

Roadies and MTBers:

Who's Winning and Losing the Hearts and Minds of the Public?

by James Hart

Like all other sports and recreations, cycling is not without its controversy. The debate is already well-known to most: the sport's supporters point toward its positive environmental impact, lower expenses and health benefits. Opponents believe the increased bicycle traffic has led to more congestion and more dangerous traffic patterns. Despite the lack of agreement, Sydney continues to expand its cycleway network to accommodate increasing demand as more workers have turned to their bicycles to make their morning commute.



Cycling supporters point toward its positive environmental impact, lower expenses and health benefits, but opponents believe its popularity has led to more congestion and more dangerous traffic patterns. Photo courtesy of www.nationalcapital.gov.au.

But even some cyclists are unhappy with the way the city chooses to accommodate its growing bike culture. According to the New South Wales government, its new cycleways are designed to give riders their own lane, separate from motor traffic, which makes the road safer for everyone. This claim is often challenged, however, by motorists and cyclists alike.

“I don't reckon [the cycleways] are much use. They're just dangerous,” said Andrew, a regular cyclist who uses the Darling Harbour Bridge as part of his commute. “They should have probably just have made the bikes ride one way, the same way traffic's going, to make it easy for everyone. Because otherwise with the two lanes, it just makes traffic more complicated and more dangerous.”

There's no clear cut answer to these issues, and debate increases as commuter cycling continues to grow in popularity. But what about mountain biking? Interest is picking up for trail riding as well, and although its issues are different, the sport is turning every bit as political.

Unlike their commuting brethren, the controversy surrounding mountain bikers doesn't involve their use of Sydney roadways. Most of the trails used by riders are found far from major commuter arteries, and usually serve no other purpose than to provide bikers with a place to ride.



The claim that the new cycleways increases rider safety is often challenged by motorists and cyclists alike. Photo courtesy of dpti.sa.gov.au.

Further, a lot of mountain bikers don't have quick access to their favourite trail, and use either their cars or public transportation to get there.

“It's surprising that you bump into people who have driven out from Sutherland or Blacktown, so they've come a fair distance to come up here,” said mountain biker Nick Jones about others who frequent the Manly Dam. Although Jones said that he lives close enough to the trail to not have to drive, he often uses his car to visit other trails farther out.

“This is where I ride locally here, but I've also driven down to Canberra or Mt. Stromlo,” he said. “There're heaps of really great rides out there.”

More riders are getting into mountain biking as the sport continues to develop. In North Sydney, there are several large mountain biking clubs such as Turramurra Off-Road Cyclists and the Manly Warringah Mountain Bike Club. And more area cycle shops have begun to carry mountain bikes and equipment, in addition to their road gear.

However, unlike commuter cycling, the number of available locations and services for mountain bikers has not kept up with its increasing demand.

“It can get pretty busy,” Jones said about Manly. “If everyone knew it was a dry track, this car park would have at least eighteen cars in it. And the reserve lot’s usually full on dry days as well.”



With a distinct lack of proper trails to ride on, many mountain bikers have resorted to riding illegally through restricted lands. Authorities have responded to the problem by closing illegal trails, erecting walls and fencing around restricted lands. Photo courtesy of www.national-parks.nsw.gov.au.

With a distinct lack of proper trails to ride on, many mountain bikers have resorted to riding illegally through restricted lands. According to consulting organisation World Trail, there have been numerous reports in mountain bike publications and the mainstream media that complain of the escalating conflict between mountain bikers and land managers. Authorities have responded to the problem by closing illegal trails and erecting walls and fencing around restricted lands. The NSW government has even issued fines to illegal riders, ranging from \$110 to \$1,200. In some instances, bikes have been confiscated by police.

The problem is so bad that the Sydney Catchment Authority (SCA) has recently purchased five new surveillance cameras to help target illegal activity and trespassers in the restricted areas surrounding its drinking water dams. According to SCA, the use of cameras and regular patrols led to over sixty fines last year.

“These people were caught engaging in a number of illegal activities including walking, mountain bike riding and trail bike riding in restricted lands, which can damage vegetation, cause erosion and can have a negative impact on water quality and biodiversity,” SCA Chief Executive Officer Michael Bullen said in a recent press release. However, World Trail has stated that despite the negative publicity, the positive outcome from these conflicts has been that several mountain biking groups are mobilizing to begin lobbying local and state government for legal mountain bike trails, and some progress has already been made.

Both the Kuring-Gai and Hornsby Shire Councils are actively seeking to introduce new mountain biking facilities on council-managed land. The Kuring-Gai council has also been working with the local mountain bike community to develop a number of legal cross-country singletracks in the area as an alternative to illegal trails on restricted lands.

Other city councils are starting to develop their own trail plans, as the number of mountain biking enthusiasts continues to grow. World Trail urges riders and advocacy groups to work with local government in developing recreational areas for riders, instead of using illegal trails that harm the environment and could lead to fines. The group suggests contacting local councils about expanding trail locations, since local councils are often less constrained than those working within national parks, whose role as custodians of the parks often puts them at odds with recreational user groups.