



# Guidelines for a Quality Trail Experience



*mountain bike trail guidelines*

June, 2018





# About

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## ***BLM***

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) may best be described as a small agency with a big mission: to sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of America's public lands for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations. It administers more public land – over 245 million surface acres – than any other federal agency in the United States. Most of this land is located in the 12 Western states, including Alaska. The BLM also manages 700 million acres of subsurface mineral estate throughout the nation.

The BLM's multiple-use mission, set forth in the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976, mandates that we manage public land resources for a variety of uses, such as energy development, livestock grazing, recreation, and timber harvesting, while protecting a wide array of natural, cultural, and historical resources, many of which are found in the BLM's 27 million-acre National Landscape Conservation System. The conservation system includes 221 wilderness areas totaling 8.7 million acres, as well as 16 national monuments comprising 4.8 million acres.

## ***IMBA***

IMBA was founded in 1988 by a group of California mountain bike clubs concerned about the closure of trails to cyclists. These clubs believed that mountain biker education programs and innovative trail management solutions should be developed and promoted. While this first wave of threatened trail access was concentrated in California, IMBA's pioneers saw that crowded trails and trail user conflict were fast becoming worldwide recreation issues. This is why they chose "International Mountain Bicycling Association" as the organization's name.

IMBA's nonprofit mission is to protect, create, and enhance great mountain bike experiences. Core activities include promoting responsible mountain biking, engaging in volunteer trail work, and offering assistance to land managers. A vibrant network of IMBA chapters and other affiliated groups are the heart, mind, and soul of the organization. Today, IMBA counts more than 700,000 hours of volunteer service annually.

Mountain biking offers amazing opportunities to experience the great outdoors, explore new terrain, and connect with the land and with friends. Believe me, I am not the only one who feels this way! Every year more than 3.5 million mountain bikers ride the trails that are available on public lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). And there are more riders every year.

The BLM is responding to this increasing demand by providing new and improved mountain bike trails so more Americans can experience their public lands on two wheels. But we are not doing this alone. We work closely with communities across the country and with national partners so we can be thoughtful, strategic, and sustainable in our approach.

Recently we collaborated with the International Mountain Bicycling Association and other partners to develop these "Guidelines for a Quality Trail Experience." The guidelines will help improve the design, construction, and management of mountain bike trails all across the country.

We depend on citizens like you to help us maintain the mountain bike trails we all enjoy on public lands. You can help out by viewing and sharing the guidelines, which are available in this publication or online. You can also practice and promote responsible mountain biking, volunteer at local trail events, and stay engaged with recreation planners at your local BLM office.

I have been incredibly fortunate to ride on public lands around the country, including places like Moab and Mt. Hood. I look forward to seeing you on the trails, and I am grateful for the passion you bring to this important use of our nation's public lands.

Ride on!

Neil Kornze

Director-Bureau of Land Management



*BLM Director Neil Kornze (center)*  
Bar M Trails, Moab Utah—Outerbike 2015 Event

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Vision and Goals summarizes the strategy set forth to achieve the desired level of quality for mountain bike trail development on BLM-administered lands, and explains the purpose and need for developing the Guidelines for a Quality Trail Experience as well as what the document is and isn't.

## **2** *Background and History* P.8

Background and History reviews the history of the agency in regards to providing mountain bike access and associated visitor outcomes and experiences, and the challenges associated with managing mountain bike use; provides an overview of previous mountain bike-specific action plans; and spotlights several iconic BLM-administered mountain bike areas.

## **3** *Trail Settings, Characteristics and Experiences* P.18

Trail Settings, Characteristics and Experiences discusses the relationship between the recreation opportunity spectrum and the appropriate level of development through the identification of primary trail experience characteristics.

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Take Action summarizes the implementation of Guidelines for a Quality Trail Experience during all phases of trail planning, design, and development, including resources for trail system and route-specific planning for developing new opportunities, retrofitting existing opportunities, or evaluating existing experiences.

## **6** *Sustainable Experiences* P.164

Sustainable Experiences highlights the critical factors in providing mountain bike access that meets rider expectations while balancing the economic, social, environmental, historical, and cultural factors of sustainability.

## *Appendix*

Various appendices provide more detailed information to practitioners: land manager toolkit, difficulty rating system chart, trail contracting guidance, etc.



