

Sharing the Trail

By Bob Goddard

The trails of North America are busy places these days. With more people engaged in recreational trail use than ever before, it's getting downright crowded out there. Depending on the location and season, horseback riders are now obliged to share trail space with bicycle riders, hikers, joggers, roller bladers, dirt bike enthusiasts, ATV lovers, casual walkers, wanderers, snowmobilers, cross-country skiers, snowshoers, jeep 4x4's, lost cars, scared rabbits, assorted criminals and hungry dogs. It's like a parade scene out of a Dr. Seuss book.

People on the trail do what humans always do whenever they gather in large numbers: they fight. Our species is so darn territorial. "You're in MY way." "Get out of MY way." "You can't push me off MY trail." "Hey, that's MY wife." "Bring me back MY clothes." We don't cotton to strangers.

Every faction has its particular complaint against others. Joggers don't like bike riders because bike riders sneak up on them. Bike riders don't like roller bladers because the bladers take up too much room. Roller bladers despise horseback riders because of the road apple issue. Horseback riders loath the ATV/motorcycle crowd because of what the noise does to their animals. The ATV/MC people look down on foot people because they lead uninteresting lives. Why



can't we all just get along?

If letters to trail magazines (of all varieties) are any indication, the biggest point of contention among users is trail etiquette. Who goes first? Who pulls over for whom? Who waits for whom? The typical letter writer begins by explaining that they themselves are very courteous and differential to other groups of users. And their kindness is often repaid with rudeness. Letter writers from the other groups respond by saying

the same thing only in reverse. Did not. Did too. Did *not*. Did *too*.

If researchers were to conduct a study of trail use behavior using letters to trail magazines (of all varieties) as a database, here is what they would find:

1. One hundred percent of all trail users claim to be courteous to other kinds of users.
2. One hundred percent of all trail users claim to be victims of discourteous behavior by other kinds of users.

What gives?

Actually, it's very simple. I believe that the people writing the letters are all telling the truth. This is because those who behave like juvenile delinquents are not going to write a letter to state the fact. Many are probably functionally illiterate anyway and there is a good chance they haven't picked up a magazine in years, save to wipe their noses on it.

Sometimes people cross the line between routine rudeness and malicious negligence. Anyone who thinks it's funny to spook a horse with a motorized vehicle is crossing that line. It's dangerous for the horse and it's dangerous for the rider. It's even dangerous for the operator of the motorized vehicle - especially if the horseback rider manages to catch up with the operator of the motorized vehicle.

It's important to remember that not everyone knows how to properly behave around horses. More often than not, the offenders are young and we need to treat these less knowledgeable citizens with understanding and patience. All they need is a little education. And this could easily be achieved by locking them into outdoor compounds surrounded by eighteen feet high, electrified chain-link fences with concertina wire at the top and minefields around the perimeter. Think of how much they could learn!

Thankfully, the worst offenders are relatively rare. Most folks really do mean well and try to be helpful. Every trail has its own rules and customs, but even without universal standards of trail etiquette, most people manage to get along. Common courtesy simply requires common sense.

I believe the key to trail harmony is remembering the spirit of what brings us to the trail in the first place. We venture out there to relax and have fun. It's not a race and it's okay if others finish ahead of us. There is no sense in being rude or impatient. After all, it's not like we're on our way to work.

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