Imagine a nice summer day’s walk in the woods above Santa Barbara. The sun shines bright but a little breeze keeps you cool. The only distractions from your thoughts are the smells of sage, the occasional calls of a towhee, and the swoop of a nearby red-tailed hawk. Near Mission Falls along Tunnel Trail, you stop to take in the view, which stretches from the Mesa to the waterfront to the foothills, with clear skies offering glimpses of the Channel Islands.

For a fleeting second, you feel as if you’re one with nature. Then, without warning, a terrible whizzing noise can be heard from behind. You turn quickly, but not fast enough. A fully armored mountain biker screams past you at breakneck speed, spitting dirt in your face and knocking you off the trail and into the surrounding scrub. Three more zoom past you in his wake—and maybe one of them turns, gives you a slight apologetic shrug—but none bother to stop and help. Your day—if not your whole week, considering the poison oak you just fell into—is ruined. What started as a lovely walk up a lonely, peaceful trail, has just spiraled into disaster. You swear off hiking the front country for good, and curse all mountain bikers as adrenaline-pumped, nature-decimating, manicual gearheads.
But wait. Imagine a different point of view. You’ve been biking the Santa Barbara hills all your life. You grew up traversing hilltops and meadows on a cross-country mountain bike, traveling deep into the wilderness to enjoy nature in all its glory while catching some bursts of speed along the way. You’ve invested several thousand hard-earned dollars into one of those newfangled downhill mountain bikes with killer shocks.

One day, you go out with your good buddies to ride your favorite trail. You load up your bikes, drive a few miles, and get to the bottom, or top, of the trail. “No Bikes Allowed” a new sign reads. “What?” you holler, with a slew of expletives. “They eighty-sixed my favorite trail?” You and your pals hunker down to regroup, shocked and dismayed. All of you have come to understand that bike-riding in the wild is the one thing that keeps you sane, the one outlet you have to channel all your keyboard-punching, nine-to-five working class angst into something worthwhile. And here it’s been taken away by The Man. A clean recreational pursuit that you hoped to share with your own children has been swiped out from under you by anti-biking hikers who have convinced the responsible government agencies that just saying “no” is the only way to go.

Neither situation is enviable, but unfortunately, those conflicting scenarios reflect almost exactly what’s going on in the Santa Ynez Mountains these days. From Romero Canyon to Arroyo Burro trails, conflicts between bikers and hikers are on the rise. Not only have near fights erupted in parking lots and on trails, but clandestine piano wires have been found stretched across trails, at roughly the height where a mountain biker’s neck would be. Perpetrators of such have never been caught.

To deal with the concerns, an informal conversation between bikers, hikers, equestrians, and government officials was started last August. Begun under the auspices of the nonprofit Los Padres Forest Association—thereby skirting the likely unproductive yelling and shouting in public meetings that would have surely resulted if a government agency were the official sponsor—the Front Country Trails Working Group has been tasked with finding consensus, or at least compromise. The diverse group includes representatives from the Sierra Club, the County Riding and Hiking Trails Advisory Committee (CRAHTAC), the Mission Canyon Homeowners Association, the Santa Barbara Mountain Bike Trail Volunteers, SafeTrails, the Montecito Trails Association, the Los Padres Riding Association, and government officials from the city, county, and national forest. But the process has reached an impasse; hikers want to close at least some of the front-country trails to mechanical recreation, while bikers are left fighting for the right to ride at all.

**Downhill Extremes**

Since the early 1990s, when a national health movement inspired humans to get out and enjoy America’s natural wonders, exploring the wilderness has been all the rage in Santa Barbara. Be it by horseback or on foot, Santa Barbara’s front country quickly became renowned for its unparalleled beauty and challengingly steep trails up ancient Chumash trade routes, across homesteading pathways, and over utilitarian dirt roads. While these trails weren’t constructed for nature-loving fun, they certainly ended up serving that purpose. Occasionally, a horse scared a hiker and vice versa, but for the most part everyone got along. In 1992, the Chamber of Commerce capitalized on the “hiking” craze by building the front country’s first recreational trail up a popular canyon to attract tourists to town. Though they wanted to call it the Chamber Trail or the Las Canoas Trail, it’s still known by the fearsomely fanged moniker,
Rattlesnake Trail. By the 1960s, the front-country trails were being regularly traversed by as many, or more, hikers as they are today.

