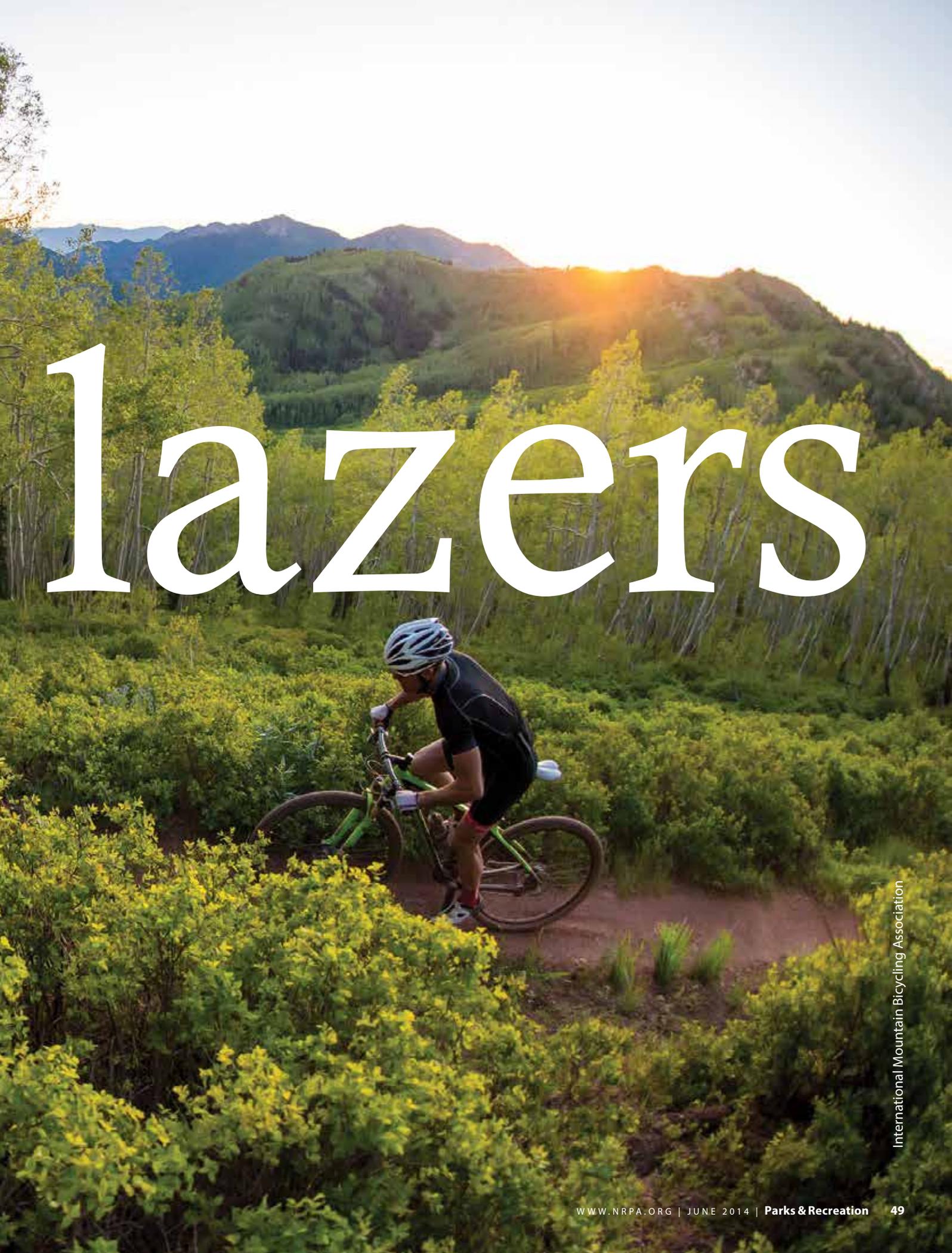
Trailb

Mountain bikers and park agencies often butt heads over illegally built trail systems, but some have found ways to collaborate and create exciting networks available to all

By Danielle Taylor

“Who owns the forests? The government that takes care of them, or the people who love them?” So asks a radio host featured on the 2011 documentary “Pedal-Driven,” which explores the sometimes contentious relationship between land managers and mountain bikers.

