

Mount Elden Freeride Trail System Proposal and Vision

Introduction

Mountain biking in Flagstaff has been a popular sport for quite some time. The Forest Service (FS) in conjunction with a local advocacy group, Flagstaff Biking Organization (FBO), has done a commendable job in providing and maintaining an extensive system of recreational trails that serve the local mountain biking community, and these trails are well used.

In recent years, downhill and freeride (IMBA's definition and statement of freeriding attached as Appendix A) mountain biking has become a relatively large segment of the local mountain biking scene, attracting riders from Phoenix, the White Mountains of Arizona, Tucson, and even surrounding states. Some of the new trails have even attracted professionals, such as the Flow Riders, to come to Flagstaff for a spin of the wheel.

Unfortunately, these new trails that have been attracting so much attention on the biking scene are, almost one and all, social trails. Some of these are historic trails that have existed for some time outside of the official system and others have been illegally created. Young, determined riders are using the cover of night to build these trails without being detected. A few new and extensive new trails are built illegally every year, and it is a given that one of them, if not all, will be a downhill trail. These trails have become a problem area for the FS.

Without the direction, expertise, and involvement of the FS and experienced organizations such as FBO, the new trails, specifically the downhill trails, are being built on the hillsides of Mount Elden with less than standard construction techniques, and are not sustainable, healthy trails. To the credit of the builders, these trails are well-scouted with intense, challenging lines which have received a certain degree of glamorous notoriety and infamy. However, they are prone to washout and erosion which creates further risk for the riders and disrupts proper water drainage off of the side of the mountain. Furthermore, some of these trails impose on sensitive wildlife habitats.

The local FS branch, Peaks Ranger District, lacks both the manpower and the budget to combat this new trail construction, the pace of which is showing no sign of slacking. The Service is simply unable to provide these recreational opportunities for mere lack of funding. Their budget is maxed with existing projects and projects planned for the future. With the aid of FBO, they have assembled an extensive volunteer trail building and maintenance operation, but their work is restricted to the existing, legal trails. Therefore, while the focus and money of the FS and FBO

resides on the upkeep and upgrading of the already extensive trail system in Flagstaff, the social trail builders keep building roughshod trails illegally.

Why Action is Necessary

As the sport of mountain biking grows, specifically downhill and freeride mountain biking, the community and local agencies will have to step up to the demands of this specific class of recreational users. If they are ignored, or even if their demands are met with procrastination, both the community and the surrounding national forest will suffer in numerous ways. The local FS is currently in a financial bind, and is fully dependent on the action and work of the community to meet these demands.

Tourism is a major money-generating source for Flagstaff, and mountain bikers who come to the area in pursuit of their sport make up a respectable portion of the tourist population. More and more, bikers are willing to travel longer distances and to new areas to find better and different terrain to enjoy their sport. Therefore, we can expect more and more extreme mountain bikers to visit Flagstaff and be directed to the scattered, unsustainable trails that offer the type of technical challenge they seek, and thereby creating more impact on these social trails which currently are not being maintained.

On the other hand, the local, hardcore mountain riders and social trail builders will continue their less-than-standard construction of new trails and cause further damage to terrain, trails, habitats, and possibly themselves. There is quite a sizeable contingent of riders and builders, who shall all remain nameless, who call Flagstaff home. The men and women include a couple professional downhill racers, many semi-pros, and many more aspirants to the ranks of the sport.

Furthermore, the local university and crossroads atmosphere create somewhat of a liquid citizenship that continuously flows in and out of Flagstaff. Many who come in become highly attracted to the sport of mountain biking, and youths are more likely to get involved with the intense downhill riding. As the sport grows and these young men and women are not finding the mountain bike experience the desire, or when they begin to look for something more than what is currently offered, they, like others in the past, will disregard legal practice and construct more illegal, unsustainable trails that create unwanted risk to the health of the forest and the riders themselves.

Considering this, it would be beneficial to both the community and the FS if the FS opted to play an active and cooperative role in developing an answer to the growing demands of the local mountain biking community and similar-minded visitors to Flagstaff. It would allow the community to create the desired experience in a sustainable and communal effort while giving the FS more control over social trail concerns.

The Plan

Flagstaff needs to address the demands of downhill mountain bike enthusiasts and racers; by doing so many benefits will be created for the city, community, and even the forest. The FS and the community now have the opportunity to work together to address these needs and bring forth fruition.

Currently we are assembling a local freeride-specific organization that would work with the experienced staff at FBO to complete a large trail building/trail maintenance team as well as a drafted trail maintenance plan that has consistency and stability. This relationship will also unite the mountain bike community under this effort. FBO has also offered their 501c3 status and track record as a fund-raising resource and tool.

The focal point of this plan will be Mount Elden. This mountain is a summertime recreational hot spot in Flagstaff which is subject to much use. This is the spot where many of the social trail builders are doing their work. This is also the spot where the majority of tourist mountain riders end up riding. This is due mainly to word-of-mouth advertising. It is common to find the same local and visiting riders weekend after weekend flying down these illegal downhill trails on their big bikes. They have become so popular that the FS has complete knowledge of them, which they can gain simply by visiting internet chat rooms and observing for a while.

