

E-bikes are an environmental dream—except out in nature

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Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

The boom in electric-powered bicycling is reducing car travel, lowering carbon emissions and introducing homebodies to exercise and the great outdoors.

But the activity is on a collision course with an equally cherished environmental ideal: peace and quiet.

In response to a new state policy that allows e-bikes anywhere that standard bikes are permitted, local officials are racing to ban their use on unpaved routes in open space preserves.

On Monday, the city of Palo Alto voted 5-2 to prohibit them from the popular Baylands Trail, beloved for its sweeping views of the South Bay, multitudes of picturesque waterfowl and easy commute to Google and other tech campuses.

The vote brought howls of protest among many residents of a city that prides itself on innovation and sustainability, with a new \$23.1 million bike overpass, bike boulevards, instructional webinars and programs that support all kinds of cycling, including e-bikes, to meet its environmental goals.

"I was really looking forward to riding my new [e-bike](#) over to just go sit on a bench and look out at the Bay," said Deborah Wexler, who can't ride conventional bikes due to knee and hip ailments. An environmentalist who donates to open space efforts, she sighed, "I'll be back in the car."

But the ban is welcomed by others who say they've been terrorized on the trail through Baylands Nature Preserve, the largest tract of undisturbed marshland remaining in the San Francisco Bay. There are plenty of paved routes for e-bikes, they say.

"A bike zooming by disrupts the fundamental reason for being out there," said Palo Alto Councilmember Ed Lauing. "Why do we go to open space? We go for a mental break ... and to slow down."

"Sometimes hikers like myself stop and focus on a bird, or a snake, or a bug, and my nose is down in the weeds," he said. "If somebody comes through on a big heavy bike, that disrupts everything. Maybe the critter runs away. Maybe I run away, because I'm getting out of the way of the bike."

Across the nation, communities are increasingly embracing e-bikes as a way to get more people out of cars and fill the gap in mass transit systems for trips that are too far to walk but not near buses or trains.

E-bike ridership soared during the pandemic and is now the fastest-growing segment of the U.S. bike market. With more riders, the bike industry has been advocating for greater off-pavement access. The outdoor equipment and apparel retailer REI gave a \$110,000 grant to PeopleForBikes to support e-cycling advocacy and infrastructure.

But e-bikes are heavier and can travel faster than regular bikes, which increases the risk of collision. Cyclists can ride farther and deeper into nature. There are three classes of the machines: Class 1 bikes can go up to 20 mph, Class 2 bikes can go up to 20 mph and have throttle assistance, and Class 3 bikes can go up to 28 mph.

E-bikes are regulated at the state level, not by the federal government.

In general, only certain areas of the California State Park system allow e-bikes. The rules are site-specific. At Half Moon Bay State Park, they're only permitted on the Coastal Trail. But at Mount Diablo, Wilder Ranch and Henry W. Coe state parks, they can go wherever traditional bikes are allowed.

On Midpeninsula Regional Open Space Preserve's 220 miles of trails, most are unpaved "wildland" routes in steep, rugged terrain—and do not allow e-bikes. Class 1 and Class 2 e-bikes are allowed only on limited

improved trails at Rancho San Antonio Open Space Preserve and Ravenswood Open Space Preserve.

The National Park Service, as part of a directive by the Trump administration in 2019, allows e-bikes on all trails in its 423 national parks where traditional bikes are allowed. This is being challenged in a lawsuit by the Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility and a coalition of conservation groups who seek to block e-bike access.

Individual park superintendents can decide whether or not to permit e-bikes on trails. At Point Reyes National Seashore, for instance, e-bike usage is limited to Class I bikes—Class 2 and Class 3 e-bikes are prohibited. At Yosemite National Park, no bicycles, including e-bikes, are permitted on off-road surfaces. But Sequoia National Park offers more e-bike riding opportunities.

In Southern California, the cities of San Diego and San Clemente banned them from the beaches, beach trails and boardwalks. In Los Angeles County, Manhattan Beach and Hermosa Beach also have restricted their use.

Orange County native and Trestles Beach surfer Tyler Warren posted an Instagram plea for "a view of sand and water, not a pile of e-bikes.... the bikes have gotten so bad they are littered up and down beautiful beaches." So far, he's collected 3,074 signatures on a petition to restrict their use.

"Every year, it gets harder to get a lifeguard truck through the crowd of e-bikes," wrote Riley Kraartz, a lifeguard at Camp Pendleton beaches.

Bureau of Land Management properties, in general, are welcoming. The general rule is that any BLM trail open for motorized usage is also open to e-bikes. But some lands also allow e-bikes on trails designed for

bicycles, if authorized by the local manager.

But California's new law allowing e-bikes on most trails, Assembly Bill 1909, is exposing a dilemma in cities such as Palo Alto, which has a history of environmental activism. One out of every six homes has an electric car. It's striving to convert all residents to electric appliances. It hosts "Cool Block" pilot programs to reduce the city's carbon footprint and distributes free "Zero Waste Party Packs" of shared dishes and utensils. The city's symbol is a towering redwood tree.

"The more people that walk or bike, the closer we get to our sustainability goals," said City Councilmember Greg Tanaka, who favors e-bike access on the Baylands Trail. "E-bikes are very democratizing, because more open space is accessible to more people."

But the town's trails are also home to several threatened and endangered species, such as the salt marsh harvest mouse and the Ridgway's rail, as well as tens of thousands of migrant shorebirds, waterfowl and a nesting colony of California gulls.

"As e-bikes proliferate, they pose a threat to sensitive wildlife in some of the most fragile areas along the Bay," said Matthew Dodder, executive director of the Santa Clara Valley Audubon Society. "We must preserve these critical areas for as long as possible."

The real issue, said e-bike supporters, is the absence of common courtesy. Penny Ellison, a longtime Palo Alto bike advocate, urged the city to consider a one-year trial regulating e-bikes, with speed limits rules for yielding right of way and education about better behavior. She also recommended a permit process for handicap access.

Tanaka thinks the attention is focused on the wrong problem.

"It's not the device," said Tanaka. "It's the behavior."

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