

Swan View Coalition Nature and Human Nature on the Same Path



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May 24, 2012

Bryan Donner and Lisa Timchak
Project Leader and Tally Lake District Ranger
650 Wolfpack Way
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Chip Weber
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650 Wolfpack Way
Kalispell, MT 59901

Via email PDF to comments-northern-flathead-tally-lake@fs.fed.us ,
bdonner@fs.fed.us , latimchak@fs.fed.us , cweber@fs.fed.us

Re: Big Mountain Downhill Bike Trail Expansion Project and
Reid Divide Bicycle Race Project

Dear Bryan, Lisa and Chip;

We submit these comments on the above two projects and ask that they be included in the public record for both projects. We address them together, as we believe you should also assess them together in an Environmental Assessment.

“Free-ride” mountain biking and mountain bike racing have a lot of issues in common due to their inherent high speeds and risks. As we will discuss below, the Flathead National Forest needs to address them collectively and within the context of not letting such extreme sports get out of control across the Forest.

In short, we have grave reservations about the spread of high-speed mountain biking. Because Big Mountain already is home to thrill-seeking enterprises like zip lines and downhill mountain biking, we do not object to the proposal for another bike trail on Big Mountain – provided all other proposals for free-ride and new mountain bike trails, as well as mountain bike races, are redirected to Big Mountain.

Big Mountain

While we do not promote sports of speed, which greatly increase the risk of negative encounters between people and wildlife, they have become established on Big Mountain and via Winter Sports Incorporated’s Special Use Permit(s). We urge Flathead National Forest to confine speed sports to the developed Big Mountain area so the negative impacts to fish, wildlife and human safety do not spread across the Forest.

In this regard, we do not oppose the Big Mountain Downhill Bike Trail Expansion Project, provided the Reid Divide Bicycle Race Project and all other proposals for new bike trails and bike races on the Flathead National Forest are redirected to the developed Big Mountain area. Why are the Big Mountain trails not being used for stages 1 and 2 of the Reid Divide proposal, though it may require the reversal of biking direction on some of the Big Mountain trails during the race?

As we will discuss below, allowing bike racing outside the confines of the “thrill-seeking” Big Mountain area will have significant negative effects on the behavior and culture of mountain biking and result in further erosion of public respect for wildlife. The Great American Outdoors initiative is aimed, in part, at getting people connected to nature. It is not intended to engage people in activities that instead put them in conflict with nature and wildlife as they pursue speed, competition and cheap thrills.

Make it clear to Forest users that the only place for breakneck biking and other thrill seeking speed sports on the Flathead National Forest is in the developed Big Mountain area. Make it equally clear that thrill-seeking speed sports are discouraged elsewhere on the Flathead National Forest as a means to promote public respect for and behavior consistent with the protection of wildlife and human safety.

Conflicts and Collisions with Wildlife

Members of Swan View Coalition and others have learned the hard way and through education to eschew speedy travel through wildlife habitat and to instead remain alert at all times to one’s surroundings, allowing time for wildlife to move aside rather than risk a surprise encounter. Wildlife management agencies have tracked plenty such encounters involving trail running and biking, plenty of them fatal to the person, if not also fatal to the “offending” wildlife.

Trail runners and bikers alike have been swatted, butted, mauled and killed during resulting surprise encounters with bears, lions, wildebeests, and other wildlife. While folks can get hurt hiking, wildlife and land management officials have become fully aware of and advise against the added risk of increased trail speeds involved in running and biking.

Parks Canada has closed some trails seasonally to mountain biking in key grizzly habitats in Banff National Park, due to grizzly bears charging bikers. Steve Michel, Banff’s human-wildlife conflict specialist said “cyclists are able to travel at a higher rate of speed than hikers, thereby increasing the chances of a surprise encounter with bears. [] They were very serious close encounters, and if it was not for just luck in some cases, it could have easily turned into a bear attack situation” (Exhibit A).

Parks Canada has also made mandatory on some trails the requirement that trail users carry bear spray and travel in groups of four or more, due to bear attacks on hikers and cyclists (Exhibits A and B). At least one trail closure came about in 2010 after a “cyclist crested a small hill and encountered the sow and her cubs about six metres away,” precipitating a charge by the grizzly bear. (Exhibit C).

