

# MANAGING CLOSE-TO-NATURE SHARED-USED RECREATIONAL TRAILS IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

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## Abstract

In the legislative framework of the Czech Republic there are several user groups that have right of access to forest for recreation by law. These user groups are: pedestrians, cyclists, horse riders and skiers. They differ in their characteristics of their land use, demands for recreational infrastructure, and extent of the right of access. The extent of the right of access for different user groups has implications for the user flow through the areas of interest and more importantly for the formal recreational trails products. It is also one of the sources of the potential user-conflict. The solution in the Czech Republic has been blanket and general restrictions that are gradually tightening. However, this has no basis in current legislation and may even be in direct conflict with it. From the point of view of the future of forest recreation and nature protection in the Czech Republic it is also a very short-sighted fix. From a professional point of view, it is therefore necessary to look at the problem in a more comprehensive way. It is essential to implement and start using the full breadth of recreational management tools.

**Key words:** right of access, user groups, restrictions, forest recreation, shared use trails

## Legal user groups

The current Czech Forest Law (289/1995 Coll.) and its implementing regulations imply five particular recreational user groups that have, to some extent, legal access to forests. These are walkers (1), cyclists (2), horse riders (3), and the law also mentions skiing (4) and sledgers (5). These groups are not defined in detail in the law, which is understandable given that this legislation was drafted almost 30 years ago.

However, the concept of outdoor recreation and the means of transport - e.g. the tools that user groups use - have changed profoundly in recent decades and continue to evolve rapidly even at present. Within each particular user group, there are quite differentiated subgroups with different, sometimes conflicting, demands on recreational infrastructure. Moreover, some of these sub-groups have in fact little in common with their core group and are included only because they are not given any further legislative attention.

Understanding user groups and their structure of recreational use of forests is important for successful visitor management and recreation infrastructure planning. In the following paragraphs we briefly describe the particular user groups and outline the subgroups that are identified within them.

Readers should note two important things: Throughout our paper we write about forest areas that are not subject to any other / higher levels of protection. Our analysis is relevant only to the Czech Republic as other countries have different recreation access legislation.

## Walkers (1)

Walkers are the only recreational users who can legally access forests cross-country - they are not limited to the network of forest roads and trails.

This privilege of the recreational access in the Czech Republic is valued by the general public but it has implications for visitor management and formal recreational trail products (see below).

Walkers have number of subgroups with different tendencies. The way that hikers, who tend to stick to waymarked routes, are using outdoors is quite different from mushroom pickers who tend to ramble through forest terrain. The walker category also includes recreational runners (who have a different movement dynamic due to their higher speeds) but surprisingly (implied by Czech Road Traffic Act) also riders on electric unicycles. In general walkers use of the forests year-round, although with seasonal fluctuations in intensity.

## Cyclists (2)

According to prevailing current interpretations of Czech Forest Law, bicycle use is limited to forest roads designed for motorised vehicles (forest road categories 1L and 2L) and to waymarked routes.

There are different types of bicycles (road, gravel, mountain with XC, trail, enduro, freeride and downhill subgroups) designed for different uses. In addition, there are ebike versions of all these types which, if certain conditions are met, are considered to be bicycles in legal sense and have same right

of access. Whereas previously cycling recreation was more or less limited to periods without snow, in recent years ebikes, fabikes and their combinations gained in popularity in snowy conditions. Legally, scooters and electric scooters are also bicycles.

### **Horse riders (3)**

Horse riders are subject to the same regulations as cyclists in the Czech Republic, i.e. they are allowed to ride category 1L and 2L forest roads and on waymarked routes. Unlike walkers, cyclists and skiers, recreational horse riders are a relatively homogeneous user group. Due to limited number of horses and their accessibility horse riders are much smaller group in numbers than walkers and cyclists. Recreational horseback riders are common only around equestrian facilities, horse farms, and ranches. Recreational horseback riding is more or less a year-round activity.