The growing sport of mountain biking requires more land than most other recreational activities, and as bikers develop their skills, they often seek out jumps, drops and other elements that add excitement to their ride. Although the majority of mountain bikers are happy to play by the rules, these two considerations, combined with the fact that many areas don’t have established trail systems where bikers can go, have led some mountain bikers to build unsanctioned trails on public land so they can practice their sport. Land managers, recognizing the damage that poorly planned trail building can have on the environment, as well as the real risk of liability for unauthorized use of the land they oversee, frequently tear down bike trails as soon as they find them. Understandably, this incenses the rogue mountain bikers who put a lot of time into developing trails, and the back-and-forth struggle begins.



1lazers



International Mountain Bicycling Association

Mountain biking has undergone a significant shift in recent years. What was once seen as a fringe pursuit is now a widely practiced family-friendly sport.

Although “Pedal-Driven” focuses primarily on the federally managed Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forests near Leavenworth, Washington, illegal trail building is a problem land managers deal with on federal, state and local levels nationwide. The conflict continues in many areas, with mountain bikers dodging park employees as they cut down trees and build jumps for their sport, and park employees becoming weary of these recreation enthusiasts tearing up the land and creating more work. But in other locales, park managers and their local mountain biking communities have been able to come together to develop truly elaborate and exciting trail systems, much better than either side would be able to develop alone.

Building Bridges and Alleviating Concerns

A few mountain bikers, concerned about the closure of trails to cyclists, formed the International Mountain

Bicycling Association (IMBA) in 1988 as the sport of mountain biking began to really take off. That first year, IMBA created and marketed its “Six Rules of the Trail,” which outlined the common rules mountain bikers would need to follow in order to ride on public lands. “Land managers throughout the U.S. (and abroad) started posting these rules on trailhead signs and in trail brochures, which helped them get comfortable with the idea of allowing mountain bikers on public trails,” according to IMBA’s website.

From the start, IMBA knew that open communication, compliance with established rules at trails, and strong volunteer turnouts at trail-building and maintenance events would be the best ways to foster good relationships with public land managers. Since then, the group has made continual strides in establishing mountain biking as a legitimate recreational activity, and the sport owes much of its current

success to IMBA’s efforts. IMBA has also worked hard to gather reputable research on mountain biking in order to dispel misconceptions about the sport.

“We’ve been quite successful in documenting that the impacts mountain biking has on the natural world are not significantly different than other trail activities,” says Mark Eller, IMBA’s director of communications. “It’s pretty demonstrable and well-accepted to recreation ecologists that mountain biking has more or less the same impact as hiking, and probably slightly less than equestrian use. The biggest determining factor in how much the natural world is going to be affected is how the trail is designed and built.”

Park managers may be interested to learn that mountain biking enthusiasts often have considerable knowledge about sustainable trail design that minimizes erosion while also creating exciting riding conditions. As the sport has developed, several trail-building companies have formed as well, and they often work in concert with park agencies and large groups of volunteers from the mountain biking community to establish sustainable, well-planned and lively trail systems.

Aside from conservation concerns, land managers also often express fears that allowing mountain bikers on multiuse trails will disrupt other trail users’ experiences. “That’s a little harder to disprove, because then you’re into people’s perception,” Eller says. However, “we actually have some sociological research that shows consistently that people’s perceptions of conflict on trails are much higher than actual rates of reported incidents.” To reduce the possibility of conflict, IMBA recommends park agencies separate usage across trails individualized for each activity

(mountain biking, hiking, equestrian, etc.), noting that it's worth the upfront investment and is the best way to mitigate issues of user conflict down the road. Much of the research the group has amassed regarding shared use, conservation, sustainable trail design, the economics of bicycling, risk management and related topics can be found at www.imba.com/resources.

What was once seen as an “outlaw” sport practiced by rogue bikers has undergone a major shift in perception, with parks nationwide now encouraging young children, older skeptics and everyone in between to give it a try. “I think the main thing is that we’ve been able to create success stories,” Eller says. “As much as our educational materials and theoretical writings about shared-use trail systems have had an influence, nothing has a bigger impact than when you see it happening in a real-world scenario. That’s been basically two and a half decades for IMBA — our whole 25-year history has been creating these success stories one at a time and holding them up as models.”