These and other accounts make clear that travelling solo can result in a negative bear encounter, while the addition of a rise or curve in the trail and a little speed greatly increase the odds. Add the element of darkness, and bike racing in bear habitat has resulted in serious human injury from mauling. (Exhibit D).

A mountain bike racer was rammed full-speed by a Red Hartebeest while competing in a race in South Africa's Albert Falls Dam and Game Reserve. A video of the charge can be viewed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S2oymHHyV1M>.

Such negative encounters don't only occur in parks and wildlife reserves, however, they occur right here in the Flathead. I was once charged by a black bear sow defending her two cubs while mountain biking in Krause Basin on the Flathead National Forest. As I rounded a blind corner, the sow charged me and stopped only after I managed to stop my bike, a few feet short of my getting swatted if not mauled – which I most certainly would have been had I been biking any faster. If only everyone could be ensured of a second chance to make slow, mindful travel in wildlife habitat a committed practice.

Our point here is that bike racing and other speed sports, rather than instill a healthy respect for wildlife, instead encourage reckless behaviors that greatly increase the risk of negative encounters with wildlife. Rather than slow down and travel with a mindful awareness of one's surroundings, speed sport enthusiasts are increasingly taking more aggressive stances against wildlife, including asking for reductions in wildlife populations and carrying firearms rather than bear spray.

Rather than acknowledge the utter foolishness of conducting an overnight mountain bike race on a trail alongside a stream where grizzly bears feed on salmon, which indeed resulted in serious injuries to a racer when tackled by a bear, an Anchorage cyclist called for the bears to be thinned out. Joggers have also been charged in the same area and an Alaska state biologist said "I would certainly recommend not riding a bike or running on those trails [] it's not unheard of for a bear to charge someone moving by on a bicycle. In fact, the motion combined with surprise could trigger what was an 'unintentionally provoked' attack." (Exhibit D).

Similarly, after describing a close encounter with a black bear, a Crane Mountain Trails Supporter proudly announced on Facebook he was abandoning bear spray and going to instead carry a gun while mountain biking. Such a choice runs contrary to the fact-based wisdom of relying on bear spray rather than a gun during an encounter. A March 25, 2012 Missoulian news article reported "Ninety-eight percent of those who used bear spray walked away from their encounter unharmed, and none of the people or bears involved died. With firearms, 56 percent of the users were subsequently injured, and 61 percent of the bears died." (http://missoulian.com/news/state-and-regional/research-bear-spray-stops-angry-grizzlies-better-than-guns/article_b0d338b6-7638-11e1-b809-0019bb2963f4.html#ixzz1uCkbvS6Q).

To put it bluntly, the Forest Service should not be issuing permits for activities that promote wrong-headed and risky behavior, such as mountain bike racing, outside the confines of a dedicated thrill-seeking area such as the developed portion of Big Mountain – and that itself is a compromise because Big Mountain is also important to

and inhabited by wildlife. To issue such permits elsewhere will simply spread such wrong-headed behavior and promote a culture of thrill-seeking on public lands that runs contrary to the protection of wildlife and human safety.

Reid Divide Bicycle Race

For the reasons stated above, we ask that the Reid Divide Bicycle Race permit be denied or that the race firstly be renamed and reconfigured so all three stages are held in the developed portions of Big Mountain.

Moreover, it is a bad idea to start a race in a gravel pit, especially one that requires prior treatment of invasive weeds. In spite of prior treatment, the spread of invasive weed seed along the racecourse is likely.

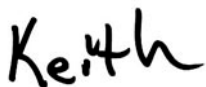
National Environmental Policy Act and Other Regulations

Flathead National Forest cannot piecemeal its review of these various mountain bike proposals under the NEPA, nor can they lawfully be approved under a Categorical Exclusion due to “extraordinary circumstances” which include serious risks to public safety and the potential for harmful run-ins with wildlife that may include threatened grizzly bear, be it on Big Mountain or near Tally Lake and Reid Divide.

We urge you to instead conduct, at a minimum, a thorough Environmental Assessment that fully assesses the impacts of the conduct and spread of thrill-seeking speed sports on the Flathead National Forest. These sports would include free-ride biking and mountain bike racing. The objective of the assessment would be to minimize risks and impacts by seeking to limit these sports to one area, which we propose would be the developed portion of Big Mountain.