*Klondike Bluffs Trail System*  
Moab, Utah

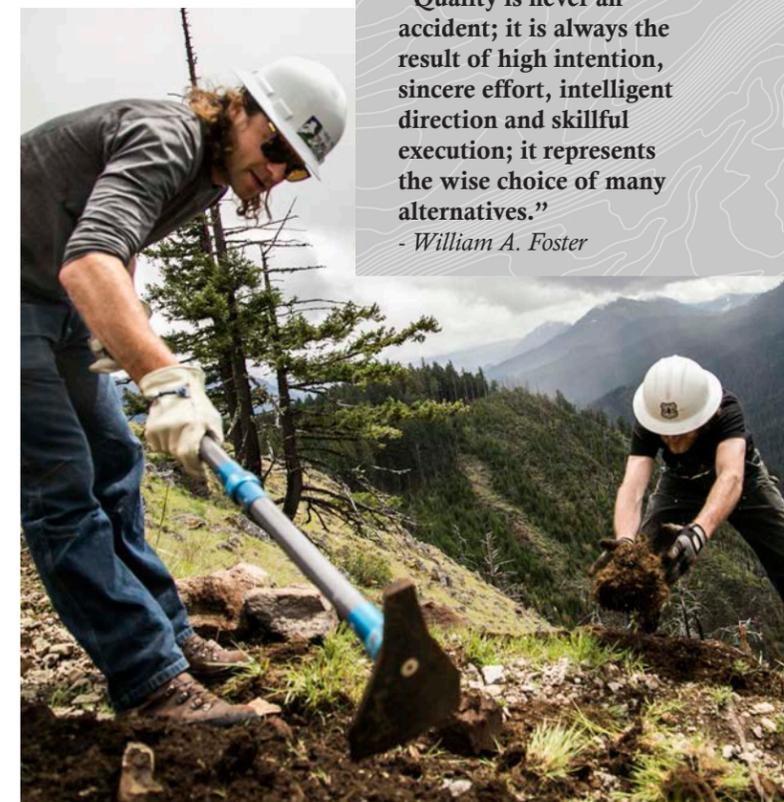
## Introduction

# Quality

**Quality is difficult to define but easy to recognize.** For the purposes of the Bureau of Land Management’s Guidelines for a Quality Trail Experience, herein referred to as QTTE, quality is defined as excellence. In the context of mountain bike trails, excellence is realized when a trail design merges the desired outcomes and difficulty that a rider seeks with the setting in which the outcomes are realized. These variables ultimately equate to an overall level of sustainability that protects resources while simultaneously providing a rider with the outcomes they seek.

Quality implies a sincere commitment to attaining the highest practical standard. With regard to a quality mountain bike trail experience, several attributes must apply. A quality mountain bike trail on BLM-administered land is one that is:

- **Appropriate to a particular place and setting**
- **Environmentally and socially sustainable**
- **Economically responsible, taking into account long-term costs associated with maintenance and administration**
- **Outcomes-focused, able to provide the targeted experience and benefits for the identified rider skill level**



