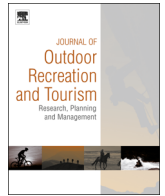




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Riding styles and characteristics of rides among Slovenian mountain bikers and management challenges

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ABSTRACT

The increased interest in mountain biking on trails in natural areas necessitates the systematic management of mountain biking. In Slovenia, access to forest singletracks and signposted mountain trails, which are highly preferred by mountain bikers, is generally not legal. There is also a lack of mountain biking management and infrastructure at the national level. An important challenge for mountain biking management in natural areas is conflicts with other user groups, particularly hikers. This paper investigates the relationships between riding preferences and styles, conflicts, and attitudes towards mountain biking management among Slovenian mountain bikers. The survey results reveal four riding preference groups, largely consistent with three identified main riding styles of mountain biking in natural areas: gravity, all-mountain, and cross country. The identified key predictors for encountering a conflict with hikers are preferences for riding on hiking trails, the importance of downhill speed, and the frequency of practicing gravity riding in bike parks. Opinions about different management measures suggest the ineffectiveness of formal sanctioning, but a high willingness for volunteer participation in trail maintenance activities. The findings imply that the successful management of mountain biking in Slovenia should combine legislative measures for opening access to trails in natural areas, the establishment of single-use trails for specific riding styles, and indirect management actions to promote education in the fields of nature protection, responsible access, and trail tolerance. Mountain biking clubs and associations may offer a promising avenue for stimulating active involvement of mountain bikers and promoting education and bridge-building actions (e.g., volunteer work).

MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS

- Riding on narrow trails in natural areas is a highly desirable experience among Slovenian mountain bikers.
- Riding in natural areas is commonly practiced and largely tolerated despite legal restrictions. However, organized and commercial mountain biking activities are restrained.
- Respondents are willing to voluntarily participate in trail maintenance, while increased fines would not substantially alter their riding practices.
- An appropriate infrastructure for various riding styles is needed, including legal access to multiple-use trails, with an option to limit bike access to popular hiking trails.
- Indirect management and bridge-building actions should be pursued, including nature protection education, responsible access, trail tolerance, and voluntary work.

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1. Introduction

Technological progress, with automatization and optimization of working processes, has led to greater individual leisure time

(Burgin & Hardiman, 2012). Mountain biking has become a popular outdoor leisure activity, characterized by recreational, competitive, and tourist dimensions (Davies & Newsome, 2009; Odprimopoti.si, 2014; Webber, 2007). The increased interest in mountain biking requires the systematic management of the activity with a mixture of legal regulations, strategies, and spatial planning as well as funding and models for the development and maintenance of mountain biking infrastructure.

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Mountain biking can be practiced on different road or off-road surfaces, on formal or informal trails. It can be performed in a variety of environments such as open countryside and forests; mountains, hills, and plains; urban parks and woodlands; and even indoor facilities. With technological advances, it has evolved different riding styles and is continually diversifying (Taylor, 2010b; Webber, 2007).

Mountain bikers often desire to ride on narrow trails in natural areas (McKnight, 2015; Rowe, 2013; Schulte, 2003; Symmonds, Hammitt, & Quisenberry, 2000; Taylor, 2010b; Zajc, 2015). However, this preference results in a high conflict potential and poses challenges for land and access managers. According to Webber (2007), the efficient management of mountain biking therefore also requires an understanding of various riding styles.

This paper focuses on mountain biking in Slovenia, where legislation regarding mountain bike access to natural areas is complicated. Access to forest roads is generally legal, but this is not true for access to forest trails and signposted mountain trails, which are highly preferred by mountain bikers (Zajc & Berzelak, 2014). Conflicts between mountain bikers and other users are often reported in informal discussions, but a lack of systematic research frequently leads to argumentation and decision-making based on subjective and emotional perceptions of mountain biking.

The main objective of the paper is to contribute more comprehensive empirical insights and foster the understanding of mountain biking activities, practices, and problems in Slovenia. This can help improve their management in Slovenia and offer findings applicable to other countries.