### **Skiers (4)**

Similarly to cyclists and horse riders, skiers have legal access to category 1L and 2L forest roads and waymarked routes. Skiing is seasonally and geographically limited to conditions with a sufficient snow cover. Outside of snow, roller skis can be used only sporadically in forests due to requirement of smooth asphalt surfaces.

Skiers are not a homogeneous group. Downhill skiing will not be discussed further, as it takes place mainly on ski slopes which are removed from forests by cadastre procedures. Of all the skiing options, cross-country skiing and ski-touring are the most relevant in forested landscapes. Increasingly cross-country skiing takes place only when snow surface is prepared by grooming by wide snowcat machines.

Cross-country skiing outside the groomed track is possible but less comfortable and is losing popularity to ski touring and snowshoeing. Climbing skins on touring skis allow uphill movement through terrain without a groomed track. On descents touring skis can be used similarly to downhill skis.

While narrow and fragile cross-country skis are mainly used within the scope of legal access the touring skis allow movement on open forest terrain, which is not granted by law.

### **Sledgers (5)**

The right for access for sledging is identical to that for cycling, horse riding and skiing. Like skiing, this activity is limited to periods with sufficient snow. The law does not specify whether it relates to sledging which is usually children's pastime, or the horse-drawn sleigh rides offered by some mountain resorts, or both. Since sledging in forest usually does not make much sense and horse-drawn sleigh rides are a rather sporadic activity in Czech context we will not discuss it further in this article.

### **User conflict**

The above user groups do not use forests (and its recreational infrastructure) separately, but rather simultaneously both in time and space. There are various interactions among them, which may (or may not) take on the form of user conflict of varying intensity. Probably the most common (or most perceivable) user conflict is between walkers and cyclists. Walkers may experience encounters with cyclists as conflict on a whole range from feelings of indignation, to varying degrees of threat, potentially resulting in injury.

Cyclists may perceive walkers as annoying obstacles to their rides, but walkers can also pose a real safety issue to them. Meanwhile, walkers cannot be legally excluded from any official waymarked cycling trail due to extent of their right of access.

User conflicts often also occur on groomed cross-country ski routes where walkers or fatbikers damage tracks (and can also obstruct skiers and cause dangerous situations). Skiers often feel superior since the track has been specifically groomed for them and can usually only operate only for a limited period of the year and the grooming requires considerable resources. Legally however skiers do not have an exclusive access.

From the perspective of user conflict recreational riding is perceived by a large part of the public and experts as an environmentally friendly activity. Horse is perceived as majestic, virtually untouchable animals. However any encounter with a horse requires slowing down from other users, which can also be perceived as detrimental to their recreational experience.

Horses have another, indirect impact on other recreational users: heavily used trails around horse ranches often show significant wear and damage. This makes their use by pedestrians or cyclists from difficult to impossible, leading to mutual hostility, as well as potentially causing secondary environmental damage (erosion, trampling and widening).

The public (and some experts) tend to label user groups according to what they consider morally right

or natural. However, it is evident from the above simple analysis that all user groups cause user conflict. The same applies to their environmental impacts, although this is not the primary focus of this paper.

### **Restrictive management on new trails**

User conflict is one of the consequences of the democratic right to recreation and is, to some extent, inevitable. Recreational infrastructure operators and land managers must take this into account and deal with it by active management tools. Although there are several legal recreational user groups, the relationship between walkers and cyclists has attracted the most attention, and the following recommendations in this paper will therefore focus mainly on the coexistence of these two user groups. Unfortunately at the moment Czech authorities and experts alike tend separate these recreational groups by access restrictions. It is one conclusion of this paper that such practice is illegal. Also if used as template solution it puts the tradition of shared-use into question. Contrary to such approach we propose deploying softer and more differentiated management tools.

This is illustrated, for example, by the public administration's requirements to post operation regulations ("provozní řád") and to install signs prohibiting walker access on new MTB trails. Both the signs and the rules are illegal in current Czech legal framework. Walkers who by law have an unrestricted access cannot be prohibited from entering the trail by a sign. From a practical point of view, this is neither a reliable nor an enforceable solution. Moreover, walkers can access the trail from virtually anywhere on the forest terrain, so the restriction may be completely missed them by.

