

Mountain bikers want to feel welcome

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ILLUSTRATION:Photo: Lynn Ball, The Ottawa Citizen / Young cyclists explore Gatineau Park this summer at Creative Wheels Mountain Bike Camp. The camp owner, Dominique Larocque, writes in the space below that the National Capital Commission must work with enthusiasts and suppliers to make mountain bikers a welcome and constructive part of the Gatineau Park recreational landscape.

HEADLINE: Mountain bikers want to feel welcome

I am tired of the endless rhetoric surrounding mountain biking in the Gatineau Park. I am tired of mountain biking being the scapegoat for the lack of creativity and decision-making abilities at the National Capital Commission. I doubt that the NCC, along with uneducated hikers, will succeed in making our sport into the sacrificial lamb of Gatineau Park.

We can dramatize and complain all we want about the negative effects this sport has on the Gatineau Park trail system, but I do believe that riding a bike is better for the environment (and for the waistline) than driving a car, air conditioner blasting. The NCC, hikers and bikers need to unite in the preservation of clean air and green spaces.

So, what could possibly spoil such a pristine place as the Gatineau Park? A large group of unaware commercial-recreational users.

I agree that mountain bikers have been very lucky to roam freely amongst the rocks and the trees for so long without having to give anything back financially (a daily/seasonal/annual user fee) or physically (trail building and maintenance). I don't agree with the illegal trail cutting and unofficial trail riding that takes place in the park.

I do know, however, that we need funding to guarantee the preservation of our green spaces, and user fees could generate a big part of this funding. Bumper-to-bumper traffic during Gatineau Park Fall Rhapsody could possibly start generating money that is urgently necessary to guarantee proper land management and the education of the current mountain bike users.

If we are to preserve recreational activities in Gatineau Park, we need to start giving back. From what I hear around me, people are ready to give back. What boggles my mind is why the NCC does not create more initiatives that would allow people to do so.

I was a mountain bike trail user when the NCC officially welcomed the mountain-bike crowd into the park in 1990. What the NCC lacked at that time was vision because it did not foresee the consequences this exciting and ever-evolving sport was going to have on the Gatineau Park landscape. I specify "ever-evolving sport" because we can no longer discuss and/or write about mountain biking without specifying the style of mountain biking one practises.

The 100,000 mountain-bike visits in the park have to be categorized into either recreational or hard-core biking. The latter means free-riding, downhill, trial riding and cross-country racing. It is by fulfilling the specific needs of these different land users that we will smoothen our ride in the park. The question is: Can it be done, and in time to save my sport?

I believe it can, but it will require time and energy from people who share a passion for the sport. My prevalent vision remains the exact same as six years ago: Develop Camp Fortune ski hill as the hub of all hard-core mountain bike activities, providing a technical play park, more single tracks and an information and service centre.

The remainder of the Gatineau Park trail system could then be enjoyed by recreational mountain bikers and hikers who want to access at a leisurely pace the various attraction points of the park.

Camp Fortune and the NCC need to agree before next spring on trail user fees for mountain biking and other summer recreation activities. This money could be utilized for trail design, building and maintenance. The single track leading out of Camp Fortune could then be restored to increase the quality of experience of both hiker and biker.

Mountain bike retailers and suppliers need to start playing a more active role in getting their customers motivated and involved in the politics of the sport. Otherwise, the avenues for biking will only keep declining, as well as those businesses' bottom lines.

Educators and race organizers also have to find solutions to issues revolving around this sport. Working at changing the "mountain masters, weekend warriors, rock jocks, cowboy" image of our sport could be a start.

Partnerships between landowners and leaders in the sport are needed to create ways to provide the type of riding that people want.

I was very disappointed by the content of the latest NCC flyer entitled "Show a Little Respect -- Have a Lot of Fun." Being a consultant in the field, I wish I had had an opportunity to comment on the flyer before it went to print. I find it lacks valuable information on the technical requirements of the sport and misses out on educating mainstream bikers and park users to the evolution that has happened in our sport in the past decade.

I have been mountain biking for 17 years and have represented my country at the 1991 Mountain Bike World Championship in Lucca, Italy. Since 1995, my firm, Creative Wheel, has taught individuals of all ages the health benefits of outdoor recreation.

Mountain biking plays an important role in promoting fitness and countering obesity. I know that numbers will keep increasing as more families and individuals of all walks of life start discovering this wonderful sport. I can only hope that it is those same individuals' creative spirits that will guarantee the survival of the sport.

Dominique Larocque runs Creative Wheel, which had 130 women and 400 children in mountain-bike camps this summer, based at Camp Fortune.

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