Fast forward to the late 1970s, when a new breed of trail users emerged. With the evolution of fat bike tires and the multiplication of gears, “mountain biking” was born. Cross-country mountain biking catapulted to national popularity; not only did it allow nature lovers to cover miles and miles of territory and get deeper and deeper into the American forests. And Santa Barbara County took center stage with the first-ever competition of the National Off-Road Bicycling Association, or NORBA, was held off Tunnel, Romero Canyon, or Jesusita trails, bomb on

**Walking on the Wild Side**

As the loudest voice against mountain bikes on the front-country trails, Jim Childress thinks he knows exactly why his mailbox exploded in the middle of the night last month. The athletic UCSB marine biology professor is pretty sure a mountain biker did the dirty work. It occurred just a few days after his organization’s anti-biker Web site (SafeTrails.org) was listed on a Santa Barbara area mountain biking site. Childress’s distaste for downhill mountain bikers inspired him to investigate the aggressive psychology of the sport, and his findings support his suspicions. Read his Web site at SafeTrails.org to find mountain bikers described as testosterone junkies addicted to speed and danger, with no regard for authority, who would rather run over hikers than share the trails. Mailbox bombing wouldn’t be much of a stretch, he believes.

To back up this psychological analysis, Childress points to articles in Mountain Biking magazine and a handful of commercially produced “extreme” downhill mountain biking movies. Complete with fast-paced punk soundtracks, the videos are chock-full of scenes shot from helicopters of armor-clad downhillers shooting down Santa Barbara’s front-country trails at outrageous speeds. Their skill is clear, their sanity questionable. At 20 to 30 miles per hour, the riders catch air, barrel down chutes, and zip over truly treacherous terrain with apparent ease. Occasionally they spill — flying head-over-handlebars and into the bushes, their bike tumbling end-over-end behind. Even to an impartial eye, it’s not too hard to imagine an unknowing hiker turning one of the tight corners, only to catch a front suspension system in the cranium.

At such speeds, the rules of physics don’t allow an easy stop. The bespectacled Childress watches the videos with uncomfortable awe, obviously impressed by the riders’ radical talents and unflinching courage, but distressed by the safety risks they just as obviously pose. Furthermore, these videos — titled Real Sick, Real Simple, and Keep It Real — and produced by SP Productions out of Santa Barbara, are promoting Tunnel and Jesusita trails to more and more riders worldwide and popularizing night riding as well, a newer and even more dangerous challenge with headlights leading the way.

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**SANTA BARBARA MOUNTAIN BIKE TRAIL VOLUNTEERS (SBMTV)**

**IS SINGLE-HANDEDLY KEEPING THE FRONT-COUNTRY TRAILS VIALBE FOR RECREATION.**

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witnessed a team of bikers burning down the trail, while leading a Sierra Club hiking group, Biegen Tunnel Trail, from the road to the usually dry he credits for most of the front-country trail damage. Biegen also found parts of the trail where water bars of soil while widening turns; and sandstone faces from the trail; black tire skids had disrupted patches number of large rocks had been deliberately removed — their detrimental effect to the trails themselves. A to another serious concern he has about downhillers affecting three hours of hike. And it only takes one biker to affect three hours of hikers.” These days, the number of riders can fluctuate from zero on a weekday to as many as 40 on a weekend. “As people, hikers have the same rights,” explained Childress, “but bicycles have no rights. Motorcyclists and four-wheel drivers have no right to use the trails. The right of access is to the individual, not to the equipment they carry.”

One of Childress’s comrades in the fight against bikers is Tony Biegen, the soft-spoken and thoughtful organizer of the weekly hikes for the Los Padres chapter of the Sierra Club. One of Biegen’s favorite places to hike used to be along the upper reaches of Tunnel Trail, from the road to the usually dry Mission Falls. That changed a few months ago when, while leading a Sierra Club hiking group, Biegen witnessed a team of bikers burning down the trail, unable to stop at the hairpin turn that ends “the chute.” The hikers in their path were forced to leap off the trail and into the bushes.

On a recent tour of the trail, Biegen drew attention to another serious concern he has about downhillers — their detrimental effect to the trails themselves. A number of large rocks had been deliberately removed from the trail; black tire skids had disrupted patches of soil while widening turns; and sandstone faces showed grind-marks left by gears. Such trail alterations can cause soils to loosen more, he explained. Biegen also found parts of the trail where water bars — the wooden posts designed to direct water flows — had been ridden around or even removed. To Biegen, this was the telltale work of downhill bikers, a group he credits for most of the front-country trail damage.