Valmont Bike Park — Boulder, Colorado

Boulder is an outdoor recreation enthusiast's paradise, with plenty of opportunities for hiking, rock climbing, mountaineering, kayaking and more thanks to its prime location on the eastern edge of the Rocky Mountains. But until 2011, options for in-town mountain biking were limited, leading Boulder's underground community of riders to establish their own trails in abandoned lots and other unsanctioned venues.

Fortunately, a long-awaited opportunity was in the works. In 1995, City of Boulder voters approved a public bond referendum to buy land for active recreational use, and the

following year, the City purchased 132 acres of land and called for public input for future development that would benefit the community. Three major Boulder bicycling advocates — Bobby Noyes, Chris Grealish and Pete Webber — quickly made it their mission to turn part of the land into a public bike park. During the next 15 years, they worked tirelessly with Boulder Parks and Recreation officials to push the plan forward.

When the park finally opened in 2011, mountain bikers were thrilled to find 42 acres featuring more than four miles of trails, more than three dozen terrain park features, a beginner-friendly skills park and pump track, a children's play area with a mini trike track, cyclocross race features and a lot more. Park planners designed the entire area with irrigation, landscaping and erosion controls to minimize its footprint, and

they included safety and informational signage throughout to engage visitors. The park has also trained more than 175 volunteer bike park hosts and bike patrollers, who encourage use of the park and assist Boulder Parks and Recreation staff with daily operations and maintenance.

Without the contributions of the original three visionaries, as well as IMBA and other groups, the park wouldn't have come together anywhere near as well as it did, and it may not have happened at all, according to Valmont Bike Park Project Manager Mike Eubank. “This element of input was critical and paramount to the success of the project,” he says. More than 15 organizations, from trail builders to engineering firms to fundraisers, helped bring the project to completion.

The park has received international attention for its innovative design



Valmont Bike Park

Riders test out dirt jumps at Boulder's Valmont Bike Park, a unique urban venue that offers mountain bikers of all types and ability levels the chance to practice their sport.

and collaborative creation process, and it recently played host to the 2014 Cyclocross National Championships. Says IMBA President Mike Van Abel, “This is the poster child for how to do urban bike parks right.”

Fountainhead Regional Park Mountain Bike Trail — Fairfax Station, Virginia

In Virginia, a group of mountain bikers demonstrated their good faith and showed an eagerness to cooperate with park authorities, which cleared the way for one of the most extensive mountain biking trail systems in the mid-Atlantic. Back in 1995, “NVRPA (the Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority) adopted a policy that biking is permitted only on paved or gravel surfaces, not on natural-surface trails, so when mountain biking was relatively new, bikers sometimes rode on natural-surface trails in the NVR-

PA system ‘illegally,’” says Kate Rudacille, deputy director of planning and grants for NVRPA. That same year, members of Mid-Atlantic Off-Road Enthusiasts (MORE) spoke out at public hearings for NVRPA’s capital improvement program to advocate for new mountain biking trails. In addition, “MORE members helped restore and maintain the 18-mile natural-surface Bull Run-Occoquan Trail, even though they were not allowed to ride it,” Rudacille says.

Given MORE’s participation and willingness to work with NVRPA, the park authority agreed to establish a mountain biking trail at Fountainhead Regional Park with MORE’s support. The volunteer group developed a design, conducted fundraising, generated publicity, created trail maps, provided dozens of trail-building volunteers, sought out sponsorships and more. Thanks in large part

to MORE’s dedication, the Fountainhead Mountain Bike Trail was built in 1996 and opened to the public the following year.

MORE continues to contribute hundreds of volunteer hours each year at Fountainhead to maintain and renovate the trails. Additionally, “MORE has worked diligently with its members to advocate for users to follow the rules and not ride on the trails when they are closed due to wet conditions,” Rudacille says. In recent years, MORE has collaborated with NVRPA to renovate the trail to reduce erosion and improve trail safety and enjoyment in accordance with IMBA trail-building standards. The group continues to bring in money from grants, fundraisers and their own pockets; provide design, construction and maintenance work on new sections of trail; improve existing sections through collaborative redesigns and upkeep; and advocate with other users to use the trails appropriately.

