



New York Mountain Bicycling Coalition

Newsletter

Summer, 2000

Law of Averages Strikes Again, Hindering Access Advocacy

The summers of 1998 and 1999 were absolutely beautiful summers with warm temperatures and little rain. So you knew it would only be a matter of time before the law of averages would strike and make up for all those rain-free statistics of the past two years. Well, it's happening with a vengeance this year. It's not quite a record wet summer, but certainly the wettest in a while, with precipitation running near twice normal. An early snowmelt left the trails dry in March, and it looked like we were in for another easy year of maintenance and advocacy, not to mention great riding. However, by April, the rains had started, and except for a couple weeks in July, have kept coming pretty steadily.

In my eight years of trail access advocacy, I have found that the single biggest complaint used to shut off access to bikes is damage to trails in wet conditions. While nationwide the list of reasons why some folks want us off the trails ranges from safety issues to bikes being "unnatural", etc., these arguments seem to pale in NY to complaints about trail damage in wet conditions. In fact, I have even had a local ADK official outright tell me that "you'd have a lot less opposition from hiking groups if you just didn't cut up the trails so much when they are wet."

But as advocates, we have to make sure how we get this message across. Access advocates get accused too much of saying "don't" too much instead of "go ride". I don't

think this is fair. I would be willing to bet that anyone reading this newsletter rides a lot more than your typical rider. And now that it has been wet, we aren't saying ride less. We are just saying put some more thought into where you are riding. Some trails are just designed and built poorly. They are in wet areas, or they don't drain. Yeah, for these kind of trails, we are saying "don't ride", at least for now. When it is wet, it's more important than ever to spread the use. Any trail, even a bad trail, can handle a few riders. But most can not handle heavy traffic the way they can in dry years. So promote the use of the more out-or-the-way trails instead this year. Your "regular route" will probably suck with too much mud anyway, so this is the best time to explore new areas.

I started MTB advocacy in 1992 which was an as wet or even wetter year than this year. Back then I thought that the task was just about impossible. Obviously I feel different today. Why? Because now MTB groups have been a lot more active in improving trails from the often poorly laid out routes we inherited from hikers and others to more sustainable routes. And I'm not talking hardening or other brute-force approaches (although that sometimes has its place). But through learning how to layout or reroute a trail to minimize water accumulation, and by performing regular drainage work on trails, MTB groups throughout the state have made it so that rain doesn't have as much impact on the trail as it used to.

Green Lakes State Park Access Granted Permanent Status

We've reported on Green Lakes State Park access issues in NYMBC news before. The closure of trails at Green Lakes in 1994 threatened to domino into a state-wide ban in state parks. Fortunately, due to local efforts at other parks, this didn't come to pass, although mountain biking became a "regulated activity" after that, which often meant closures (Unfortunately closure is often the easiest kind of regulation if you are a manager). CNY-DIRT worked hard to reverse this closure through trail work and other agreements with the park. In 1998, they were able to reopen many of the trails on a trail basis. This year, they are happy to announce that the opening has gone from a trail basis to a permanent basis. This action, coupled with positive relations throughout the rest of the state, including Grafton Lakes, Thatcher, Chenango Valley, Letchworth, and Allegany (to name just a few) sets a good model and precedent for other parks where access has been tougher to come such, such as Harriman.

Lance Stonecipher of CNY-DIRT says that not all the trails are open to bikes, only the ones open during the trial period. However, most of the better trails are open. And furthermore, the park has recently purchased quite a bit of new land adjoining the present property which Lance sees as a great opportunity for new trail development.

NY State Parks to Limit Future Trail Development??

Despite the gains in access in NY state parks, there are still many areas where access is limited or designated to pitifully few trails. Often the alternative to gaining access to existing trails (which may be poorly designed in the first place) is to offer to build new well-designed trails as an alternative; trails that would be open to bikes. However, I have heard rumors that this approach may be becoming increasingly difficult. No, there has been no formal announcement or policy set. However, there has been the mention that some state parks officials consider the state parks to be "over-trailed". In fact, there may be a push to actually *reduce* the number of trails in state parks. This is apparently due

to concerns over habitat fragmentation. Habitat fragmentation is a real concern for certain areas and certain species. For example, grizzly habitat in the Rocky Mountains can be adversely affected by high use of trails. However, before any trails are closed in state parks, or before any new trails are turned down for approval, it would behoove the park managers to identify the type of habitat that would be impacted, and/or why existing trails cause fragmentation.

State parks located in well-developed areas do indeed often provide a needed refuge for many species, and trail development in these parks may negatively impact the propagation and survival of certain species. However, many parks are quite large and/or are surrounded by thousands of acres of additional quality habitat. In these cases, habitat fragmentation is less of a concern. It is important that any decisions on trail limitations based on habitat fragmentation be made on a case-by-case basis.

