

The Place of Helicopters: Exploring the Ways of Valuing Nature in Mountain Biking

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Abstract

This paper was originally written for Dr. Nicholas Scott's Sociology 371 course *The Environment and Society*. The assignment asked students to analyze an environmental conflict of their choosing using a framework drawn from pragmatic sociology. The paper uses Chicago citation style.

In summer of 2017 I began to see my social media feeds filled with photos of mountain bikes being loaded onto helicopters to go riding. What had once been an extremely rare event appeared to be suddenly exploding, as it seemed everyone in the mountain bike community was now using helicopters to ride. It was startling to see this change occur during a summer when BC was suffering a record breaking year of forest fires, with the smoke filled skies regularly serving as a reminder of the very real impacts of climate change on our local environment.¹ What could explain this strange combination of people willing to ride in a vehicle that is the very symbol of fossil fuel consumption, in order to engage in a sport that is intimately connected to the mountains, all whilst the effects of climate change were there to be seen in the air? In this paper I explore this conflict, using it as an emerging, and particularly poignant, way to explore the manner in which mountain sports connect to, and influence, our ways of valuing the environment. Drawing parallels between the market forms of worth at the core of mountain biking justifications, and the thrill-of-the-moment mode of participation that characterises heli-biking, I argue instead for a place-based modality of mountain biking: a form of participation that, through kinaesthetic-engagement with the land, erodes the distinction between participant and environment.

¹ Simon Little and Liza Yuzda, '2017 Officially B.C.'s Worst Ever Wildfire Season', *Globalnews.ca*, 16 August 2017, <https://globalnews.ca/news/3675434/2017-officially-b-c-s-worst-ever-wildfire-season/>.

Below I first introduce the current debate around heli-biking using a case study from Revelstoke, BC. Here I draw on the pragmatic sociology of Thévenot, Moody and Lafaye in order to tease out the forms of value being utilised on either side of the debate.² Then, drawing on several experiences of mountain biking, both my own and those of a heli-biking participant, I show the ways that differing forms of access mobilities change our experience in the mountains and the way that we view the landscape.

II

In late March of 2018 an application for extension of tenure by a mountain bike guiding company—Wandering Wheels—in Revelstoke, BC began to generate significant public debate around heli-biking.³ The company in question had applied for tenure to take guests down the Mt Cartier and Mt Joss trails just outside Revelstoke, both of which would require the use of helicopters to access. Heli-biking is not a new thing to these locations: Selkirk Tangiers Heli-Skiing have held tenure for heli-biking on Mt Cartier since 2005,⁴ and there was a ~150 person race held on the same mountain in 2017 that involved all participants being shuttled to the top by helicopter.⁵ Perhaps because of such a recent large scale event on an otherwise quiet mountain, there has been some strong opposition to the tenure application by Wandering Wheels; this opposition has gone beyond the specific application to critique the concept of heli-biking, and even mountain biking, on the mountains in question. As such it offers a valuable case study to understand the forms of value that may be mobilised in a wider debate around the practice.

Wandering Wheels attempted to address much of the expected critique within a 25 page report submitted to Revelstoke council.⁶ Rather unsurprisingly

² Laurent Thévenot, M Moody, and C Lafaye, 'Forms of Valuing Nature: Arguments and Modes of Justification in French and American Environmental Disputes', in *Rethinking Comparative Cultural Sociology: Repertoires of Evaluation in France and the United States*, ed. Michèle Lamont and Laurent Thévenot, Cambridge Cultural Social Studies (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

³ Matt Yaki, 'Tenure Management Plan: Wandering Wheels', 13 February 2018, <https://revelstoke.civicweb.net/FileStorage/86D8A12C82224437A478BA8F89C8C23C-CED-Wandering%20Wheels%20Tenure%20Attachment%202018-03-27.pdf>.

⁴ However, STHS are not currently making use of their tenure, and are not offering guests the option of heli-biking on Mt Cartier.

⁵ Ted Morton, 'Canada's Three-Day Helicopter Enduro', *Pinkbike*, 20 January 2017, <https://www.pinkbike.com/news/canadas-helicopter-enduro-revelstoke-3-day-2017.html>.

