

# Open Space Use On The Summit – Mountain biking

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In this installment about open space use on the summit, I would like to discuss what seems to have become one of the hotter of the hot button issues concerning trail use, mountain biking. Let me start out by letting you know that I am a mountain biker and have been riding the trails on the summit for over 15 years. I do not consider myself an expert rider and ride the trails strictly for the physical workout and natural enjoyment of the area. I believe that there are a lot of misconceptions that people have concerning mountain biking in the summit area and I would like to discuss some of them here. Some of the issues concerning hiking have been discussed in a [previous post](#) and many of the points concerning the policy of multi-use trails that were discussed also pertain to mountain biking, so you might want to take a look at that post if you haven't already.



## Mountain Biking is too Extreme for the summit

It is important to understand that like many outdoor activities, the term “mountain biking” encompasses a full spectrum of activities that involve a bike and outdoor terrain. They go from the sublime to the extreme. Unfortunately, the rhetoric that you hear about mountain bikes on the trail often lump all of these activities together and apply them to local conditions.

You will hear that mountain biking is an “extreme sport” that will result in mountain bikers “screaming” down our trails and if you venture out there you will be taking your life in your hands. Everyone has seen the X-games and has seen the extreme side of the sport. I have heard these comments coupled with the statement that hiking on the other hand is a moderate activity that does not present the dangers of the extreme mountain biker. We can all identify with a leisurely hike. I would point out, however, that people have the amazing ability to take anything to the extreme. Case in point, consider hiking taken to the extreme, The Tough Mudder.

My point here is not that mountain biking can't be an extreme sport, but that riding in the summit does not involve the extreme side of the sport. Riders on the summit are primarily cross country trail riders that, like hikers, are out to explore the area and get a good physical workout while enjoying the outdoors. The terrain on the summit is not really suited for the more extreme activities of the sport like [freeriding](#) and [down hilling](#). The terrain is either too flat or too steep and the wide flat trails that are in the area don't lend themselves well to thrill riding. I think most of the riders that visit the summit would agree that the more extreme parts of the sport are better left to other areas like ski resort hills and formal mountain bike parks that can cater to the technical parts of the sport. Personally, I would oppose any effort to allow extreme riding on our multi-use trails. This is something that the TDLT is well aware of and it is why they have designated a few “mountain bike” only trails away from the multi-use trails to accommodate any riders looking for a more challenging ride.

## Mountain Bikes tear up the trails and cause erosion

This is a very old argument that not only pertains to mountain bikes, but to trails in general. The fact is that any trail whether natural or man-made contributes to the erosion in the area. There is in fact a wealth of literature available on trails, trail design and the impact they have on the environment. Just Google “trail design”. As you might imagine there have been a lot of studies on the effect of mountain bikes and I have read several. As with many issues you can find data to support it's pros and cons. The bottom line in my mind is that all trail activity has an effect on the environment and the important thing is to design and maintain the trails to minimize their effects.

When the trail plan was presented by TDLT in the [summer of 2013](#), it was clear that many of the trails were existing ski trails (which were originally logging roads). These trails had in no way been “designed” for any use other than removing logs or skiing on 5 ft of snow. Certainly they had not been subject to modern trail design techniques to minimize effect. TDLT made a very informative presentation on trail design at their presentation. To address some of the issues with the local trails I did [a survey](#) that summer with mountain biking in mind. What I found interesting in

