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Mountain Biking as An Addiction

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An addiction is any activity that is habitually pursued in spite of the fact that it is harmful to the participant or others. That obviously includes mountain biking. The harm that mountain biking does to the mountain biker is well documented [1,2]. It includes thousands of horrendous injuries, paralysis (paraplegia and quadriplegia), and even death. And mountain bikers themselves characterize mountain biking as an “addiction”. They speak of it in glowing terms – “stoke” (thrill), “adrenaline rush”, etc. In the three decades that I have studied mountain biking impacts, I have heard of only three people who have quit mountain biking! Even people who have become paralyzed or even blind have continued mountain biking. I can’t think of any more convincing proof that mountain biking is an addiction.

Mountain bikers are a danger to themselves [3]. Norco Factory Team Mechanic Lewis Kirkwood Thinks Mountain Biking Could be Giving us Bad Vibrations. Mountain bikers are a danger to others.

Why is mountain biking so addicting? It seems that once someone starts mountain biking, they feel a need to do it as often as possible – at least weekly. And they become impervious to information about the harm that mountain biking does. (That’s why it is extremely unfortunate when land managers or their staff start mountain biking.) Apparently, some people have an especially strong desire or “need” for danger and thrills, and it seems to be accompanied by an unusually low concern for the welfare of wildlife, the environment, non-bikers, or anything else that gets in the way of their thrill-seeking. A phenomenon that may be related is the existence of psychopaths -- people who seem to be genetically devoid of moral feeling. See Without Conscience: The

Disturbing World of the Psychopaths Among Us, by the brilliant scientist Dr. Robert Hare. I highly recommend his book. As far as I know, in Hare’s terminology, mountain bikers are sociopaths, not psychopaths.

They are interested in thrills. Riding a bike on a trail, especially a trail containing many obstacles, or a trail one is not familiar with, is very challenging. (But if mountain biking is the high point of your week, as it seems to be for many mountain bikers, you must be leading a pretty dull life, off of the bike!) The sensation of speed, the feeling of the wind whipping against your face as the ground turns to a blur beneath knobby tires is one of the reasons so many of us become addicted to mountain biking [4].

It’s a behavioral addiction [5]. “Jake Legge, who will attend Moopark College in the fall, said the sport is addictive. ‘Ever since I was little, we’d do vacation trips in Mammoth and we’d bike out there,’ he said. ‘As time went on, we did more and more biking. Before you know it, we’re racing. We got hooked. Ever since, we just can’t get off the bike’ [6,7]. It’s one of those kinds of sports ... it grows on you, Corona said, adding: “It’s very addictive. If you like it, you’re going to like it a lot.

They are interested in building mountain biking skills and competing with other mountain bikers. The thrill of racing drives people to spend more money on their bike and ride it harder and more often. Racing, up to and including the Olympics, drives a lot of mountain biking. Of course, it is also extremely harmful to the parks and natural areas that are used for practice! It is hard to think of any other (legal) use of public lands, other than hunting, that is as harmful as mountain biking.

They want to get to their destination faster (not considering that the process of getting there is a major part of the enjoyment). Once, when much younger, I was hiking along a very boring trail. The thought came to me that if I had a bike, I could get past the boring section of the trail, and to the interesting part much faster. But about 2 seconds later I realized that if I could do that, so could everyone else, and the place would be full of people and ruined. That was the end of my (2-second) mountain biking career.

We mountain bike because of the euphoric adrenaline rush, but that adrenaline rush is made all the sweeter by the pain endured on every single ride." Greg Heil "What do you enjoy most about mountain biking? Just the experience of being out in a forest on a trail, just flowing down it and enjoying the scenery. I know it sounds cheesy, but you really become one with nature. At the same time, there's the adrenaline rush you get from downhill and runner's high from climbing. It's a lot of stuff that's hard to put into words. Steve Ray

The mountain biker ideal (the human ideal?) is nonstop adventure, with no restrictions! That seems to be an integral part of human nature. But the result is the total disaster that the Earth has become, from global warming, ocean acidification, ozone depletion, pollution of the entire Earth, habitat destruction, and rampant species extinction. At the very least, we should restrict bicycles to pavement!

Mountain biking is a beautiful thing. It's also an inherently dangerous activity, but it rewards you in proportion to the risks you take. Point down the hill and you go fast. Let off the brakes and you go faster. The less you brake in turns, the more speed you carry out. Want to catch some air? You'll have to leave the ground first. Risk is as essential to the sport as wheels or handlebars. If you don't want to skin your knee, get lost, get hypothermia or bonk from time to time, you never want to risk wearing a cast for a few weeks, and you want your trails smoothly groomed, straight with good sight lines, well-marked and not too fast or pointed downhill, maybe you should take up jogging or spin class instead of mountain biking [8].

It doesn't take much practice or forethought to realize that mountain biking is inherently dangerous. We don't trust young people with drugs, alcohol, motor vehicles, or guns. Why should we trust them with mountain bikes, which are at least as dangerous? One more reason not to mountain bike: mountain bikers ride so fast and quietly that they will startle a mountain lion or grizzly, causing them to instinctively attack [9].

Won't a helmet protect me from serious injury? Don't bet on it [10] Man injured in Brown County mountain biking accident [10].

Alan Keeling, 48, of Crestwood, Ky., is in good condition today at IU Health Methodist Hospital in Indianapolis. NASHVILLE, Ind. A Kentucky man was critically injured in a mountain biking accident at Brown County State Park.

Alan Keeling, 48, of Crestwood, Ky., was slammed face first into a fallen log after he was thrown from his mountain bike at about 4 p.m. Sunday while riding the trails at the state park, according to Indiana conservation officers.

Keeling was wearing a helmet, but he struck the log lower on his head. He suffered face and skull fractures and was flown to IU Health Methodist Hospital in Indianapolis for treatment. Indiana Conservation Officer Brent Bohbrink investigated the accident. Nashville Volunteer Fire Department, Columbus Regional Hospital EMS and state park personnel assisted at the scene.

Isn't mountain biking safe if you learn the proper techniques? No! So-called "expert" mountain bikers have horrendous accidents all the time. Mountain bikers seem to enjoy the thrill of danger and seek it out. That leads to accidents. But no matter how "safely" you ride, the inherent randomness and unpredictability of nature ensures that there will always be accidents.

Acknowledgement

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Conflict of interest

Author declared no conflict of interest.

References

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3. James Smurthwaite (2019) Norco Factory Team Mechanic Lewis Kirkwood Thinks Mountain Biking Could be Giving us Bad Vibrations.
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5. Rai Cornell (2019) What is Behavioral Addiction?
6. (2016) Mountain bike team conquers trails. Thousand Oaks Acorn.
7. Arielle Zions (2017) Nogales, Sonora to host mountain bike race series.
8. Mike Levy (2015) Question - The Biggest Mistake That's Been Made In Mountain Biking.
9. (2018) Cougar attack kills 1, injures another, 30 miles east of Seattle.
10. (2012) Man critically injured in Brown.