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Feeling unfairly vilified



WHEEL OF MISFORTUNE - On Top Bike Shop co-owner Dan Sedlacek hopes his kids will have the chance to ride on the North Shore.

By Tia Abell (Rob Newell photo)

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Mountain bikers are getting a bad reputation.

They're accused of tearing up the hillsides, creating traffic and parking problems, scaring nocturnal wildlife, crushing plants, crashing through ponds, threatening frogs, changing their clothes in public and, in general, behaving rudely.

No wonder some residents want to ban this lot from using the trails on Fromme Mountain - particularly as the bikers must pass through and park in their neighbourhood to reach the trails.

But while the District of North Vancouver will revisit its Alpine Recreational Strategic Study next month to assess the needs of all parties, longtime biker Dan Sedlacek said his two-wheeling community has been wrongly characterized.

"We're being portrayed as villains to the mountain, and to local residents," said the 33-year-old local businessman, a co-owner of On Top Bike Shop with his brother John.

"A lot of people (bikers) are doing volunteer work to keep it clear; we're trail-builders, stewards of the mountain."

Sedlacek, who's biked for 14 years, regularly attends the District's meetings on the mountain biking issue. What he hears worries him.

"I just think that mountain biking has been brought to council's attention in a negative way, with much anger from residents, unfortunately.

"But it's an awesome recreation. You're getting kids up in the forest doing physical exercise, and as for the damage, I don't see a lot of that going on. As long as we're allowed to continue maintaining the trails, there's very little impact from this sport."

Sedlacek noted that he'd never seen any other groups volunteer to maintain trails on Fromme - although hikers and dog-walkers frequent the area. His store, however, sponsors three to four trail maintenance days per year. The media contact for the North Shore Mountain Bike Association, Ken Neave said mountain bikers aren't trail destroyers - they're the ones who have the know-how and willpower to keep the pathways in good shape. With more than 400 members from across the Lower Mainland, the bike association has an army of fit and motivated volunteers for trail maintenance. "Our agreement with the District is not to build new trails but to shore up the ones already there. And what really damages the trails? A well-built trail will not erode from biking."

Water is the true trail-wrecker, he explained.

"If they doubt that, I would direct them to the Grand Canyon."

The bike association will team up with local hiking and walking groups to repair sections of the Baden-Powell trail on Sunday.

"The section we're doing is used almost exclusively by hikers because it doesn't access the trails mountain bikers usually use."

His point, of course, is that mountain bikers want everyone to enjoy the trails.

"We want to share the trails and help maintain the trails. What we see is a small minority of people who don't want to share, period."

One may be curious as to the fuss over Fromme. Mountain biking areas are also open on Mount Seymour and Cypress Mountain - so would losing access to Fromme make a difference?

Sedlacek sounded a little horrified when asked.

"It would be pretty difficult to find a better area than Fromme. It's so popular and well used because it is so good."

In fact, he believes many bikers would continue to use the park, even if banned, simply because they've used it for so long.

"It would be super difficult to police such a thing ... such an exhaustion of effort to stop such a big thing."

A biking ban also doesn't make sense to him because he sees the benefits of mountain biking as spilling off in all directions - from hotels and restaurants to gas stations and bike shops to the health of local children.

"Everyone's gaining from this. I believe our community is gaining because our kids are out in the forest using their bikes - not learning how to smoke behind the 7-11.

"It's very cool to mountain bike. Kids get exercise in the forest and I couldn't think of a better place for them to be."

Sedlacek takes his two children, a four-year-old girl and 19-month-old boy, for walks in Fromme and said he hopes they'll also have the opportunity to mountain bike on its trails when they're older.

"They love it when they see mountain bikers when we're on Fromme," he said with a chuckle.

"What's unique about Fromme is you have to climb to get up there. All the mountains are unique in their own way."

Neave, a 41-year-old who has biked on the North Shore for about 10 years, said Fromme's climb is part of the appeal.

The ascent also helps thin out the stream of cyclists. Slower, Sunday bikers tend to lag a little behind while those in tip-top shape chug on ahead.

In fact the whole network and variety of North Shore trails is what draws people from all over the world, he said. The trails are steep and the coastal climate ensures plenty of damp, slippery pathways.

"Every time you turn a corner, you have a new challenge. Elsewhere you could go a half-mile before the next drop. Here you ride a bike length and a half and have a new challenge - even expert riders feel beat up when they're done."

Of course, the Shore's proximity to a large urban centre is a bonus, he said.

Neave noticed a big change about six or seven years ago when the often internet-based mountain bike media noticed "The Shore." At one time, he used to know most of the people he passed on the trails, but not anymore.

"It's a vacation destination for people from all over the world. We've had emails and letters from the U.K., Germany, Australia and New Zealand - they see this in the news and people are saying, 'Wow, I plan my vacation around this, I hope there are trails to ride on when I get there.'"

Neither Neave nor Sedlacek deny that a few cyclists exhibit rude behaviors - such as roaring past hikers without slowing down.

But the bike association strives to educate riders to the ethics of the trails, Neave said.

"There's going to be irresponsible bikers....No doubt if 10 mountain bikers slow down and smile and chat, you're not going to remember that. You're going to remember the guy who came screaming through the trail."

He dismisses accusations made at a recent District meeting that bikers often ride through a pond, threatening the amphibians.

"I don't want to be ankle-deep in mud in a frog pond," he said, noting that District of North Vancouver staff already fenced off a section of the pond and built a path clear of the area.

Meanwhile, Sedlacek believes most of the annoyance for local residents would be relieved with a parking lot and washroom facilities.

As far as the traffic issue, he's sympathetic but said the reality is the residents live next to a recreational area at the edge of a growing city.

"You have to take measures to ensure the impacts are handled well."

He acknowledged that of the dozens of emails sent to District councillors from concerned cyclists around the world, a high proportion were abusive to councillors - in particular, Ernie Crist.

Crist is stridently opposed to mountain biking on Fromme. "It's the biggest con job I've ever seen in my life," the councillor said of local bikers' efforts to appear environmentally sensitive.

"Why do you think they want to come here? Because everywhere else in the world it's banned."

Crist believes biking damages Fromme's fragile, forested slopes - regardless of any trail maintenance - and that the area is just not big enough to accommodate the demand. And the District of North Vancouver cannot afford to pay the nearly \$1 million required to create a parking lot, he added.

"They want to ride down the steep forested slope of Mt. Fromme - it's convenient and the Hell with everyone else."

Yet Sedlacek hopes Crist and others against biking on Mt. Fromme will keep an open mind - and that both sides will keep their cool.

"We need to be reasonable and hear each other out. Let's show we're reasonable people and move forward on this - the more people who get involved, the more solutions we're going to find."