### **Well designed trails are the most effective management tool**

As trail designers with years of experience, we argue that when designing and permitting nature-based forest trails for MTB, the walker user group, given its size, should be actively reflected in the design and subsequent use regime. Mandatory separation of recreational groups and restriction on access tend to arouse public resentment, pit user groups against each other and contribute to the division of society. They also provoke resentment against the authorities, land owners and managers, and politicians. Such restrictive tools should only be used as a last resort. Before that, range of more sophisticated tools should be applied, tailored to the specific conditions.

The most effective tools for preventing user conflict is creating a recreation infrastructure by applying design and engineering principles of the half rule and the 10% rule.

Consistent adherence to moderate trail grade does not allow cyclists to pick up speeds and therefore will effectively limit user conflict. Strict adherence to sight lines (removing lower tree branches and overgrown vegetation), not only during construction but also further maintenance also helps. Users must be able to see each other at a sufficient distance.

In addition to this, trail parameters (especially width, vertical and horizontal undulations and anchoring) are also a very useful tool. As an example, consider grade reversals. They are very popular with more advanced off-road cyclists, but walking on them is not very pleasant - they feel tiring and inefficient. A trail designed with pronounced grade reversals eliminates most walkers just by making them prefer different route. It also eliminates other users, such as horseback riders, who find it impassable, and illegal users, such as motorcyclists, who find it unpleasant to the point of impassable. Even on such trails pedestrian use cannot be completely eliminated and the design must take that into account, especially in relation to lines of sight.

In addition to design and engineering measures, there are other non-restrictive tools to minimise user conflict. Trails in close proximity to settlements should automatically be considered to be shared-use and should be designated and promoted as such. Of course, structural qualities such as a very gentle grades and long sight must be applied.

In all information materials on site and elsewhere users should be actively encouraged to be considerate and friendly to other users and other user groups. While such soft management tool never works 100% it's more civilized and democratic than restrictions (even more so illegal restrictions as pointed out).

Our long experience at a destination MTB trail system Singltrek pod Smrkem also shows that a certain regime of trail use will eventually establish itself on the trails. Local people like to use some parts of the trail system for walking and already know on which days there will be minimal cyclist traffic on the trails and on which days it is better to avoid them. It is also extremely important for formal trail products to have well-developed formalised risk management and consistent and transparent administration.

### **Conclusion - Shared use needs to be taken into account**

Finally, we would like to point out that concerns about shared-use paths and user conflict are quite understandable. User conflict should not be taken lightly. In the legislative framework of the Czech republic it really is not easy to develop formal recreational infrastructure products targeted to non-walking user groups. Walkers always need to be taken into account.

On the other hand the trend of growing visitor numbers, mainly in non-walking users groups is evident. If the authorities, land owners and managers do not start acting either by offering formal products or by more nuanced management measures, users will always find their own ways (both figuratively and literally). This will bring with it problems that can be even more difficult to respond to.

### **Souhrn**

V legislativním rámci ČR má ze zákona určitou míru práva na rekreaci na lesních pozemcích několik (dále dělitelných) uživatelských skupin: pěší, cyklisté, jezdci na koních a lyžaři. Tyto skupiny se liší svými charakteristikami, nároky na rekreační infrastrukturu, tendencemi i mírou práva přístupu. Různá míra práva přístupu pro různé uživatelské skupiny má implikace na formální produkty rekreačních stezek a také je jedním ze zdrojů potenciálního vzniku uživatelského konfliktu. V Česku se často přistupuje k zbytečně obecným, zbytečně tvrdým, či postupně se zpřísňujícím restrikcím. To však v českém kontextu nemá oporu v legislativě či dokonce s ní může být v rozporu. Na situaci je nutné nahlížet komplexněji a je nezbytné zavést a začít používat celou šíři nástrojů managementu návštěvnosti. Domníváme se, že základním předpokladem těchto opatření je odborné inženýrské řešení infrastruktury stezek, tras a jejich sítí. Na ně by měly navazovat cílené, sofistikované nástroje.

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