

HOME & FAMILY

PHOTOS BY ROBERT HARBISON - STAFF

Steve Marcos glances over his shoulder at Michael Gagnon as the two trek through woods near Beverly, Mass.



# NOTHING STOPS A MOUNTAIN BIKE

But controversy continues over its erosion of wilderness trails

By Laurel Shaper  
Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

"It's like being a little kid again," exclaims Michael Gagnon as he jumps over rocks and maneuvers through the late autumn brush and across a thick blanket of leaves covering the ground at Sally Mulligan Park in Beverly, Mass., north of Boston.

"You can ride over anything if you can balance the bike," contends Mr. Gagnon, a bicycle enthusiast who regularly cycles through the local woods.

His vehicle is known by many names, but be it mountain bike, all-terrain bike, city bike, or fat-tired bike, experts agree that this new breed of two-wheeler is revolutionizing the bicycle industry.

"The all-terrain bike is here to stay," says Jim Fremont, information director at the Bicycle Federation of America. "Every domestic bicycle manufacturer has a line of mountain bikes on the market today. This is definitely not a fad."

Some people, however, wish these off-road bicycles were a pass-



Peter Loescher rides down stairs near Copley Plaza in Boston

ing fad.

Controversy has surfaced in California and Colorado particularly, as these bikers flock to public lands previously dominated by hikers and equestrians.

Environmentalists voice concern over erosion caused by bicycle use on trails. Hikers and equestrians talk of bikers racing down hill-sides at speeds up to 40 m.p.h., injuring themselves, colliding with hikers, and scaring horses.

Efforts are under way to organize and promote safety and courtesy. The National Off-Road Bicycle Association, a 4,000-member organization supporting off-road bicycling, is promoting an "off-road code for mountain biking" that encourages bikers to be courteous and cautious.

In just 10 years the mountain bike has evolved from a crude, custom-made hybrid owned by a select few to a mass-produced commodity with steadily increasing popularity. In the mid-'70s in northern California's Marin County, pioneers such as Gary Fisher, Tom Richey, and Joe Breeze began building the predecessors of today's mass-produced mountain bikes. These serious bikers wanted a rugged bike that could withstand the heavy wear and tear of off-road cycling on the local trails and mountains of the California coast.

"We brought high-tech to off-road bicycling," says Mr. Fisher. Today's mountain bike is reminiscent of the old newspaper delivery boy's two-wheeler of 30 years ago - before the sleek European-style racing bikes came into fashion.

Promoters of the all-terrain bike often characterize it as "user friendly." The drop handlebars, skinny tires, and light frame of the racing bike are replaced by upright handlebars to allow for a more comfortable seating position and greater stability; knobby, wide tires, for shock absorption and traction; and a more sturdy frame, for durability.

The bikes are extremely low-g geared for ease in climbing hills and generally come equipped with 15 to 18 gears.

"I see these bikes as the basic bike for the average consumer of the future," says Bill Wilkinson, executive director of the Bicycling Promotion Organization.

Industry statistics suggest this could be the trend. Sales have roughly doubled every year since 1983, when about 200,000 moun-

Please see BIKE next page

'I see these bikes as the basic bike for the average consumer of the future.'

- Bill Wilkinson,  
executive director of  
the Bicycling Promotion  
Organization



---

## BIKE

from preceding page

---

tain bikes were sold. By 1986, 2.6 million bikes were sold.

Many of the mountain bikes being bought throughout the country today are purchased exclusively for street use.

In fact, it is estimated that as many as 80 percent of mountain bikes may never be used on off-road terrain. Current estimates indicate that about half of all bikes bought for street use are mountain bikes.

The use of mountain bikes as street bikes makes sense, Fisher says. They require less maintenance, and their thick tires and sturdy frame give significant advantages in tackling the potholes, bumps, cracks, and curbs of city streets. Many people are finding these bikes the

perfect commuting vehicle in the city.

Peter Loescher, a management consultant, commutes on his mountain bike 15 miles back and forth from his suburban home to his Boston office every weekday. "There is no comparison between my old bike and the mountain bike I have now," Mr. Loescher insists. "I can go through curbs, hit potholes . . . and not have to deal with a flat."

Mountain biking appeals to a broad cross section of people. The bike accommodates serious bicyclers as well as the casual or occasional rider.

"This sport has no stereotype," says Mr. Ross.

"It's a good way to peel off some stress after a long, hard day," says Gagnon. "You get past the mortgage and the work-week and really enjoy the outdoors."