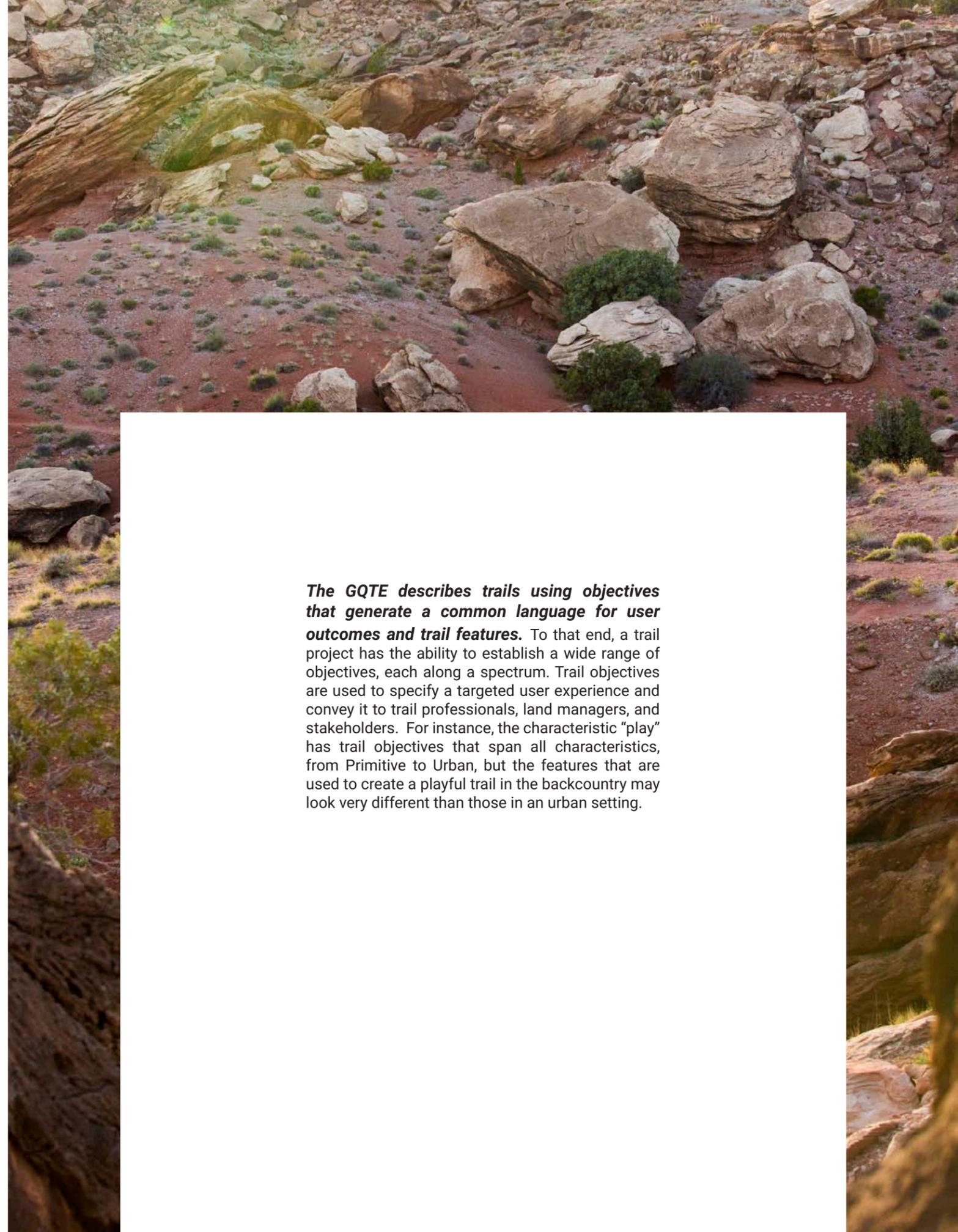
**“Quality is never an accident; it is always the result of high intention, sincere effort, intelligent direction and skillful execution; it represents the wise choice of many alternatives.”**  
- William A. Foster

The overarching vision for the GQTE is to establish key characteristics that will define a range of trail-based experiences. When applied properly, the trail features will form the foundation for an experience that meets the targeted trail objectives and outcomes. The GQTE documents the BLM's evolution as a land management agency, provides internal staff and the public at large a resource to

better communicate what constitutes a quality riding experience, and sets forth a process for ensuring that targeted experiences and beneficial outcomes are realized. As a mountain biker's quest for an extraordinary riding experience has evolved, so must the evolution of how trails are communicated, planned, designed, constructed, and managed.



Illustrations are a key element of the GQTE, helping to define and describe trail objectives and how these can be translated into physical trail features. This example illustration for “Choke” shows how the rider interacts with the feature and how the feature functions as a management element. The effect on rider behavior is clearly evident from the rendering – chokes can be used to add challenge and to slow user speed.

