

## Wilderness on the Mon and Mountain Biking

Mountain bicyclists and Wilderness advocates in West Virginia are often one and the same. They share a passion for the outdoors, and typically enjoy a wide variety of wildland recreation, including hiking, backpacking, cross-country skiing, hunting, fishing, paddling, climbing and cycling. Members of these groups have worked together for years to safeguard the variety of places we all enjoy, and to ensure appropriate access to West Virginia's precious public lands. These efforts have helped protect many of West Virginia's wild places, especially the roadless areas in our Monongahela National Forest (Mon). These positive relationships between groups and individuals will be essential to future efforts to protect the remaining wild public land in West Virginia.

Efforts to protect and safeguard wild lands have always hinged on finding common ground and balanced approaches among users. Currently, designated Wilderness on the Mon is less than 9% of the Forest, which is roughly 1/2 the national average. Furthermore, only 4% of the National Wilderness Preservation System is located East of the Mississippi, where over 60% of the U.S. population resides. This severe imbalance in Wilderness recreation opportunities in the East, and the Mon, has resulted in overuse of existing Wilderness areas. Correcting this imbalance while maintaining ample opportunities for non-Wilderness recreation, such as mountain biking, makes good sense in view of the important role that outdoor recreation plays in West Virginia's economy. This includes the **major** draw that our recognized Wilderness areas have for their long-established users.

The permanent protection that comes with Wilderness designation extends to other Wilderness values, such as wildlife habitat, watershed protection, and places to go where the sights and sounds of human activity are minimal. In view of the dwindling land in the East suitable for Wilderness designation, protecting what we now have is all the more important, for us as well as future generations.

### FINDING A WILDERNESS BALANCE ON THE MON NATIONAL FOREST<sup>i</sup>

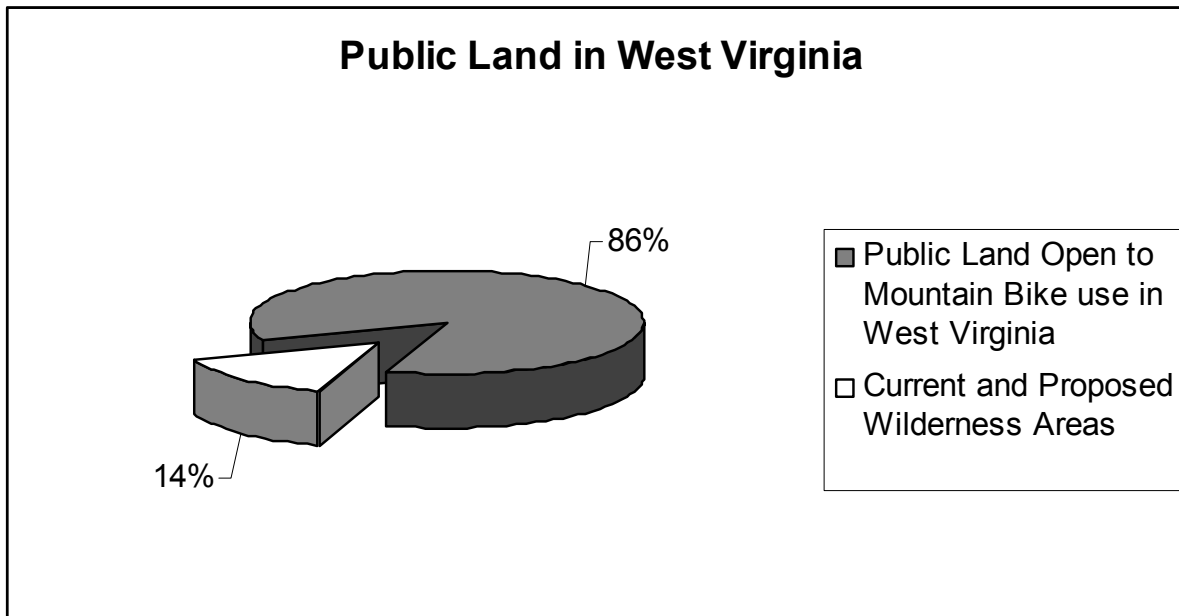
- After meeting with representatives from West Virginia's mountain biking community, the West Virginia Wilderness Coalition removed over 36,000 acres (a 20% reduction in our proposal) of potential Wilderness land in the Mon from consideration due to well-established bike use. Most of this acreage also recently passed the U.S. Forest Service criteria for Wilderness on the Mon, making its exclusion a major concession to the biking community.
- Designation of new Wilderness as proposed on the Mon NF would leave over 86% of West Virginia's state and federal public land open to mountain bike use
- **Over 75%** of the Mon National Forest itself lies **OUTSIDE** the current and potential Wilderness areas and thus, would remain open to bicycling and other non-Wilderness uses.
- **4,072 miles** of roads (many of which are closed to motor vehicles) within the Mon NF proclamation boundary and **630 miles** of system trails (**more than 2/3 of the Mon trail system**) are outside of current and potential Wilderness areas. Excellent mountain biking can also be found in West Virginia's State Parks and Forests, where wilderness designation is not possible.

### SHARING A PASSION FOR THE PUBLIC LANDS

Many outdoor recreationists and public land users, including mountain bicyclists, understand the value of Wilderness protection. We realize that there are plenty of places to ride, but a relatively small portion of land untrammelled enough to qualify for Wilderness designation, especially in the East. Most of us would acknowledge that not all activities are appropriate in all places, and that we must

balance our passion for enjoying our recreational pursuits with what is best for the forest, of highest value to the land.

To ensure the future of some of West Virginia's most outstanding wild places, we must think beyond our own uses, and take steps to protect these lands for their own inherent values. That means having the vision and foresight to designate additional Wilderness so that some places on the Mon remain as they are – wild and free, where the forces of nature rule.



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Mountain Bike dealers/outfitters who have endorsed the WV Wilderness Campaign (as of 9-13-04):

- Pathfinder of WV, Morgantown
- Elk River Touring Center, Slatyfork
- Charleston Bicycle Center, Charleston
- Whitetail Cycle and Fitness, Morgantown
- Mountain State Outfitters, Charleston
- Wamsley Cycles, Morgantown
- Outdoor Adventures, White Sulphur Springs

<sup>i</sup> Percentages and data were collected through USDA Forest Service, Region 9 and Draft Citizens' Wilderness Proposal for the Monongahela National Forest by West Virginia Wilderness Coalition

<sup>ii</sup> West Virginia Land Stewardship Data, Natural Resource Analysis Center and West Virginia Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit, West Virginia University, updated January 2000