

Uphill climb to allow mountain bikes on PCT

By Jessie Marchesseau

You could walk or ride a horse the 2,650 miles from Mexico to Canada along the Pacific Crest Trail, but don't try to ride your bike.

Prohibited since 1988, riding a bicycle on the Pacific Crest Trail could cost you as much as \$5,000 and six months in jail, though tickets normally run between \$50 and \$150.

The Pacific Crest Trail Reassessment Initiative is trying to change that. Since 2010, the group has been working to get the U.S. Forest Service to reconsider the ban on bicycles. It contends that the trail was never meant to be a foot- and equestrian-only trail, but mountain biking, which began to gain popularity in the 1980s, simply did not exist when the trail was originally developed.



The junction of the Tahoe Rim Trail and Pacific Crest Trail at Meiss Meadow.
Photo/Ben Fish

The PCT has been around since the 1930s and stretches through California, Oregon and Washington. In 1968, it was designated

a National Scenic Trail by the National Trails System Act. It was not until 1988 that the PCT Advisory Council unanimously agreed to ban bicycles on the entire trail.

Bicycles are already prohibited in all National Wilderness Areas, and the PCT runs through more designated wilderness areas than any other National Scenic Trail. About 46 percent of it is in wilderness areas. This includes the Desolation and Granite Chief wilderness areas near the Lake Tahoe Basin. Of the nearly 50 miles of the PCT within the Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit, 21.8 are in designated wilderness areas. It is the other 26.7 miles that the PCTRI is trying to gain access to, along with the rest of the non-wilderness portions of the PCT.

Part of that mileage is the Tahoe Rim Trail. As a multi-use trail, the Rim Trail allows bicycles on most non-wilderness sections, but it also shares part of its route with the PCT. As a result, the West Shore section of the Rim Trail is essentially a bicycle-free zone.

In the Lake Tahoe area, several popular mountain bike trails also intersect or run into the PCT. Having access to the trail, especially in the non-wilderness area between Meiss Meadow and Echo Lake, would allow riders to easily transition from one trail to another.

“As a local mountain biker in South Lake Tahoe, I can attest that having some sections open to bikes on the PCT in non-wilderness areas would greatly improve connectivity of some trails such as Hawley Grade, Round Lake, Sayles Canyon, Brian Meadow and Pony Express,” said Ben Fish, an avid South Shore mountain biker.

However, Beth Boyst, PCT program manager with the USFS, said that even opening small sections to allow access between popular mountain bike trails is unlikely.

“When you start changing things a little bit, you get a

slippery slope of changing the trail experience," she told *Lake Tahoe News*.

This idea of "changing the trail experience" is a big part of why some people, hikers and USFS officials alike, are opposed to the idea of bicycles on the trail. Online forums reveal that some users believe mountain bikes would disturb the overall serenity of the trail. Others fear bicycles would frighten horses.

"This experience is about being able to commune with nature in a peaceful environment, away from the trappings of civilization," said Mark Larabee, spokesman for the Pacific Crest Trail Association. "PCTA holds that trail experience in the highest regard."

The PCTA is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to "protect, preserve and promote the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail as an internationally significant resource for the enjoyment of hikers and equestrians, and for the value that wild and scenic lands provide to all people." It is the USFS's primary provider of trail maintenance for the trail. Last year, PCTA volunteers contributed more than 92,000 hours.

This is one area the PCTRI suggests that mountain bikers could benefit the trail. In 2011, International Mountain Bicycling Association-affiliated organizations across the U.S. collectively put in more than 700,000 volunteer hours maintaining public bicycle trails.

"They're always struggling to find more volunteers and funding," Jeff Barker, a PCTRI supporter and advocate, told *Lake Tahoe News*. "The mountain bike community could bring a lot of people and money to the cause. Bikers are a community that is enthusiastic about trail maintenance."

Lake Tahoe has one of the largest networks of mountain bike trails in the state. The Tahoe Area Mountain Biking Association alone put in about 2,000 volunteer hours of trail

maintenance in 2012.

“It is obviously a passionate issue for many and TAMBA is maintaining a neutral approach to it for now,” said TAMBA President Kevin Joell of the PCT initiative. “I can say that if sections are ever opened to bikes in our area, that we would be happy to assist with maintenance as we have on many other trails around the lake.”

However, it does not look like that will be any time soon. On Feb. 5, Randy Moore, Pacific Southwest regional forester for the USFS, issued a letter to the PCTRI stating that the Forest Service will not be pursuing a termination of the bicycle closure or any amendments to the PCT management plan.

There is more to it than just changing the rules, Boyst pointed out. Studies would have to be done to determine the ramifications of a different use and increased usage. Bicycle trails must take different erosion issues into consideration than footpaths, and the PCT was originally designed for foot and horse traffic.

Moore and Boyst insist the trail was always intended to be exclusively a footpath and equestrian trail. Supporters of the PCTRI insist it was intended for all non-motorized use, bicycles included. Both groups cite the National Trails System Act and the PCT Comprehensive Management Plan to support their respective positions.

So while the two sides continue to hash out the semantics of the governing documents, outdoorsmen can still enjoy the splendor of the Pacific Crest Trail ... on foot or horseback.

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For more info, on the Pacific Crest Trail – go online.

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