Thank you for this opportunity to comment and please keep us informed.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Keith". The letters are cursive and slightly slanted to the right.

Keith J. Hammer
Chair

Enclosures: Exhibits A-D

Exhibit A

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Trail restriction to protect bears, bikers

Jul 07, 2011 11:48 am | CATHY ELLIS

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Mountain bikers and dogs will not be permitted along Lake Minnewanka's shoreline this summer under new Parks Canada rules aimed at reducing serious bear encounters.

A seasonal restriction will be in place for the Aylmer Trail and Lake Minnewanka Shoreline Trail from Stewart Canyon Bridge to the east park boundary, from July 10 to Sept. 15.

Hikers must travel in tight groups of four, but new this year is a requirement they must carry bear spray. Cycling is also not permitted along the Minnewanka Shoreline Trail and dogs are not allowed in the area.

The LM8 backcountry campground will be closed.

Parks officials say this restriction lowers the risk of potentially harmful encounters between people and bears feeding on prime food sources, such as buffalo berries.

They say the restriction was changed this year as a result of three or four surprise grizzly bear encounters with cyclists in the past few years, all involving female bears with cubs.

"We wanted to come up with a constructive solution that would allow cycling on the trail for a portion of the year," said Steve Michel, Banff's human-wildlife conflict specialist.

"We didn't want to have a situation develop where we could have a bear encounter that became so serious it could jeopardize the future of cycling in that area."

Not everyone is happy with the decision, with some arguing decisions such as these should apply to all users and not just single out mountain bikers.

But Doug Topp, a director of the Bow Valley Mountain Bike Alliance, said he is fully behind Parks Canada's decision.

"Nobody likes a closure, but this is an adaptive management step and it was the right step. It's being closed for a time, while every other trail in the valley is open," he said.

"We know we are not pleasing all bikers, but we believe it's the right decision. Minnewanka has been open for months already and it will be open for months after; there's plenty of time left to ride."

Topp said Parks Canada has presented the science to justify this.

"There've been close encounters, and if there was ever a bad mauling or worse, we felt the chance of it being permanently closed was real," he said.

“This trail is iconic, and if something really bad happens there, it could be worse than losing the Upper Bench like we did in Canmore a few years ago.”

Michel said there were serious bear attacks involving hikers in the Aylmer area in 2001 and 2005 and three or four serious bluff charges involving cyclists from 2007 to 2010.

He said cyclists are able to travel at a higher rate of speed than hikers, thereby increasing the chances of a surprise encounter with bears.

“They were very serious close encounters, and if it was not for just luck in some cases, it could have easily turned into a bear attack situation,” he said.

“We’re trying to avoid something like that happening.”

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Man fined for not carrying bear spray

Jul 30, 2011 06:00 am | By [Tanya Foubert](#) | Rocky Mountain Outlook

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For the first time Parks Canada is requiring hikers to carry bear spray on a popular Banff trail and it's enforcing the rule.

Korean student Han Kang is the first person caught without bear spray on the Lake Minnewanka Trail and received a \$400 fine as a result.

Kang pleaded guilty in Canmore Provincial Court in front of Judge George Gaschler this week to the offence along with not being in a group of four hikers, another restriction on the trail.

Crown prosecutor Anita Szabo asked for a stiff penalty because the hiker was only in a group of two and wardens had to take them off the trail and out of the area by boat.

"The Crown is seeking a rather high fine in this matter," Szabo said.

The Minnewanka Trail is restricted to groups of four hikers or more by order of the superintendent annually from July 10 to Sept. 15 but this is the first year bear spray has also been a requirement.

Parks Canada spokesperson Mark Merchant added mountain bikes and dogs are not permitted either.

Merchant said the trail has a history of encounters with grizzly bears including two mountain bikers being charged by a sow with cubs in 2007 and an incident last summer that saw another biker charged.

"Just this week alone boaters reported a sighting of a grizzly bear and cub in the area – bears are there," he said. "It is one of the best berry patches around and the bears know that, they go to the slope to eat."

Feeding bears are distracted bears, Merchant said, and that increases the likelihood of a surprise encounter.

"For us to do this we really want to use this as a way to emphasize the seriousness of the situation," he said. "We don't want to (close the trail) we want people to go out and enjoy nature and give bears their space."