In a perfect world, free from budget constraints, Orr and Kellogg—who have both experienced disrespectful bikers themselves—would establish a standard width, and add more sweeping turns to prevent shoulder erosion. They would also place a few obstacles, such as immovable boulders and trees on the trail, to force downhillers to slow down. Orr likes to cite the friendly, hand-holding creation of the hiking, biking, horseriding Tahoe Rim Trail as evidence that different user groups can get along.

“There’s no reason why our community can’t come together and do the same thing,” Orr said. “The safety concerns are valid, but those concerns would also be dealt with by proper trail construction and community-based education efforts.”

But despite such wishes for togetherness, no one denies that there’s a certain element of downhill riders — particularly the young ones who come from Los Angeles and Orange County—whose general distaste for authority leads to disrespect for other users and gives unfortunate credence to the small group of hikers claiming danger.

“We’ve never denied it,” said Anderson. “There’s a subset of guys riding the front-country trails that shouldn’t be. They’re too fast and have no regard for...
others. It’s the extreme, testosterone-filled crowd, usually 16- to 22-year-old males who act like, well, 16- to 22-year-old males.

Not only would a major crash spell disaster for both those involved, it would likely lead to the fast closure of trails to bikers. And if there are enough close calls—which are being made public via the Safe Trails Web site and by occasional calls to the Sheriff’s Department—it won’t take too long for the city, county, and national forest to target bikers as the bad guys.

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To head that possible outcome off at the pass, Orr and Anderson set up tables at the top and bottom of the trails to pass out bells that bikers can put on their bikes. Then hikers could hear them coming, the logic goes, and at least be ready. The bells seem to be catching on, though certainly not everyone has happily donned the silver sounders.

Hikers such as Biegen and Childress have questioned whether sustained education will even work, though, because, as Biegen explained, with four colleges and a tourist-based economy leading to a largely transient population, “How are you gonna educate when the people keep changing?”

To that, Orr suggested, “Education is always a continual process. In order to have a well-working trail system, all users need to be educated. We’ve only had 10 or so people doing education, and in the last three years, it’s made a significant difference. And if the education effort is taken on by a larger group, who knows how well it would work?”

On the Path to Common Ground

As a 25-year veteran of the forest, Kerry Kellogg has watched all the trail wars go down. But despite the dangers of downhillers, with their Web sites advertising the Santa Barbara front country as “Death Trail” and gleefully advising riders to kiss their wives goodbye, there has been only one downhill-related death, a young biker who crashed while riding alone on Romero Canyon Trail. Because no hiker has ever been seriously injured by a biker, the mountain bike community tends to see such vocal opposition from people like Jim Childress and Tony Biegen as overblown.

Said one SBMTV member, “We think the hikers involved in this process are a vocal minority, maybe 10 percent. It’s an emotional fear, not a well-informed basis for decisionmakers. But sometimes that can be powerful, and that’s what worries me. It may lead to people making silly decisions.”

Kellogg hopes that these groups will be able to come together to work out a good system of sharing. Regarding the racing downhillers, Kellogg thinks the best solution would be for a private landowner to donate some steep property that could be made into a special, bike-only trail. But if nothing can be worked out, bikers may start seeing some trails get closed. Then, the question is: How would restrictions be enforced by the city, county, or national forest service, especially during one of the worst budget crises in years?

As for the working group, each representative has developed a recommendation. The Sierra Club and CRAHTAC, two groups usually known for inclusiveness, support a separate track for downhillers and agree that the fire roads should remain open to all, but recommend that all singletrack trails from Jesusita to Romero be closed to mechanical use. The SBMTV is also against race biking on the trails, hoping to establish a separate course for that sport, but is also in favor of keeping them open to bikers while a master plan for the trails is worked out. In the meantime, SBMTV is pushing for trails to be marked with clear signage informing all users of safety concerns, and intends to continue the current educational efforts to inform bikers of the risks and respect issues.

Though some hikers are following the equestrians and beginning to shy away from front-country trails, many from the biking community remain more optimistic.

As Chuck Anderson put it, “I’m hoping that as a community, trail users of all sorts can come together.”