“It has been a very positive and productive partnership with MORE,” says Paul Gilbert, NVRPA’s executive director. “The result is one of the best trails on the East Coast. We get people from hundreds of miles away who come just to experience this remarkable trail.”

Swan Creek Park — Tacoma, Washington

Mountain biking opponents who insist the sport deteriorates the land should visit Washington state’s Swan Creek Park, which opened its new system of mountain biking trails this March. Before the 50-acre Douglas fir forest in the middle of the 273-acre park was home to a mountain biking trail system, it attracted a different segment of the community. Littered with methamphetamine needles, campfires, ille-



www.flickr.com/scorchedearth

Offering dedicated mountain biking trails with varying levels of difficulty, Virginia’s Fountainhead Regional Park draws bikers from several surrounding states.

gal encampments and other items indicating improper use of the park, it was clear the sector needed to find legitimate recreational use.

At the same time, “there was a level-of-service gap here in Tacoma,” says Joe Brady, natural resources manager for Metro Parks Tacoma. “There are a lot of folks who just love to mountain bike and had no place to do it close to town.” Tacoma riders would have to travel an hour or more to get to the closest mountain bike trail system, which discouraged ridership and provided a ready population of riders eager for a trail system closer to home.

After passing an \$85 million capital improvement bond in 2005, Metro Parks Tacoma underwent a community involvement process to develop a master plan. The Evergreen Mountain Bike Alliance recognized this as an opportunity to bring mountain biking to Tacoma and offered to help. Once the master plan was approved in 2011, Metro Parks Tacoma created a contract for Evergreen to provide construction and ongoing maintenance of the mountain bike park. Project Manager Mike Westra soon came out to survey the site and laid out a phased plan.

“Evergreen did all the construction through volunteer labor, and they continue now that the park is complete to maintain it to the specifications we outlined using volunteers,” Brady says. “We’ve got a couple of volunteers who have put in more than 1,500 hours in the last year. You see this with volunteers—they just come out of the woodwork when they have the ownership to do it and the ability to make meaningful change.” Evergreen volunteers also help make sure mountain bikers don’t create new, unauthorized trails, Brady says. “It’s a self-policing model.”

One goal of the project was to discourage illegal activity in the park,



Russ Carmack/Comcast Washington State

Volunteers organized by the Evergreen Mountain Bike Alliance provide regular trail maintenance tasks at Tacoma, Washington’s Swan Creek Park.

which has definitely been a success, according to Brady. “Mountain biking fits into that nicely, by getting bad users out of the park and good users in. We’re not only cleaning out an old bad use, but we’re infusing new users into a public space that’s way more productive. Mountain biking at Swan Creek was a really great opportunity for us to accomplish a lot of objectives in one project.”

Dozens of similar shining examples of collaborative partnerships exist nationwide, proof to frustrated public land managers and mountain bikers alike that it’s more than possible to work out a solution for everyone.

Park managers looking to establish a positive connection with the local mountain biking community are advised to contact their local IMBA chapter (www.imba.com) for nearby mountain biking advocates eager to work with park and recreation agencies. The association also offers resources such as “Trail Solutions: IMBA’s Guide to Building Sweet Singletrack” and “Managing Mountain Biking: IMBA’s Guide

to Providing Sweet Riding” (www.imba.com/resources), which can help get you started.

“[Public land] managers out there need to realize that there are these incredibly dedicated volunteers who have taught themselves to be super effective at building and maintaining trails in partnership with land managers,” Eller says. “They do it all for free. The last survey of groups in 2012 documented 700,000 donated hours of volunteer service. From the manager’s point of view, if you’re being tasked with improving community assets and improving public health, cycling appeals across demographics, old and young, different ethnic and racial groups...You’ve got dedicated volunteers with a lot of know-how and you’ve got an opportunity for land managers to improve their communities and fulfill their mission. A lot of times, it’s just a matter of putting those two things together and getting a conversation started, and good things start to happen.” 🌱

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