

Mountain biking on friendlier ground

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By Howard Meyerson
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It wasn't so long ago that mountain biking was viewed as a rogue sport in the well-established world of outdoor recreation.

Everyone had their piece of the public lands pie. No one wanted to share with bratty cyclists. That included the state.

So it was with great interest that I read a recent press release by the DNR which boasts that "Michigan mountain biking trails are among the best in the nation."

The press notice spoke of Michigan's recent B-plus grade by the International Mountain Bicycling Association in Boulder, Colorado. The organization issues a report card every year, grading states and countries on their mountain-biking conditions.

Michigan gets high grade

Read that to mean conditions that include whether the riding community is developing partnerships with government; whether club growth is up or down; whether the politics and trails are rider-friendly and how many trail miles are on the ground.

Michigan was one of 12 states with a B-plus grade. Its company included Idaho, New Mexico, Washington and New Hampshire.

Virginia topped the list with an A. Rhode Island came in last with a C-minus.

British Columbia and Scotland topped the list of international riding destinations, each with an A. Italy, Israel, England, Australia and Wales got B's. Mexico got a C-plus, topping northern Ireland with a C.

This wasn't the first year that Michigan scored so well. It has had that grade for about five years. But it was the first time that the DNR opted to acknowledge it or even brag about it.

Biking has come far

That's a far cry from the early days when organized riders used to have to claw their way into DNR meetings to have a voice at the table; light years from needing to prove their credibility and the looming demand for trails.

The DNR's announcement is a huge credit to organized riders -- in particular the Michigan Mountain Biking Association. And it's a credit to top DNR executives who not only see what MMBA volunteers have accomplished, but also see the potential for making Michigan a mountain-biking destination.

"We have a tremendous amount of land with trails on them and trail access is not as big an issue here as with other states," said Todd Scott, the MMBA executive director.

"A gap we had in the past was a lack of urban trails in the city of Detroit, but we got permission to build one there this year at Rouge Park. It's a mile and quarter now and we hope to make it a three-mile loop this spring. Eventually we will make it much longer."

That's a classic example of the MMBA's can-do attitude. Back in 1988 when it formed, its members had almost to plead their case and the need for trails.

Today the 2,000-member organization maintains 516 miles of trail around the state. Roughly 264 miles are located at state recreation areas like Fort Custer, Yankee Springs, Ionia and Bass River along with various state forests. The rest are scattered at city, county and township parks.

That growth came as a result of MMBA's ongoing effort to convince state and other land managers that the trails were needed and that the group could be counted on to build and maintain the trails.

Michigan, you see, ranks sixth in the nation with 1.6 million mountain bikers, according to the Outdoor Industry Association, a trade organization that tracks non-motorized outdoor recreation. An OIA survey shows California leads with 5.27 million riders followed by Florida's 2.57 million, New York's 2.3 million, Texas' 2 million and Pennsylvania's 1.67 million.

"We peaked in 2001 with 46 million mountain bikers," said Mike Lee, the spokesman for OIA in Boulder Colo. "Today we have 39.5 million participants in the U.S. who went riding an average of 16 times in 2004."

With all that one might ask why Michigan did not get an A. Mark Eller, the spokesman for the International Mountain Bicycling Association, said Michigan is getting close.

"There are beautiful places to ride in Michigan and Michigan leadership is strong. It has a real possibility of getting to the top," he said. "The difference between getting an A or not is having enough trails to serve the population base."

Ahh. Yet again the issue turns to funding.

Scott said the bottleneck in Michigan has become the funding reductions due to a loss of general revenue funds for programs like state recreation areas where many trails are located. Funding cuts mean fewer planners on staff.

"Things are moving slower," said Scott. "Things take forever. There aren't a lot of planners on staff and that holds up trail expansions. At Pontiac Lake State Park we had hoped to have a project done by 2005 and it is just getting started.

"At Waterloo Recreation Area we hoped to build an 18-mile trail and connect it with the trail at Pinckney Recreation Area to make a 50-60 mile network. The planning that was to start last year still has not begun."

In biking vernacular, that one would be called an "Epic" ride. It would be one of several located around the state -- a demanding challenge for even veteran riders and -- and a clear snapshot of just how far mountain biking has come.