April 16, 2020

Electric power assisted bicycles (e-bikes) are gaining in popularity in America, and for years the Arizona Trail Association has recognized the potential impacts e-bikes might have on trails and trail users. Since the Arizona Trail is designated a non-motorized trail by Congress under the National Trails System Act of 1968, the potential of e-bikes on the AZT has not been an issue. After all, a bicycle with a motor (no matter how small or quiet), is motorized.

However, last year the Secretary of the Interior issued an order for all land managers within the Department of the Interior to formalize their position on e-bikes and encouraged them to be made legal wherever bicycles are currently allowed. This could impact six of the Arizona Trail’s 43 passages. Also, since the Department of Agriculture (US Forest Service – the agency that administers the Arizona National Scenic Trail) often follows recreational management guidelines set forth by the Department of the Interior, it became possible that e-bikes could be allowed on most of the AZT outside designated wilderness areas.

For anyone not intimately involved in the intricacies of land management, one important thing to note is that the Arizona Trail Association is not a land manager. We do not make decisions about the Arizona Trail, but instead protect, maintain and sustain it with your help. We aspire for consistent management across numerous jurisdictional boundaries, and often act as a mediator so various National Forests, Ranger Districts, State Parks, National Parks, BLM units, counties, cities and private property owners are all making somewhat uniform decisions that preserve the nature and purpose of the trail. The Arizona Trail Association does not have the authority to allow or exclude specific uses on the trail; those decisions are at the discretion of the land managers themselves. Most of those land managers represent federal agencies; they are public servants that work for you and me.

We believe that public lands belong in public hands, and under this current Administration a lot of decisions about parks, forests and trails are being made that don’t involve a public process. So the Arizona Trail Association has had to be more aware, involved, and proactive in protecting the AZT. We work hard to share relevant information with you so we can all be involved before final decisions are made. Being proactive instead of reactionary usually yields much more positive results.

The Arizona Trail Association takes a very pragmatic approach to projects and uses that may impact the trail and the trail experience. We largely rely on you to define your own trail experience, which is why our mission statement is “to protect, maintain, enhance, promote and sustain the Arizona Trail as a unique encounter with the land.” You define your own unique encounter with the land, and we work hard to provide the pathway through deserts, mountains, canyons and forests that makes those experiences possible. One of our internal discussions about e-bikes revealed there isn’t enough data on impacts of e-bikes to health and safety, environment/trail conditions, and recreational conflicts for land managers to make a truly informed decision. Even though we all have our individual personal feelings, an organization like the Arizona Trail Association that represents a diverse group of trail users relies on research and science to come to reasonable conclusions. That’s where the need for e-bike research was discovered.

A graduate student with close ties to the Arizona Trail recognized the issues and the rapidly changing policies that were emerging from federal and state agencies, as well as counties and cities throughout Arizona, and offered to lead research into perceptions of conflict surrounding potential
future use of e-bikes on the Arizona Trail. It’s an unbiased approach that has been reviewed by numerous leaders within social science, land management and research analytics, as well as representatives from the hiking, mountain biking, equestrian and e-bike communities. To help fund this research, the Arizona Trail Association approached the two most diametrically opposed organizations in support of e-bikes (PeopleForBikes) and opposed to e-bikes (Back Country Horsemen of America). Like the Arizona Trail Association, they realized the value in the research without attachment to the outcome. Then they committed funds to help make it happen.

This study uses a mixed methods approach by gathering and analyzing both qualitative and quantitative data to be gathered and analyzed independently, then once the results from each are obtained, they can be compared to one another and interpreted.

For qualitative data gathering, we solicited feedback from trail users last year by posing an open-ended question about their opinions of e-bikes being allowed on sections of the Arizona Trail. Over 100 responses were received in August and September of 2019. These comments are currently being coded and analyzed as qualitative data. Because there is so little existing research about e-bike user conflict, we are using an emergent coding process that will allow us to remain open to sources of conflict that did not come up in past literature. If you didn’t contribute comments last year and would like to do so, please send an email to comment@aztrail.org.

For quantitative data gathering, we developed a 20-question survey that is strategically designed, not to be a comprehensive questionnaire about all of the positive and negative elements of e-bike use, but instead to address gaps in existing research, specifically about perceptions surrounding e-bikes. The survey addresses a number of previously unquantified issues including whether there is a correlation between experience riding e-bikes and positive views of e-bikes and whether different existing user groups have similar or dissenting views of e-bikes. There are also questions examining perceived social conflict versus direct conflict.

To date, the vast majority of e-bike related research has taken place on city streets, often outside the United States, and has primarily focused on e-bikes as a form of transportation with recreation as a secondary function. This type of research does little to inform us about the likely outcomes from federal rule changes that will allow e-bikes on trails. This study could provide insight into the future behavioral outcomes from the Department of the Interior’s intentions to allow e-bikes wherever bicycles are currently allowed. As it stands, there is very little existing research to help predict the possible consequences of these policies that are just beginning to be implemented.

Did you know that one National Park through which the Arizona Trail passes has already made the decision to allow e-bikes? The Arizona Trail Association has concerns with allowing a motorized form of recreation on a Congressionally designated non-motorized trail, and it will be interesting to see how this particular issue develops, especially as the Department of Interior works on redefining e-bikes as something that is not “motorized,” but more closely aligns with a traditional bicycle.

The results of the research may shed light on which issues are perceived to be of greatest concern to existing users and begin to clarify if previous e-bike use reduces negative perceptions. This type of information may be useful for educational approaches to prevent conflict or dispel false narratives. The knowledge gained from this study might also drive strategies used by land managers to minimize conflict. The Arizona Trail Association has spent the last 26 years focused on ways to minimize conflict, and our proven methods are too many to mention here but are used by land managers and other trail organizations nationwide. We are proud that the Arizona Trail is open to all forms of non-motorized recreation – unlike other National Scenic Trails that are more
restrictive. We are attempting to get out ahead of changes to federal rules so the AZT remains relatively conflict free.

We feel the Arizona Trail is an ideal venue for this type of research due to a diversity of trail users; it crosses many different land management boundaries; has a socially and environmentally conscious nonprofit organization that takes a proactive approach to issues, with a commitment to inclusion and sustainability; and a strong coalition of supporters (that’s you). There will surely be a need for further research on e-bike use on public lands, but this current research can serve as a valuable starting point.

If you choose to take the online survey, great. Thank you. If you prefer to share your comments, opinions and concerns to add to the qualitative data, please send an email to comment@aztrail.org. Please keep your social media posts kind and considerate, and do your best to tone down the rhetoric. We recognize that the effects of the coronavirus outbreak have created a storm of uncertainty and anxiety, and our intention is not to add any additional stress with a topic like e-bikes. The Arizona Trail should be a source of inspiration that we are all proud of – a pathway that unifies us, not divides us. We genuinely care what you think – after all, this is your trail – which is why we are investing resources into this research to turn your experiences and opinions into something that can be presented to land managers that may guide local, regional and national policies into the future.

Sincerely,

Matthew J. Nelson
Executive Director, Arizona Trail Association