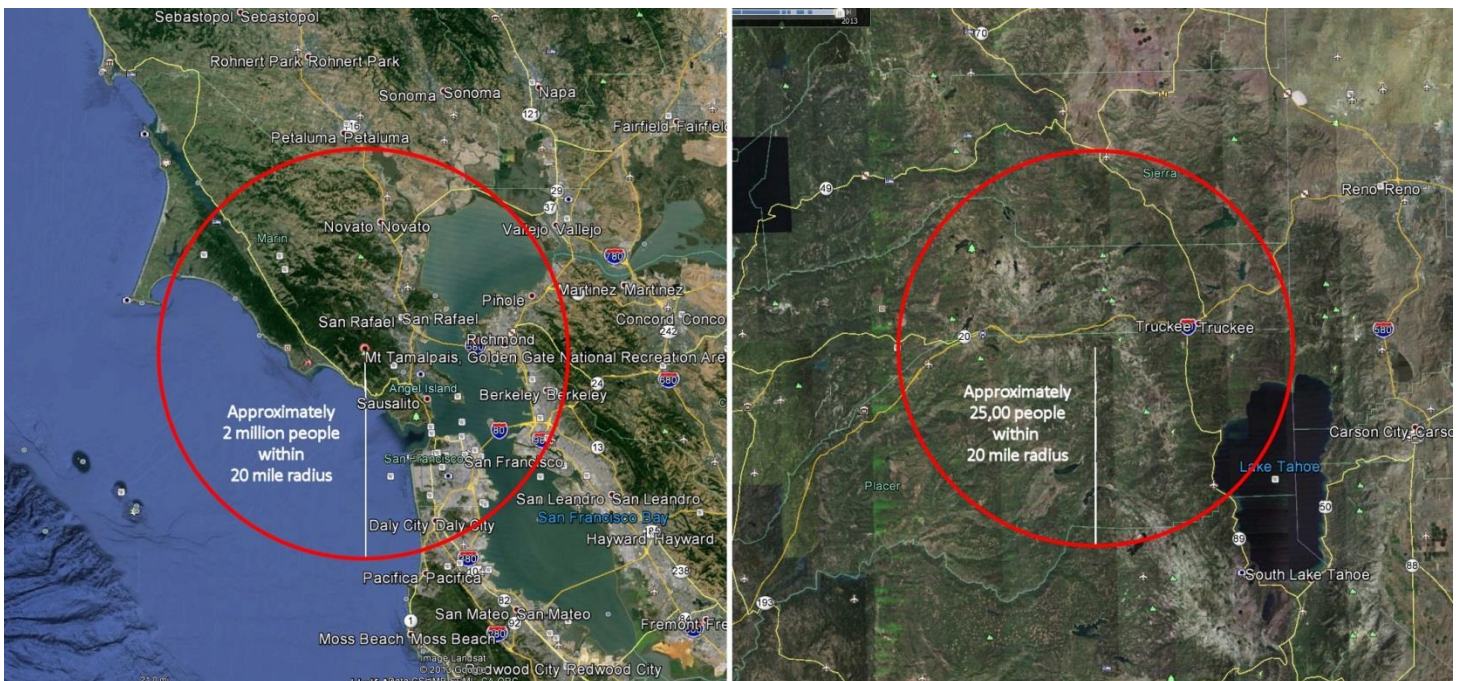
that survey were the observations of minimum effects on the trails after a 24 hr mountain bike race run that summer that had literally thousands of mountain bikes running on the trails. Subsequently, a group from TDLT, SLCWD and a local hydrologist, John Cobourn, did a walking survey of the trails around Serene Lakes. They were able to identify problem areas which TDLT plans to incorporate into their trail design plan.

While there is no denying that the trail use, including mountain bikes, has an effect on erosion, these effects can be mitigated by proper design and maintenance of the trail which is the intention of TDLT.

### **We don't want another Marin County on the summit**

This is a cry that I have heard raised about the trail plan. When we got our first "mountain bikes" back in the 80's (that was just a normal 10 speed bike frame with some larger knobby tires) we drove over to [Mt Tam](#) to test them out. This was long before it became a mecca for Bay Area downhillers. The draw is the same as it is now, you could drive to the top and then ride (coast) down the trails. I have to admit it was a pretty exhilarating experience on a bike with no suspension. Today riders with full suspension bikes flock to the top and do scream down those trails. No one can deny that trail conflict is a big issue in Marin.

When I look around the summit, I have a hard time equating anything here with Mt Tam and Marin county. Just about everything I can think of is different from the weather to the terrain. But the primary reason that the Summit is not like Marin county is shown in the graphic below.



It's the people. As the map shows, the population within a 20 mile radius of Mt Tam is 80 times the population of the center of the Royal Gorge open space area. Isn't that a big reason why we all come here? The Summit is not Marin County and it never will be. That includes the mountain biking. Sure we will have the occasional thrill seeking bay area mountain biker drive the 3-4 hours to come up here, but that's not the same as having thousands of mountain bikers about 20 minutes away.

### **Mountain bikers are going to flock to the Summit now that the word is out**

This is sort of a variation on the "build it and they will come" argument. This assumes that the summit has been a secret until now and mountain bikers didn't know it was here. This is not the case. We are fortunate to have one of the best trail rides in the Sierras right on the summit, [The Hole in the Ground Trail](#). This trail is world famous and





mountain bikers come from all over every year to ride the route. I have ridden the trail a number of times and have also hiked it. It is a wonderful trail ride or hike. The trail is meticulously maintained by a number of organizations including mountain biking groups and I would hold it up as a perfect example of what mountain biking on the summit is all about. It is a cross country trail ride that really tests the skill and stamina of a rider. I have hiked the trail during bike season and have had only positive interactions with riders.

There is no reason to think that riders coming to the Royal Gorge trail system will be any different than those coming to Hole in the Ground. The truth is that the majority of the riders on the Royal Gorge trails are going to be local residents and vacationers with their families. When my kids were young we road on the ski trails and when I ride now on the rare occasions that I do see other riders they are often whole families out on their bikes. Sure we are going to have the occasional irresponsible rider out there, but that is the world we live in. I firmly support the policy of "Howdy" that TDLT is promoting for the trail system and believe that with proper signage to guide users, everyone, including mountain bikers can use the trails together. We just need to give it a chance this summer.

Next post will have a discussion of the our four legged friends that helped to win the west.



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