We first discuss riding styles commonly regarded as mountain biking by summarizing criteria to distinguish riding styles, as laid out by different authors, associations, and selected industry brands. Then we briefly present key aspects of mountain biking management in Slovenia, particularly in light of legal regulations, nongovernmental actors, and conflicts between mountain bikers and other users in natural areas. After outlining the methodology of our study, we identify riding preference groups and related riding styles and explore the relations between preferences, characteristics of rides, conflicts, and attitudes towards the management of mountain biking. We conclude with implications of the findings for mountain biking management.

2. Riding styles in mountain biking

Mountain bikers are not a homogeneous group of outdoor recreationists. They differ in skill levels, motivation, equipment, riding styles, and many other characteristics. Advanced technology has enabled the development of mountain bikes for different riding styles and has contributed to an increasing diversification of the sport (Webber, 2007; Zajc 2015). However, there is no common definition of a riding style, and varying descriptions are used even in the literature to describe this term (e. g., rider type, type of mountain biking, or category of mountain biker). Examples of various expressions are illustrated in Appendix 1 of the online Supplementary material.

The decision to take up mountain biking and the preference for a specific riding style is influenced by different factors (Skår, Odden, & Vistad, 2008; Taylor, 2010b). Motivations can be functional, like needing physical exercise, or affective, where important drivers include feelings, thrills, or escapism (Taylor, 2010b). Mountain bikers often seek a kinesthetic landscape experience. This is not necessarily related to speed; it can, for example, be a feeling of mastering the mountain bike on a technically demanding trail (Brown, 2013b). Trail design factors (slopes, turns, straight trails, bumps, obstacles) and trail erosion factors (roots, rocks, mud,

gullies) are all important for the mountain biking experience (Symmonds, Hammitt, & Quisenberry, 2000). However, many mountain bikers ride in several riding styles, blurring the boundaries between individual styles (Davies & Newsome, 2009; Taylor, 2010b; Webber, 2007).

Riding styles can also be categorized according to the technical characteristics of mountain bikes on the market. This is an important aspect not only because different mountain bikes are more suited to different riding styles, but also because of the popularization of specific riding styles and their corresponding equipment through media, manufacturers, and competitive events.

A feature that probably most generally distinguishes bikes for different riding styles is their front and rear suspension travel. Based on an assessment by four Slovenian experts involved in mountain biking advocacy, competition, trail building, and education, we identified four major categories of mountain bikes according to this criterion:

- Hardtail cross-country: no suspension or only front suspension.
- Full suspension cross-country: front and rear suspension to 100 mm.
- Full suspension all-mountain: front and rear suspension 100–160 mm.
- Gravity (downhill/freeride): front and rear suspension more than 160 mm.

Mountain bike industry brands use different phrases to describe products in the four major categories. The offers of four major mountain bike industry brands in Slovenia are in line with the assumption that modern mountain biking is diversified, with various mountain bike types to fulfill (or create) riders' expectations and desires. Cross-country hardtail, cross-country full suspension, and all-mountain bikes represent a majority of products sold as mountain bikes. Brands produce different shares of the different categories of mountain bikes. For all brands, gravity represents the lowest percentage of the offer (10% or less). Two brands offer additional smaller categories of dirt/street, e-bikes, and fat bikes.

3. Background of mountain biking management in Slovenia

Mountain bike access is regulated differently around the world (DIMB, 2015; IMBA Europe, 2015; Taylor, 2010b; Zajc, 2015). Differences also exist among European countries and even among regions within countries (Pröbstl, Wirth, Elands, & Bell, 2010). For example, in Scotland, mountain bikers can legally ride in all natural areas (Pröbstl et al., 2010), while in parts of Austria, they are banned from riding even on forest roads (Forstgesetz, 1975; IMBA Europe, 2014).

Mountain biking management in Slovenia is limited and complicated. It is managed mainly by regulations provided by acts at the national level. There is no difference, in the regulation of mountain bike access, between public and private land. Due to sectoral planning at the national level, access to natural areas is regulated by six different acts:

- The Forest Act.
- The Mountain Trails Act.
- The Nature Conservation Act.
- The Construction Act.
- Agricultural Land Act.
- The Environmental Protection Act.

In this paper, we focus on mountain bike access to natural areas within the existing infrastructure, which can be grouped into two

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