It is again important to stress that there is no official policy on this issue that I am aware of. Rather, I am asking to find if any other activists throughout the state have run into any similar indications. If this appears to be more than just a rumor, then this is an issue that NYBMC needs to address at the state level.

Finger Lakes National Forest Access

Lately it seems as if NYMBC news is regularly being scooped by BIKE mag's local knowledge and Dirt Rag's Access Action. Of course that is fine with me as Pat Gilsenen and Phil Keyes do an excellent job and provide a great service keeping everybody up to date on what is happening, and I encourage you all to send in your news to these guys (as well as to me!)

Pat recently reported in Local Knowledge that the Interloken Trail in the Finger Lakes National Forest was opened to bikes. NYMBC news has previously reported on the progress that David Burke and his buddies near the forest have been making in the FLNF in getting trails open to bikes, so I contacted Dave to get the full details.

Dave informed me that progress continues in gaining access at the FLNF, albeit at a glacial pace. As reported here earlier, one trail, the

No-tan-tak-to trail was opened last year on a trail basis, something the forest service has the authority to do. To this list, the northern section of the Interloken trail (north of Searsberg road) was also added. This is significant as the Interloken Trail is part of the Finger Lakes Trail system, specifically one of the north/south spurs of the east/west FLT. While the section of the main FLT was not opened to bikes (nor the portion of the Interloken near its junction with the FLT), this does represent the third section of the FLT system on public land that has been opened to bikes (the other sections are state forests in Cattaraugus county, and Letchworth state park; some private landowners also are open to bike use including Holimont ski area and Camp Cutler Boy Scout Camp, although both these properties require a free permit for bike use).

Additional trails will be opened to bikes in the future. Eventually all trails except the main FLT, the Gorge trail and the Ravine trail will be opened to bikes. However, the openings will be delayed until environmental impact statements have been completed, a process that could take years, and is dependent on the availability of funding to complete them.

The compromise of excluding the Gorge and the Ravine trails was reached after negotiation with the Finger Lakes Trail Conference which represented the interests of hiking users. Although Dave and other cyclists argued for use of all trails in the forest, access to these trails was not achieved. Despite this setback, the compromise reached will eventually provide quite a few miles of trail open to bikes. Furthermore, the agreement with the Forest service includes the construction of new trails in the forest that will be open to bike use. However, approval of these new trails will be delayed by the same environmental review process to be completed for the rest of the existing trails to be opened to bikes.

Dave tells me that it is a paradox that they have been able to win much of what they have negotiated for in the way of access in the forest, in the short term only limited mileage of trails are open. However, the

future looks bright for additional trail miles in the FLNL.

New MTB Representative Named to the NYS Trails Council

While response was poor to my request in the Winter NYMBC news for a fresh face on the NYSTC for mountain biking, response was greater for the appeal through a notice I put in the newsletter of my local organization, WNYMBA. In fact, two individuals contacted me expressing interest in the position. After ensuing discussions with Anne O'Dell, TC chair, we've got our volunteer, and Bruce Levine has stepped up to represent MTBers at the next Trail Council meeting in November. Thanks go out to Bruce for offering to represent us in this important council, a body that has significant recommendation power for state-wide trail use issues and TEA-21 expenditures.

NY ATV Access Issue Heats Up

Regular readers of the IMBA e-mail list hear a lot of the on-going debate regarding the extent that mountain bikers should ally with motorized trail user groups. The issue is fractious, and I believe much more of a regional issue than anything. Without taking a stance one way or another, it is important for NY cyclists to keep an eye on the current battle for ATV access now in progress. Currently, ATVs have essentially no access whatsoever on public land. However, ATV users have been quite active in the political arena fighting for access on a trial basis in certain state forest lands in the Adirondacks. This is being fought vigorously by the major hiking groups (FLTC, NY/NJTC, and ADK). It will be interesting to see the outcome of this debate. While the fact that ATVs have no access at present suggests that we have nothing to gain by allying with them, we need to watch this debate lest we become the next target of coordinated efforts to defeat their attempts at gaining access.

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For info on how to help keep trails in your area open, contact your local MTB advocacy organization.

Founding Organizations:

Western NY Mountain Bicycling Association
Rochester Bicycle Club (RBC)
Central NY-DIRT (Dedicated Individuals for Responsible Trail-use)
Mohawk-Hudson Cycling Club (MHCC)
Westchester Mountain Biking Association
'Gunks Mountain Biking Association
Fats in the Cats
Concerned Long Island Mountain Bicyclists

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