The Proposal is for the community and local FS agency to work jointly to both legalize and coordinate the building of these new downhill trails on a specific corridor, which we will call Oldham Canyon, of Mount Elden. It is a dream of these local trail builders to have the permission and ability to construct these trails in broad daylight at any time and on any day of the week without the fear of facing legal reprimand or sanction.

Within this corridor on Mount Elden the community would provide volunteer work, documented and overseen by the FS, to build a series of marked, interconnected braided downhill and freeride trails that are entirely sustainable and subject to constant modification, upkeep, and upgrading, and that contain the desired features which make the sport so exciting and popular. The community will provide the manpower and man hours, and the FS would provide the oversight, expertise and machinery necessary to successfully build these trails with the adventure potential sought by the recreational market as well as the sustainability required to maintain the health of both the forest and the riders.

Benefits to the Community

A large-scale community effort into building this series of ride-specific trails has the potential for multiple impacts and benefits to the Flagstaff. Increased tourism, whether people drive up to ride for four hours or to stay for four weeks, will be beneficial to many of the local businesses. Hotels, restaurants, art galleries, tourist shops, etc. will all benefit. All this business creates necessary tax revenue for the city itself. The local FS branch will have the ability to log all of the volunteer work hours put in by the community to build and maintain the trails, and submit these hours for the purpose of pursuing much-needed budget increases.

Benefits to Forest Health

The construction of this specific set of trails may be invaluable to the FS regarding their concerns about forest health. Primarily, it will give the FS a handle on the growing problem of the increasing number of illegal social trails popping up every year, some in sensitive wildlife habitat. If these trail builders are given legal permission and cooperation to build the kinds of trails and trail features they want to see and ride, their building efforts can be concentrated and overseen in a designated area. If this is not met head-on with a cooperative effort from the authorities, the illegal trail building will most likely continue in the scattered fashion it has.

Another benefit to the forest will be that the trails will be built with an emphasis on sustainability. This will minimize the erosion, drainage, and safety hazards which are found on existing social trails. Also, the allowance of local freeriders to build new, sustainable trails that offer the level of challenge sought would be met by the obliteration of social trail that encroach protected habitat by teams of volunteers.

Furthermore, if these freelance trail builders are able to work with the FS on projects such as this, it will be an educational experience for both sides. Each interest group will learn to better understand and address the needs of one another, and a stronger relationship of respect and trust may be forged between the community and the agency.

The Vision

In conclusion, Flagstaff has the potential to become provide all of the challenge and adventure sought by the local mountain biking community, and there are many groups and individuals who desire to create this. We envision a series of black diamond, world-class, downhill mountain bike trails that are built by the community in conjunction with the local FS and assisted by professional riders. We envision large advocates of mountain biking such as IMBA, NORBA, and some of the large bike manufacturing companies aiding us with their professional expertise to build the best series of downhill mountain bike trails in the Southwest.

Every weekend we meet people from all over the United States riding our trails in Flagstaff. And many of our group will take trips and vacations just to go and ride trails in different areas of the country. Cyclists travel, and we wish to make Flagstaff a prestigious destination for them all. We have already had professional riders come to Flagstaff to get a taste of the riding out here, but we would like to make Flagstaff one of their usual haunts.

In the future, we envision professional mountain bike racing of all scopes coming to Flagstaff. Events such as a professional downhill mountain bike race would bring large companies and professionals from all over the world to bring expertise, manpower, and funding to improve trail structure and sustainability. Also, hosting professional racing events would cause Flagstaff to become even more of a travel destination for cyclists.

We believe the timing is right for a bold, new step in mountain biking to be taken in Flagstaff. Downhill and Freeride mountain biking is immensely popular in the Southwest, largely because of the rugged natural terrain. A summer's worth of community volunteer work by young adults willing to dedicate themselves could put Flagstaff at the head of the regional class in this sport.

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Appendix A

IMBA Freeriding Position

(Freeriding is a style of mountain biking that celebrates the challenges and spirit of technical riding and downhill.

1. IMBA supports freeriding as long as it's responsible and in appropriate locations. We are committed to helping develop trails and riding areas that are authorized and appeal to all mountain bikers. We are developing written and visual educational tools to help land managers, clubs and individual riders develop sustainable, appropriate freeriding options.
2. The future of all aspects of mountain biking depends on cooperation with land managers and our collective commitment to protect the natural environment.
3. Young mountain bikers identify with the challenges and spirit of freeriding. By recognizing and supporting this connection, IMBA will help assure the future of mountain biking.
4. IMBA supports downhill racing. We develop and recommend sustainable course construction techniques.
5. IMBA supports off-trail riding only in appropriate, designated special use areas.

Note: This statement was taken directly from the IMBA website. IMBA has many references, tools, and technical trail building instructions located on their site.