⁶ Yaki, 'Tenure Management Plan: Wandering Wheels'.

for a business applying to extend their activities, the core of their justification draws upon a market worth, and particularly focuses upon “adventure tourism” as a form of economic activity which would be grown through the tenure.⁷ This form of market justification is something we see used widely by mountain biking organisations in the region; for instance, the organisations in North Vancouver, Squamish, Whistler, and Pemberton have all released economic impact reports that they have utilised to add an economic “weight” to their concerns, and grant them a voice within local decisions.⁸ Among mountain bike organisations, market justifications are often used in combination with civic justifications, such as when Wandering Wheels refer to themselves as offering a “community service,”⁹ or frame that service as “much needed [...] to help accommodate education and safety for backcountry trail users.”¹⁰ This certainly plays upon the bike industry ideals of community, where operators such as Wandering Wheels are expected to be community advocates for the sport, helping to maintain trails and support local mountain biking organisations. However, in most cases the civic justifications appear to be subordinate to the market, and trail organisations have not tended to release “Community Impact Reports” that detail their community contribution.

This relationship between civic and market worths is drawn differently within the critiques seen in Revelstoke, with the two being seen as incompatible forms of worth. The North Columbia Environmental Society references the ways in which “the buzz of a steady stream of helicopters is ruining the area for hikers, local residents, and anyone in the vicinity,”¹¹ while a resident focuses on the clash between civic and market worths when saying that they do not want to see

⁷ Yaki, 4.

⁸ Tony Fisher, ‘Economic Impact of Mountain Biking in Whistler 2016’ (Canadian Sport Tourism Alliance, April 2017), <https://www.mbta.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Squamish-EI-Report-April-3-2017.pdf>; ‘Mountain Biking Economic Impact Study - Squamish’ (Western Canada Mountain Bike Tourism Association, April 2017), <https://www.mbta.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Squamish-EI-Report-April-3-2017.pdf>; ‘Mountain Biking Economic Impact Study - North Shore’ (Western Canada Mountain Bike Tourism Association, October 2017), <https://www.mbta.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Squamish-EI-Report-April-3-2017.pdf>; ‘Mountain Biking Economic Impact Study - Pemberton’ (Western Canada Mountain Bike Tourism Association, May 2017), <https://www.mbta.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Squamish-EI-Report-April-3-2017.pdf>.

⁹ Yaki, ‘Tenure Management Plan: Wandering Wheels’, 10.

¹⁰ Yaki, 4.

¹¹ City of Revelstoke, ‘Addition to the Agenda: Staff Reports Item 11d’, 27 March 2018, <https://revelstoke.civicweb.net/FileStorage/4DE39549870646909FA0D567857A5B13-Wandering%20Wheels%20Tenure%20Public%20Comments.pdf>.

“another company looking to profit from public built hiking trails.”¹² The opponents here seem to be drawing on a neoliberal conception of business that sees the market, and as such market worths, as the primary consideration in any business decision; in such a framework any civic worth that Wandering Wheels attempts to bring to the table will always be subordinated to the market.¹³ Others draw on a civic worth to highlight the elitist nature of mountain biking as a high priced form of recreation, referring to the “privileged few” able to pay for the helicopter ride up to descend on their bikes.¹⁴ There is a split in the discussions of the environmental impact here, with some seeing this impact through an anthropomorphic lens, and focusing on the ways that extra bike traffic may cause a change to the wildlife experience for hikers: “what is the legal action if a hiker gets hit by one of his clients or a spooked animal? Hikers like to see nature, not get run down by it.”¹⁵ These arguments tend to be revisionist, suggesting that heli-biking could be moved to a different, more suitable, location. Others seem to be drawing on ecological worths to make a more radical critique, which gives intrinsic value to non-human users of the mountains and questions the place of mountain biking at all: “there is an extensive body of scientific and management literature that demonstrates that mountain biking [...] has a significant and prolonged impact on all wildlife species.”¹⁶ While we do see broader ecological critiques appear in the arguments, with several mentions of the increased greenhouse gas emissions,¹⁷ overall these appear to be secondary issues, with the damage to the localised environment being a far more prominent concern. Domestic forms of worth also show up within the critique, with opponents to the tenure application calling on specific elements of the history of the trails. For instance, a local resident writing to Revelstoke council notes that the trails were built “by troubled youth and their mentors” and argues that the usage by bikes has changed the trail, making it less suitable for hiking and so less in line with this history.¹⁸

¹² City of Revelstoke, 1. See also: City of Revelstoke, 6.

