

Mountain Bikers, recreationists, land owners and conservationists: Multiple conflicts in Hannover's Deister region

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Keywords: mountain bikers, conflicts, forest, Germany, Deister

Introduction

Mountain biking is an activity that is still relatively new and has shown a growing economic importance in many areas world-wide within the last decade. With its growing popularity, the environmental impact of mountain biking has become an issue for park and recreation managers, especially in forest habitats. Whereas quite a number of studies has been done in North America (Marion & Wimpey, 2007 (with extensive references); Chavez et al., 1993) or in Australia and New Zealand (e.g. Goeft & Alder, 2001), only few studies exist in Europe. Although a number of conflicts between mountain bikers, other recreational uses, land owners and nature conservation is reported from urban (such as Munich) or rural areas (notably the forest national parks), only one major study in Germany (Wöhrstein, 1998) exists. Thus, park and recreation managers still need to address a number of questions that require further research to better understand the sociological conflict potential and ecological impacts of mountain biking. This paper illustrates the current research needs in Germany based on a currently running pilot case study in Northern Germany.

Study Area and Methods

The Deister is a mountain range located 20 km in southwesterly direction of the city of Hannover in Lower Saxony. It is approximately 23 km long and about 4 km wide with the highest elevation being 405 meters above sea level. Due to its convenient location within Hannover Region (population about 1.1 million people), it can easily be reached by car or public transport within 30 minutes travel time. While hiking has been the most popular activity for many decades, more recently, mountain bikers have discovered the Deister mountains as prime recreational area. The Deister forests, mainly comprised out of beech, oak and fir communities, are both publicly and privately owned and used for logging. Additionally, parts of the publicly owned forest are part of the European habitat network NATURA 2000 and thus are protected under the Federal German Nature Conservation Act (BNatSchG).

Since early 2009, reports about verbal and physical conflicts between mountain bikers and foresters have been appearing in the local media. Foresters prefer to ban mountain bikers from the forests, whereas recreationists urged authorities to develop a new trail system parallel to existing hiking trails. As conflicts seemed to be on the verge of escalation, all stakeholders agreed to several measures to allow mitigation: The local recreation planning authority started a dialogue process with the stakeholders involved. A round table was initiated in December 2009, accompanied by a quantitative pilot survey to collect data about mountain bikers in the Deister region. The Leibniz University Hannover also launched a pilot study which now focuses – due to the lack of substantial data – on the following aspects:

- mountain biker and hiker counts, both manually and assisted by electronic counters;
- mapping existing mountain bike trails;
- expert interviews with involved stakeholders to identify existing and potential conflicts;
- developing a second quantitative survey to be used during spring and summer of 2010 to determine recreational uses, use patterns and preferences in the Deister mountains;
- integrating the results in a GIS model in order to identify conflict areas;
- The objective is to gather data that provides the background for a conflict management strategy in the Deister region.

Preliminary results

At the current time (January 2010), only few preliminary results are available, but more will become available by late spring. The use of electronic counters (Eco Counter Twin Logger) is still in a test phase. Expert interviews will be conducted in February of 2010. Expected results from the pilot studies are on

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overview of the existing network of mountain bike trails, potential areas of conflicts between mountain bikes and other recreational uses. Based on the data derived from visitor counts, survey areas for a secondary survey to be launched later in 2010 will be identified.

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