Merchant said wardens are actively patrolling the area and will enforce the restrictions including to have bear spray.

Because bear spray is to be easily accessible, usually worn on a belt, he added enforcing the regulation will not require Wardens to search hikers belongings.

Contravening the National Park Act regulation results in a mandatory court appearance and a fine of up to \$25,000.

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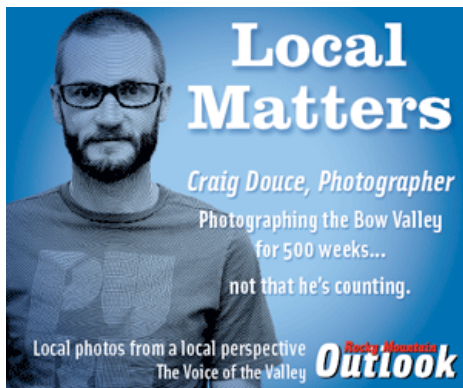
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Minnewanka shore trail closed after grizzly sow charges cyclist

Aug 05, 2010 06:00 am | By [Rob Alexander](#) | Rocky Mountain Outlook

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Parks Canada has closed the Lake Minnewanka trail and all of the campgrounds along the lakeshore after a sow grizzly with two cubs charged a Calgary mountain biker on the weekend.

Banff National Park closed the trail from Stewart Canyon to the park boundary on Saturday (July 31) after the cyclist encountered the sow and her two cubs at approximately 9 a.m.

Human-wildlife conflict specialist Steve Michel said Monday (Aug. 2) the Calgarian had ridden his bike the eight kilometres to the Aylmer Pass trailhead, intent on hiking into the pass.

However, the man turned back after encountering signs at the trailhead reminding hikers of the seasonal travel restriction that requires them to travel in groups of four or more from July 15 to Sept. 30.

About half way back to the Lake Minnewanka parking lot, Michel said, the cyclist crested a small hill and encountered the sow and her cubs about six metres away.

The man stopped, got off his bike and ran away from the sow, which charged after him.

“As he looked over his shoulder when he started running, he noticed the grizzly was already charging him,” Michel said.

The Calgary man stopped running and got behind some trees off the trail.

“They had a brief standoff for 30 seconds or so and the female grizzly returned to her cubs and they headed upslope off the trail.”

Parks Canada staff will patrol the area and lift the closure once they deem the area safe.

The bear was feeding on buffalo berries, which are not only ripe, but are a key food source for bears at this time of the year.

Michel said Saturday’s incident marks the third serious encounter between mountain bikers and grizzly sows with cubs since July 2007.

Michel said the mother bear appeared to have behaved normally, given the circumstances of the encounter.

“If you encounter a grizzly bear with cubs at close range, you can expect she will charge you. That is why you want to avoid a surprise encounter,” he said.

Situations such as this put stress on bears at a critical time when they are attempting to gain as much weight for winter hibernation as possible.

As a result, Michel reminded trail users to take all of the usual precautions, including pre-trip planning, making noise, carrying bear spray and knowing how to use it, travelling in groups and leaving dogs at home or at least ensuring they remain on leash.

And key for trail runners and mountain bikers, travel slowly and in a group, especially at this time of the year.

For more information, including warnings and closures, go to www.pc.gc.ca/banff-bears Write your Story Here. Write your Story Here.

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Exhibit D

Bear attacks teen bike racer

By BETH BRAGG and WESLEY LOY

Published: June 30th, 2008 12:11 AM Last Modified: October 13th, 2009 07:36 AM

A teenage girl riding in an all-night mountain bike race was badly injured early Sunday morning when a bear attacked her on a trail in Far North Bicentennial Park.

Police officers with shotguns escorted medics into dark woods to retrieve the girl, who underwent surgery at Providence Alaska Medical Center. The girl is expected to survive, Anchorage Fire Department spokeswoman Cleo Hill said.

Authorities wouldn't identify the girl and wouldn't discuss the nature of her injuries except to say they were extensive.

"One of the EMS supervisors on the scene said that in his 24 years of doing this, these were the most extensively traumatic injuries he'd seen," Hill said.

The bear is believed to be a grizzly, state biologist Rick Sinnott said. It's possible it's the same sow who charged a pair of joggers two weekends ago on a nearby trail, he said.