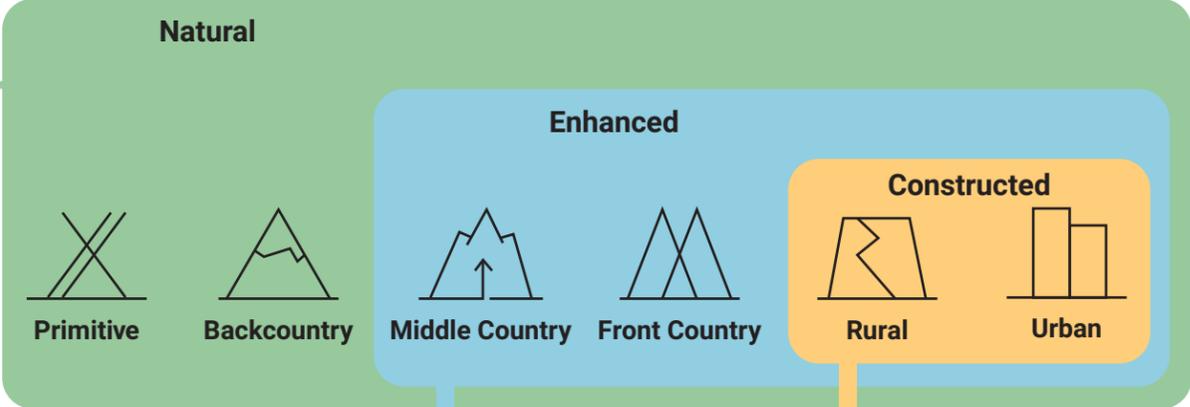


*The GQTE describes trails using objectives that generate a common language for user outcomes and trail features.* To that end, a trail project has the ability to establish a wide range of objectives, each along a spectrum. Trail objectives are used to specify a targeted user experience and convey it to trail professionals, land managers, and stakeholders. For instance, the characteristic “play” has trail objectives that span all characteristics, from Primitive to Urban, but the features that are used to create a playful trail in the backcountry may look very different than those in an urban setting.

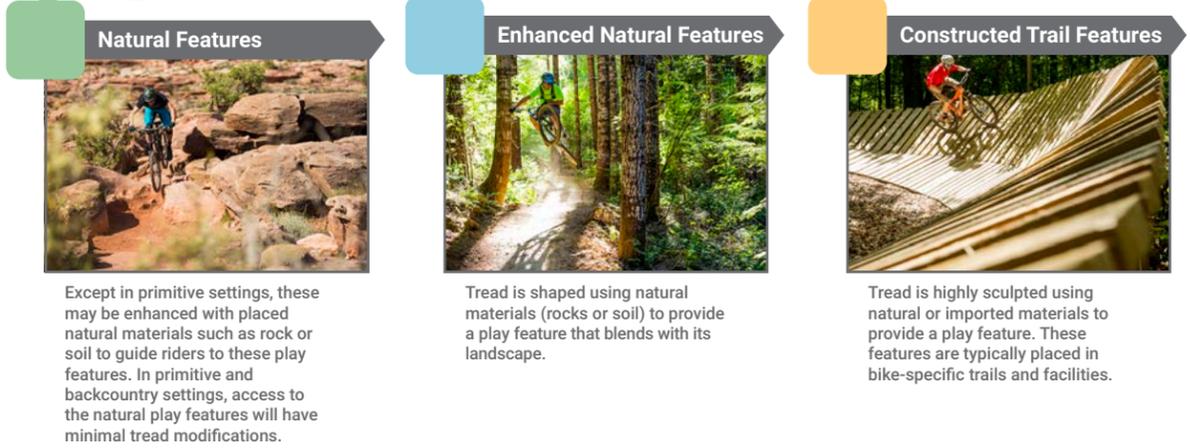
# Recreation Setting Characteristics

# Play

**Engaging in the activity purely for the enjoyment, bringing a childlike wonder to the pursuit or no destination.** On a trail, this often means utilizing features to alter the experience, rather than simply riding from point to point. Playfulness is an important characteristic in mountain bike trails and distinguishes trail experiences from many other trail user goals (hikers, equestrians).



## Trail Feature Spectrum





# Sustainability

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**An integral part of mountain biking is balancing sustainability with challenge. Mountain bikers are constantly testing the limits of their skills and equipment. Challenging trails can provide a rider with numerous outcomes that can be realized in a variety of settings: a sense of excitement or exhilaration, progression, or an opportunity to test and develop their skills.** For mountain bikers who are new to the sport, trails on the easier end of the spectrum provide an opportunity to develop their skills in a safe and predictable environment. For more advanced riders, challenging trails provide the opportunity to push their personal limits as well as those of their gear. Regardless of where a rider falls within this spectrum, when a trail is designed, planned, and managed to provide desired and challenging trail objectives, the rider's opportunity to realize these targeted outcomes will be increased.

The question is, though, how do you accommodate a range of mountain bikers who define challenge the same way yet seek dramatically different trail features to achieve a similar experience? As land managers and riders, we often hear both ends of the conversation: "We want sustainable trails but don't dumb down what we already have" or "Those trails are insane, crazy, and impossible to ride." In an era that has been defined by trail-building principles like the Half Rule, 10 percent average grade, and contour trails, it can be easy to miss the mark when designing and building bike trails for the appropriate level of rider skill and challenge.

One of the core principles of the GQTE is to balance the four components of trail sustainability in every project that is undertaken. If achieved, this balance will provide the type of quality trail outcomes that riders seek, ultimately resulting in a truly sustainable riding opportunity.

## Three components of trail sustainability:

**1. Environmental Sustainability** – Will the trail provide for resource protection? This is the definition that is commonly used when referring to what does or does not provide for a sustainable trail.

