Two legs good – two wheels bad? Are mountain bikes really bikes for the mountains? – What does 'responsible access' in the uplands mean conceptually and in practice for mountain bikers and land managers in the Cairngorms National Park?

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Background

Scotland has the most liberal access legislation in the world. Recreational users enjoy a right of non-motorized access to most land and water under the Land Reform [Scotland] Act 2003. The rights have to be exercised 'responsibly' (Scottish Outdoor Access Code 2005) and the concept underpinning the Act is one of 'shared use' in that all users are afforded equal legitimacy. However as the potential of the mountain bike as a "dream machine" (Ruff and Mellors 1993) is explored, and as mountain bikers extend their explorations to more remote areas like the Cairngorms plateau, the 'contested nature' of upland access has sharpened (Brown et al 2008, Macnaughten and Urry 1998).

Many land managers express concern around the physical and social impacts of mountain bikes, and a sense that mountain bikes are 'inappropriate' in certain settings (Horn et al 1994, Cessford 2003, Carothers et al 2001). They regard the personal judgment of 'responsibility' and voluntary restraint implicit in the legislation as an inadequate tool to protect areas. These concerns are enhanced within the Cairngorms National Park, which by its very designation as an IUCN Category 5 Protected Area is regarded as deserving of special care.

Aims

The research set out to examine the following:

- The relevant literature that relates to conflicts over access and recreation in protected areas
- How access rights and responsibilities are conceived and enacted in the montane core of the Cairngorms National Park
- The influences that shape different interest groups view of mountain biking in the mountains and uplands, and how this relates to their perceptions of how they should be used

Methodology

Primary data was generated using a qualitative research approach. Two focus groups were organized – one for land managers and the other for mountain bikers. Each focus group was posed a series of questions under approximately five topic areas (see Table 1 below) and conducted over a two and half hour period. Data was recorded and fully transcribed, before analysis using NVivo software.

Findings

What emerged was a considerable gulf in ideological positions – many land managers (and other hill-users) remain

Table 1. Developing the Themes

Theme	Topic Areas
The Cairngorms uplands	Value and meaning of the Cairngorm mountains to participants; what adds or detracts from that experience; and how they should be used
Social and environmental impacts of mountain biking	Perceptions of damage, erosion and social impacts; and the relationship to wider recreational, and other land use
Decision making (mountain bikers focus group only)	Internal and external factors that influence the 'when, where and how to ride' decisions
Surfaces – upland paths and tracks	Who and what paths are for ("entitlement"); the effect of upland path work and implications for biking
Scottish Outdoor Access Code	Participants understanding of the Code; perceived strengths and weaknesses of the Code; other sources of information that guide responsible access; and the responsible to irresponsible continuum
Promotion	Implications of promoting and publicising routes in sensitive areas; engaging with land managers; and education v regulation

opposed to the concept of mountain bikes in the mountains and no amount of 'rational' argument, or infrastructure built to accommodate dual use, is likely to unsettle this.

The main areas of contention revolved around the interpretation of responsible access, and the agency of path work interventions.

Firstly, the fluidity and flexibility of the interpretational approach to responsible access is something that confounds attempts to simplify and provide clear-cut guidance about appropriate behaviour. A mountain biker's perspective is that responsible riding is about being responsive to conditions, not necessarily following the strictures of a written text, demonstrating a resistance to the 'fixing' of places and surfaces as in-bounds or out-of-bounds to mountain biking. The implications of this refusal to see landscapes as fixed, unchanging entities and see them as evolving artifacts with history, means that management based on spatial or temporal zoning is difficult to 'sell' or implement, especially given that the Scottish access legislation is based on an all-encompassing *a priori* rite of passage.

In terms of enacting responsible access, mountain bikers demonstrate an almost over-exaggerated awareness of social interaction on the hill. By and large they choose to exercise their right knowing they will meet opposition, and they manage their time and space to avoid this if possible – without compromising the satisfaction of their activity. The mountain bikers' position strongly accords with the Land Reform Act and Scottish Outdoor Access Code, which assumes the basis of responsible access as individual choice and decision-making.

Both groups viewed education as an essential tool in managing access and promoting responsible behavior. Mountain bikers view education as part of an apprenticeship which involves acquiring both biking skills and environmental awareness of how and where to ride – this is something learned through practice. As the context specific nature of responsible access means that it is as much about what is 'read' on the ground, as is 'written' in the Code (or other texts), this has implications for the value of buttressing the Code with more detail.

Secondly, in the disparity of what paths mean to people – who and what they are for – we find the biggest gulfs in understanding of responsible access. An engineered path surface sends out different signals to different interests. For mountain bikers, it was 'pathness' made manifest, an invitation to use that surface for passage, and subject to reasonable speed and care for other users, an indication of Code compliant behavior i.e. not going 'off' path. That same, engineered surface however may signal to a land manager (or other user) that a response to damage has been instigated and that the toughened veneer is *itself* deserving of protection. Thus, the research findings highlighted an uncomfortable tension between a concept of responsible access – using a path – and a concept of irresponsible access – damaging a path through the act of using it.

The disposition of land managers *against* biking use on upland paths contrasts with the desire for, and existing practice of, mountain biking in the uplands. Overall neither stakeholder group had an interest in making access to uplands physically easier, and there was an almost unanimous desire to retain areas with wild land qualities. But the fact that some path work intervention has had precisely the effect of easing general access to the hills, and at the same time disentitled existing bike access, is an area of tension that needs to be addressed in the future.

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