¹³ Although it's also worth noting that the ways in which civic worths are used, and the boundaries of the collective for whom good must be chased, are different for different actors. While Wandering Wheels have a perspective grounded in the mountain biking community, with mountain bikers being at the core of their collective good, other actors here are willing to exclude mountain bikers interests from the collective good.

¹⁴ City of Revelstoke, ‘Addition to the Agenda: Staff Reports Item 11d’, 2.

¹⁵ City of Revelstoke, 2.

¹⁶ City of Revelstoke, 5.

¹⁷ City of Revelstoke, 2,3-4.

¹⁸ City of Revelstoke, 2.

It's important to note that all the public discussion of heli-biking from within the mountain bike community has been supportive of the concept overall, with any critique being only mildly revisionist, but never questioning whether helicopters should be used to ride bikes.¹⁹ Any radical critique seen so far (with the exception of this article) comes from outside the mountain bike community. Within the mountain bike community we see a strong utilisation of market and civic forms of justification, with ecological worths seeming to be somewhat sidelined and considered mitigated. In contrast, the opponents to heli-biking (and in some cases mountain biking) seen here describe a form of civic worth that is in conflict with the market, and draw more heavily upon ecological worth. Both sides of the debate are particularly focussed on the local area, with only the opponents beginning to spread this perspective to include reference to global environmental concerns.

III

In order to understand the ways that accessing the mountain by helicopter formed the experience of the ride I spoke to several participants of the Mt Cartier heli-biking race; I'd like to draw on one response that stood out here. The respondent mentioned the way that flying in the helicopter allowed them "to really see the scale of the ride you're about to do;" for this rider the connection to nature that occurred during the ride was heavily connected to the passage of the descent trail through the various zones of the mountain, and the manner in which that allowed them to "experience all the changes from the high alpine back to civilization." The flight in this sense gave them an anchoring overview to enjoy the ride before embarking on the ride.

¹⁹ This perhaps represents a fear within the sport that making any concessions on where and when mountain bikes are allowed to ride is at risk of starting a torrent of bike bans. Similar fears are currently being seen manifested regarding the introduction of electric assist mountain bikes, with many people opposed to them being allowed on mountain bike trails for fear that this will be seen as a form of motorised use and cause all mountain bikes to be banned from the land. It's interesting to note that a lot of the environmentalism in skiing is structured around the ways climate change is threatening the loss of winter: the skiers terrain.



Figure 1: “We came from all the way over there!”

This exhilaration in looking down seems to be something distinctly different than experienced by the non-motorised traveller: rather than looking down and seeing a beautiful, but other, vista that they will soon travel through, the non-motorised traveller looks down and sees a history of their journey to this point. The picture above (Figure 1) shows a group of children I coached on a summer bike camp on a particularly tough day in 2017: we had been pedalling and pushing our bikes uphill for many hours on a hot summers day, most of the children were starting to struggle, and I was having to use every ounce of encouragement to keep them going. But when we arrived at a paraglide launch where the trees had been removed—with a panoramic vista from where we could see the starting point of our day—almost immediately the struggles and pain washed away, and the group revelled in the vista, pointing out places in the valley where we had travelled during our journey, and marvelling at the distance they had come. In this moment it seemed that they conceptualised the valley in an entirely different way, not only had they (I hope) learned something of their own capabilities, but they had learned a new appreciation for the terrain that was tied to their own experiences of movement through it. They had become integrated into the collective of the mountain for a while, and would feel this connection whenever looking up at the slopes. This landscape now contained a very personal history for them that traced the lines of their movement—and the pain in their

legs—to this point. It was no longer a landscape that was other from them, but rather a landscape that included them and their personal history.