Peter Basinger, a cyclist competing in the race, encountered the injured girl on a trail called Rover's Run shortly after the attack happened around 1:30 a.m.

The trail parallels the south fork of Campbell Creek, a stream stocked with salmon by the state and fished frequently by grizzlies.

The girl mumbled the word "bear" but was unable to say more, Basinger said.

Basinger waited with the girl for about 25 minutes until medics arrived.

Emergency responders had to hike about half a mile from the South Bivouac trailhead off Campbell Airstrip Road to reach the girl, Hill said. They carried her on a stretcher across the same route to reach an ambulance waiting on the road.

TICKING 'TIME BOMB'

Matt Novakovich of Anchorage, who routinely rides and races bicycles in the park, thinks it was merely a matter of time before someone had a bear encounter in that part of the park.

"That area's getting more and more dangerous with the bears," he said. "It's frustrating, because at what point are they going to thin them out? It's like a hidden time bomb in the forest. It kind of scares me."

The girl was among about 60 participants in a 24-hour race sponsored by the Arctic Bicycle Club. The race began at noon Saturday and was to end at noon Sunday, but organizers canceled it after the attack.

"We're all shattered," said race director Greg Matyas, a longtime Anchorage skier and bicyclist.

A prerace safety meeting specifically mentioned bears and moose, he said.

"The first rule was no headphones, and the reason for that was (to be able to listen for) the bear and the moose," Matyas said.

The girl's bike was equipped with bear bells, he said, and she had two lights -- one on her helmet, another on her bike.

The 24-hour race is usually held at Kincaid Park but was moved to the Hillside this year because of construction at Kincaid, Matyas said. It was held on an 8.6-mile loop.

The victim had just come off the Gasline Trail north of Hilltop ski area and was entering Rover's Run when the bear attacked.

The bear ripped off the girl's helmet and flung it in the woods, Basinger said. Sinnott said it was pocked with the bear's teeth marks. Hill said it probably saved the girl from further injury.

Bears frequently walk on Rover's Run, Sinnott said. Most likely, Sinnott said, this bear was fishing for salmon in the creek and might not have heard the cyclist coming due to noise from the creek and from strong winds roaring through the forest.

Warning signs are posted in the area, although the city has not officially closed the trails. Sinnott said he'll talk to city parks officials today about closing the trails, although a true closure is impractical.

"Any trail head will get you in there and there's, what, 20-plus trail heads?" he said. "I would certainly recommend not riding a bike or running on those trails."

RECREATION GOES ON

Signs posted at trail heads two weeks ago warned users of bear activity. On June 14, a sow with two cubs charged a pair of joggers on the Double Bubble trail, which is near Rover's Run but doesn't parallel the creek.

On Sunday, Sinnott updated those warnings with news of the mauling.

Even so, dozens of bikers and hikers used the trails, fully aware of the overnight attack.

"It's not going to stop me from going out of the house and enjoying the short summer," said Rada Nordstrand, who was out for a bike ride with a friend. "But I'm thinking we should buy some bear spray."

Hendrik Van Hemert and Connor McCoy knew about the attack before they left the Hilltop parking lot for a bike ride up Prospect Heights.

"I thought a lot about the young woman as I was riding," Van Hemert said. "When I was out there it was easy to see exactly the balance between risk and enjoyment anyone who (goes) outdoors must face. There is an artificial sense of safety when you are doing something you not only love but have done countless times before.

"There are hundreds of mountain bikers in Anchorage that could have found themselves in the exact same position."

Sinnott said it's not unheard of for a bear to charge someone moving by on a bicycle. In fact, the motion combined with surprise could trigger what was an "unintentionally provoked" attack, he said.

Sinnott said he didn't arrive in time to see the victim before she was taken to the hospital, but he learned from emergency responders

that the bear bit her on the head, torso and thigh. She also had a "sucking chest wound" caused by a puncture to the lung cavity, he said.

It was close to 3 a.m. when Sinnott and two police officers emerged from the spooky near-solstice night to the South Bivouac Trailhead parking lot on Campbell Airstrip Road. Sinnott carried a 12-gauge shotgun.

Find Beth Bragg online at adn.com/contact/bbragg or call 257-4309.

Read more: <http://www.adn.com/2008/06/30/450061/bear-attacks-teen-bike-racer.html#ixzz1uCFhU1hW>