

Riding (uphill) to prosperity

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A town thrives because of biking, but not everyone is happy.

The only noise you hear is the water rippling over rocks, as the Lehigh River cuts through a steep valley near Jim Thorpe, Pennsylvania. Bikers ride along a paved path that gently slopes at a 2 percent downward grade. The lush carpet of trees on the mountains eventually gives way to a small picturesque town that looks like a place you'd see in the Swiss Alps.

This little town of 4,800 supports two bike stores that shuttle riders to the beginning of the Lehigh Gorge Trail, as well as quaint stores, B&Bs, and several restaurants. The weekends buzz with activity.

Jim Thorpe has come a long way from its days as a depressed mining town to the biking center it is today.

The first time we came through Jim Thorpe, it was to raft. But since then we've been back three times to mountain bike, stay in hotels, eat at restaurants, and shop on Main Street.

We spent plenty of money there, so I was surprised to hear about the anti-bike sentiment. Bike tourism seems to have lifted this town from its depression. Why would a town bite the hand that feeds it?

"It's animosity between the locals and the visitors," said Tom Loughery, corresponding secretary of the Jim Thorpe Area Council. "Existing residents had no idea that the town had something special to offer. They complain that it now takes 10 minutes to get across town, and the restaurants are crowded."

They don't seem to link the visitors to the newly-renovated homes and buildings and the full tax coffers.

No irony was lost when this town changed its name from Mauch Chunk to Jim Thorpe. Thorpe was a versatile athlete of American Indian descent who won two gold medals in the 1912 Olympics, but these were rescinded when it was learned he'd earned a minimal amount of money during college playing basketball. Although he played professional football and baseball, his later life was marked by poverty and alcoholism.

Mauch Chunk had been a thriving coal and railroad town. In an attempt to replace those dying industries with tourism, town leaders agreed to let the widow of the disgraced athlete bury his body there in 1953 and changed the name in his honor. The tourists never came, until the 1990s. But it wasn't to see Thorpe's grave. It was to go biking.

Copious studies support the idea that biking can boost an economy. Mountain biking has been the fourth most popular adventure activity among U.S. adventure travelers, according to a 1997 study by the Travel Industry Association of America. Sixty million adult Americans bicycle each year. Bicyclists spend money on this recreation, which creates jobs and brings revenue to communities. The Outdoor Industry Foundation reports that bicycling contributes \$133 billion to the U.S. economy each year.

Declining towns can capitalize on their natural gifts. Not every mountain biking center needs spectacular rolling rock trails like Moab, Utah, or the backdrop of the Rocky Mountains that Durango, Colorado, offers. Woodlands and flatlands can be developed into biking arenas. Plus, the trails can be cleared with volunteer efforts and a few inexpensive tools. In Jim Thorpe, timber roads and coal mining roads had already been cut through the woods.

Looking for new sources of income, West Virginia aggressively pursued bike dollars in the early 1980s. It sponsored races and reaped the benefits by establishing itself as a biking mecca. The Hatfield-McCoy trails that were opened in 2000 have proven very successful. After a decade of work to build community support and of agreements with 20 different landowners, the shared-use trails have added \$51 million to the economy, drawn 303,000 visitors, and created 1,572 new jobs.

Yet some still oppose biking there.

"The Nature Nazis think they are saving the world from mountain bikes," complained Matt Marcus, owner of Blackwater Bikes and the president of the West Virginia Mountain Bike Association, describing his experience with officials from the U.S. Department of the Interior.

"Anti-bike groups claim that bikes cause erosion and trail widening," said Drew Vankat, policy adviser for the International Mountain Biking Association, "when in fact research has shown bikes cause no more impact than horses."

Vankat has been at the forefront of a battle with the U.S. Forest Service in Colorado. The Forest Service director in Denver proposed eliminating bikes on the Monarch Crest Trail — based on research done before mountain bikes were even invented.

"They don't want to lose pristine nature and feel if you allow bikes, it will open up the floodgates," Vankat said.

The town of Jim Thorpe felt the backlash too.

"The state of Pennsylvania outlawed biking on state game lands, and while only four trails were affected, the perception was that there was no more biking in Pennsylvania. That was in 2004, and it really hurt the economy," said Loughery of the Jim Thorpe Area Council. "We're working hard to gain them back."

To be fair, not every cyclist is courteous. Some refuse to ride single-file or around a puddle while off road, widening the trail. But the benefits far outweigh a few examples of bad behavior.

The Forest Service argues that allowing bikes into the woods would open the door to allowing in four-wheeled all-terrain vehicles (ATVs). So the agency takes the position of "no wheels at all." That's easier: The Forest Service is under siege from powerful companies like Kawasaki Motors. Bike manufacturers lack the deep pockets to fight for inclusion. Although ATVs are noisy and pollute with their fossil-fueled engines, equating pedal-powered bikes with ATVs makes no sense.

Depressed regions have an opportunity to recreate their image and character. While not as powerful as coal or steel barons, bike riders can help towns overcome flagging economic fortunes, if they can overcome the naysayers.

Additional Reading:

Jim Thorpe, Pennsylvania

Lehigh Gorge Trail