This sense of seeing history in, and connecting to, the land is something echoed in place-based education, which Knapp discusses as being centred around moving away from the *I-It* relation to the land, and towards the *I-Thou* relation.²⁰ We see echoes of the Latourian erosion of the society/nature binary here,²¹ as for the *I-It* relation the environment is seen as something distinct from the self, “made up of things that are separate from you,” while in the *I-Thou* the boundary between actor and environment becomes less clear, and “you feel part of the greater whole.”²² We can perhaps see in the comments from my respondent an insinuation of the *I-It* relation, as he refers to the way that the trail allowed him “to experience all the changes from the high alpine back to civilization:” civilization here is something other than the high alpine, there is a hard boundary between the civilization to which one returns, and the alpine from which one rides. The environment here is “made up of things that are separate from you” and from which you escape back to civilization, with the respondent themselves existing as a pocket of civilization amidst, but distinct from, the wild.²³ If we contrast with the children looking out at the landscape that they have moved through we see something quite different: here the landscape they are looking out on contains the traces of their movement, and is embedded in the memory of their muscles; in this case they “feel part of the greater whole” of the landscape, and begin to move towards an *I-Thou* relationship with the land.²⁴ In it’s contextuality to the actors this *I-Thou* relation exists as a negotiation between the children, the woods, the trail, and their bikes; the *I-Thou* relation here represents their inauguration into a collective that they see woven through the landscape.²⁵ The place in place based pedagogy then represents a multitude of places that overlay a space, each coming together to form a messy plurality that “goes towards every more intricate attachments” to the land.²⁶

²⁰ Clifford E. Knapp, ‘The “I - Thou” Relationship, Place-Based Education, and Aldo Leopold’, *Journal of Experiential Education* 27, no. 3 (January 2005): 277–85.

²¹ Bruno Latour, ‘To Modernize or to Ecologize? That’s the Question’, in *Remaking Reality: Nature at the Millenium*, ed. Bruce Braun and Noel Castree, 1 edition (London ; New York: Routledge, 1998), 221–42.

²² Knapp, ‘The “I - Thou” Relationship, Place-Based Education, and Aldo Leopold’, 278.

²³ Knapp, 278.

²⁴ Knapp, 278.

²⁵ Latour, ‘To Modernize or to Ecologize? That’s the Question’.

²⁶ Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2004), 235. See also the following study that has shown the ability for place-based

IV

This intricate attachment to the land is something that I experience myself, through daily rides on an intersecting mesh of trails, criss-crossing a series of small wooded hills less than a kilometre from my door. This regular ride becomes something akin to what Scott refers to as “banal adventure;”²⁷ an experience which briefly removes me from normal human time-space, to experience a kinaesthetic engagement with the land and its non-human inhabitants. It’s the very act of propelling myself through the woods that helps to create this connection, as Lowenheim puts it: “the physicality of mountain biking in these hills [...] makes me feel I belong here, that I know the territory with my body.”²⁸ For Lowenheim, however, this goes a little further, and his daily commute by mountain bike allowed him “to lose traction and fall into the cracks and crevices of the world, and thus find and see things that otherwise [he] would have probably ignored or would not have been aware of.”²⁹ Through his riding Lowenheim was able to “lose traction” from his life-as-a-whole, and experience a deeper understanding of the history and tradition of the land that he rode through. Similarly, my kinaesthetic engagement with the land is bonded to a knowledge of the history—both recent trail history, and longer Skwxwú7mesh First Nation history—that criss-crosses these hills, and these combine to deepen my sense of place.

While heli-biking allows for the thrill of physically losing the traction between tyre and trail, it compartmentalises the experience of mountain biking, and distils it to just the thrill of the ride in the moment; in doing so it diminishes the ability for the rider to “lose traction” in the landscape, and to erode the boundaries between themselves, the history of the space, and the environment. This thrill-of-the-moment is seen reflected in the forms of worth that mountain biking utilises, with a heavy attachment to the short term vision of the market, and a preferencing of the mountain bikers perspective above all else. However, if the

pedagogy to foster such “intricate attachments” through caring: Sara Price, “Towards Caring: The Role of Place-Based Learning in a Secondary School English First Peoples Class” (University of British Columbia, 2016), <https://open.library.ubc.ca/cIRcle/collections/ubctheses/24/items/1.0308790>.

²⁷ Nicholas A. Scott, “Ecological Mobilities: Enacting Nature through Cycling,” in *Assembling Moral Mobilities: Cycling, Cities, and the Common Good* (Lincoln: Univ of Nebraska Pr, 2020).

²⁸ Oded Lowenheim, *The Politics of the Trail: Reflexive Mountain Biking along the Frontier of Jerusalem* (University of Michigan Press, 2014), 2.

²⁹ Lowenheim, 196.

sport is engaged within a place based modality we can see potential for the creation of an eco-domestic form of worth, that begins to encapsulate the rider within a place based collective, tied to the history and tradition of the area. Here the rider is encouraged to notice the environment through which they move, but more, is encouraged to see themselves as part of that environment.

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