

GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS NATIONAL PARK MOUNTAIN BIKE AND ELECTRIC BICYCLE RESOURCE

The Great Smoky Mountains National Park (GSMNP) is one of the most visited sites in the national park system, with an average of more than 10 million annual visitors since 2014, and 12.5 million visitors in 2019.¹ As a result of this high visitation, the GSMNP experiences congestion and crowding, especially on popular trails and visitor areas like Cades Cove. Currently, biking is a regular activity in the GSMNP, but detailed data on bike use is limited. Estimates of visitors biking in the Cades Cove area ranged from 16,000 to 21,000 per season from 2015 to 2019. While parkwide statistics for bike use do not exist, the Cades Cove data indicates that biking is a popular activity and suggests that overall bike use in the GSMNP has increased over time. It is also reasonable to assume that bike use is increasing parkwide based on the upward trend in annual visitation.

A new mountain bike trail system has been proposed to enhance visitor experience in the park by taking advantage of new and unique recreational opportunities in the Wears Valley portion of the GSMNP in Sevier County, Tennessee. Previous NPS planning efforts completed between 1968 and 1984 identified this portion of Wears Valley as one of the most desirable areas for recreational and other development along the Foothills Parkway within the GSMNP. While more than 800 miles of trails exist in the GSMNP, less than 8 miles are designated for biking. Public roads within the GSMNP are open to biking, but no purpose-built mountain biking trails currently exist.

DECISION NOTICE FOR THE WEARS VALLEY MOUNTAIN BIKE TRAIL SYSTEM

In compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the National Park Service (NPS) prepared an [environmental assessment](#) (EA) to examine alternatives and environmental impacts associated with a proposed mountain bike trail system within the Wears Valley portion of the GSMNP. The NPS issued a decision and a [Finding of No Significant Impact \(FONSI\) for the Wears Valley Mountain Bike Trail System EA](#).

SELECTED ALTERNATIVE

The EA analyzed the no-action alternative and three action alternatives for the construction of a mountain bike trail system. Based on the analysis presented in the Revised EA, which was available for public review from February 8 to March 10, 2022, and after considering public comments, NPS selected alternative 3 (Proposed Action and NPS preferred alternative) for the development of a mountain bike trail system if construction and annual operational funds become available.

Alternative 3 will create a mountain bike trail system with approximately 4.2 miles of easy trail (green, less than 5% slope), 2.9 miles of moderate trail (blue, 5-10% slope), and 4.7 miles of advanced trail (black, 10-15% slope) for a total of 11.8 miles of bicycle-optimized mountain bike

¹ "Annual Visitation." Great Smoky Mountains National Park.
<https://irma.nps.gov/STATS/SSRSReports/Park%20Specific%20Reports/>

trails. The selected alternative would also include approximately 2.3 miles of pedestrian-only trails in the project area for a total of 14.1 miles of trails. An approximately 0.93-mile access road would also need to be constructed to access the mountain bike trail system and trailhead. Amenities at the trailhead would include a bike wash and repair station, restrooms, and picnic tables. An informational kiosk for orientation, trail etiquette, and rules for mountain biking would also be constructed at the trailhead.

The mountain bike trail capacity is 177 people at one time, based on assumptions outlined in the Revised EA. The estimated annual visitation for the mountain bike trail system would be approximately 81,000 visitors. This number includes both existing GSMNP visitors and new visitors, so it is unknown what the total increase to overall visitation would be; however, it would be small compared to the overall 12.5 million annual visitors. To manage congestion, the GSMNP could implement measures including visitor dispersal, parking enforcement, reservation system, or increasing trail capacity by expanding the mountain bike trail system in adjacent portions of the corridor under a separate NEPA process.

DOES THE GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS NATIONAL PARK ALLOW ELECTRIC BICYCLES ON NON-MOTORIZED TRAILS?

On September 28, 2021, the GSMNP confirmed and redesignated the continued use of Class 1 and 2 electric bicycles (e-bikes) on NPS areas where traditional bicycles are currently authorized under the Superintendent's Compendium. During the EA review process, the GSMNP did not identify any potentially significant impacts associated with e-bikes. Therefore, like other NPS trails where bicycles are allowed, non-motorized bicycles and Class 1 and Class 2 electric bikes (e-bikes) would be authorized on the mountain bike trails. The use of Class 3 e-bikes would be prohibited.

WHERE ARE ELECTRIC BICYCLES ALLOWED IN THE GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS NATIONAL PARK?

The term "e-bike" refers to a two- or three-wheeled cycle with fully operable pedals and an electric motor of less than 750 watts.

- Class 1 and 2 e-bikes are allowed in GSMNP where traditional bicycles are allowed. E-bikes are prohibited where traditional bicycles are prohibited. Except where use of motor vehicles by the public is allowed, using the electric motor to move an e-bike without pedaling is prohibited.
- A person operating an e-bike is subject to the following sections of 36 CFR part 4 that apply to the use of traditional bicycles: sections 4.12, 4.13, 4.20, 4.21, 4.22, 4.23, and 4.30(h)(2)-(5).
- Except as specified in this Compendium, the use of an e-bike within GSMNP is governed by state law, which is adopted and made a part of this Compendium. Any violation of state law adopted by this paragraph is prohibited.

HOW DID TRAIL ACCESS FOR CLASS 1 ELECTRIC BICYCLES EXPAND IN THE GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS NATIONAL PARK?

NPS considered potential impacts of e-bikes during internal scoping and did not identify any environmental issues specific to e-bikes that warranted detailed analysis in the EA. NPS' conclusion was based on a review of resources in the project area and previous analysis of potential impacts of e-bikes in the GSMNP. As noted in chapter 2 of the EA, like other GSMNP trails where bicycles are allowed, non-motorized bicycles and Class 1 and Class 2 e-bikes will be authorized on the mountain bike trails. The use of Class 3 electric bikes will be prohibited.

WILL MORE TRAILS BE OPENED TO ELECTRIC BICYCLES IN THE GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS?

The GSMNP will continue to monitor safety, sustainability, crowding, and natural resource impacts associated with the effects of mountain bikes and Class 1 and 2 e-bikes use on roads and trails. The information collected will help guide the continued use-designation of trails in the GSMNP. Any new trail access would need to be analyzed in a separate NEPA process with a public comment period.

NOTEWORTHY FINDINGS FROM THE WEARS VALLEY IN THE GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS NATIONAL PARK DECISION NOTICE + FONSI:

WILDLIFE IMPACTS

In pages 56-59 of the EA, potential impacts on wildlife from the presence of mountain bikers, including noise, are discussed. Similarly, potential impacts from the noise from e-bikes are discussed in the visitor use and experience section beginning on page 49.

For both projects, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service concurred with the overall park findings that allowing mountain bikes and Class 1 and 2 e-bikes is not likely to adversely affect listed species. Wildlife collisions are analyzed in the EA, with a focus on the potential for vehicle collisions along the access road. While the potential for wildlife collisions exist for e-bikes and other types of bikes, the probability of these collisions occurring is very low. Therefore, this issue was not carried forward for detailed analysis in the EA based on internal NPS scoping.

The FONSI and NPS responses to comments on the EA and associated documents are available for viewing online via the [Planning, Environment and Public Comment \(PEPC\) website](#).