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My Turn

Human powered, but still machines — bicycles do not belong in wilderness

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In the newly proposed federal bill “Human Powered Travel in Wilderness Act,” (S.3205) Senator’s Mike Lee and Orrin Hatch, both Utah Republicans, take liberties in manipulating the definition of mechanical transport in hopes of gaining support to open wilderness areas to bikes and other machines.

They claim that if a mechanism is human-powered, then it is not a machine. This misrepresentation is deceitful and unethical. It would overturn decades of management practices and the original intent of the Wilderness Act of 1964.

Bicycles are built with metal, chains, gears, braking mechanisms and hydraulics. They are most definitely machines, giving the user a mechanical advantage by yielding more energy output than input. This legislation would open the door for all kinds of human-powered mechanics in the wilderness.

The senators are creating a rift between two groups that have coexisted and collaborated for decades — cyclists and wilderness advocates. The two agree on most public land issues. This bill would give power to the states to push other agendas and promote exploration. Counting on a brief timeline and the inaction of states, if the bill passes and the state does not make any decisions within two years, wilderness areas will automatically be open to human-powered machines.

This is a continuation of the tenuous and dangerous arguments between citizens and states trying to wrestle away federal control of land.

The Wilderness Act was passed unanimously, with bipartisan support, using language to protect it from further interpretation. “In order to assure that an increasing population, accompanied by expanding settlement and growing mechanization, does not occupy and modify all areas within the United States and its possessions, leaving no lands designated for preservation and protection in their natural condition, it is hereby declared to be the policy of the Congress to secure for the American people of present and future generations the benefits of an enduring resource of wilderness.” The authors knew that there would be many advances in technology and population growth in the future. They were well aware that they could not predict future inventions that would push the boundaries of recreation.

Wilderness areas are established to protect wildlife habitat, safeguard our drinking water and provide recreation opportunities on nature’s terms.

They were not set aside to be endurance gyms or adrenaline parks. One specific characteristic of wilderness is that it has outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation.

I don't think the authors would label mountain biking a primitive type of recreation. As an avid mountain biker, I feel there is no shortage of opportunities to ride. Wilderness accounts for less than 3 percent of the nations lands (2 percent in New Mexico). The Western states have large swaths of public land open for biking. There is also private land (north side at Taos Ski Valley) as well as private and public ski areas that have become mountain bike parks.

The amount of single-track and trails in the West is endless.

To me, the argument regarding trail impact and maintenance is moot. Besides the user conflict between bikes, humans, horses and wildlife, the wilderness does not have perfectly maintained road-like trails for miles and miles because the wilderness was established to help maintain a more primitive and natural landscape (maybe even a place to get lost). Manicured bike trails do not blend into the natural landscape.

Senators Lee and Hatch, as well as groups like the Sustainable Trails Coalition, are using propaganda and deception to pit cyclists and wilderness advocates against each other. It would be arrogant and selfish for our generation to decide to help pass this legislation just so we can ride our bikes in these sensitive wilderness areas. The wilderness was not set aside for us, but for preservation so it will exist for future generations.

We cannot forecast the impact of demolishing the Wilderness Act. However, by working together, we can create bike trails in appropriate places while honoring the protection given to our lands that sustain wildlife, watersheds and an ever-diminishing sense of solitude.

Aldo Leopold said, "We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us.

When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect."

Please contact your senators and tell them to vote "no" on bill S.3205.

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