**2. Social Sustainability** – This is frequently overlooked in the trail development process. Evidence of the failure to meet desired user outcomes (experiences and associated benefits) are everywhere: overcrowded trails, trails with little use, trail users who feel “pushed out” by other users, and unauthorized routes.

**3. Economic Sustainability** – Can the land manager and the community bear the long-term costs of maintaining a trail? If it provides a valuable experience, it is likely worth the investment, but it must be weighed against shrinking maintenance budgets.

# Who, What, How

## Who developed the GQTE?

Developing the GQTE has provided an opportunity to reconsider the role that the BLM plays as a recreation service provider and to solidify the agency's commitment to connecting with communities through the design, development, construction, and management of bike trails.

**This document is the direct result of input from many BLM stakeholders.** Over a series of workshops and land manager training sessions, these stakeholders helped to define the foundation of the document, test it in the field, and review it as it evolved.

Beginning in the fall of 2014, the BLM and IMBA, through a generous grant from the Shimano Corporation, conducted GQTE-based land manager outreach workshops throughout the United States. These workshops reached over 300 participants and were held in the following locations:

- Steamboat Springs, Colorado - August 2014
- Lorane, Oregon - October 2014
- Prineville, Oregon - May 2015
- Salida, Colorado - November 2015
- Atlanta, Georgia - December 2015
- Missoula, Montana - June 2016
- Phoenix, Arizona - September 2016



Those in attendance at the workshops represented a variety of disciplines and hailed from a wide range of geographic areas, possessed a broad range of trail design and development experience, represented riders of various skill levels, and had varying levels of experience in managing mountain bike use.



**A core planning team comprising BLM recreation program and IMBA Trail Solutions program staff were brought together under a National Assistance Agreement to develop this document.** The collaboration between trail professionals from diverse disciplines and geographies enables the document to provide meaningful guidance to a wide range of settings throughout the BLM.

## Who should use the GQTE?

**The GQTE provides guidance to everyone involved in trail development and can help facilitate conversation amongst internal staff as well as with contractors, volunteers, and the public at large.** It provides direction to everyone involved in the development of a new trail system or the modernization of an existing trail to facilitate better communication and the attainment of targeted outcomes between land managers and mountain bikers. It should be referenced during all phases of trail planning, design, construction, and maintenance. The guidelines should be used to focus all stakeholders on ensuring that bike-optimized trails on BLM lands are of high quality and reflect the primary trail features that ultimately provide the targeted outcomes riders seek.



*Sandy Ridge Trail System*  
Sandy, Oregon

## How should the GQTE be used?

The GQTE is formatted as a flip reference. The chapters are color-coded along the edge to allow for quick location of the appropriate chapter. The GQTE should be referenced during all phases of project design and development as well as during construction and maintenance. The GQTE is accessible at [www.blm.gov/mountainbike](http://www.blm.gov/mountainbike) and includes additional interactive tools that aren't available in hard copy versions of the guidelines. The appendices include real work examples of BLM planning projects that have incorporated the GQTE process as well as a library of resources to assist with all phases of bike trail planning, design, construction, and management.



# GQTE Acknowledgments

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For nearly 20 years Mike has applied his landscape architecture and recreation planning experience to Mountain Resort Community based projects throughout North America and Asia. Now with IMBA Trail Solutions, Mike is involved with planning, design, and construction of world-class mountain bike trail networks and bike parks all around the globe.

To provide feedback on this publication please visit [www.imba.org/blm\\_gqte\\_feedback](http://www.imba.org/blm_gqte_feedback) or contact us directly at the emails provided on this page.



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*Sandy Ridge Trail System*  
Sandy, Oregon



*Pipe Dream Trail*  
Moab, Utah

## Chapter 1

# Vision & Goals

**The Bureau of Land Management (BLM), under a national partnership with the International Mountain Bicycling Association (IMBA), has developed trail guidelines as a comprehensive approach to trail planning, design, construction, and management specific to mountain bike trails.** The long-term vision of the BLM is that mountain biking will be the first of several trail-based activities covered under a set of specific national guidelines.

National Trail Guidelines (Guidelines for a Quality Trail Experience), hereafter referred to as GQTE, provides guidance and establishes best management practices for BLM field office managers and staff, interest groups, and individuals. It utilizes existing approaches to protecting natural resources while developing new guidance to design, plan, and manage high-quality mountain biking trails. The GQTE will be adapted as implementation of these principles occurs, as new technology is developed, and as public needs evolve. Refinement of the GQTE will be iterative and science based as new information becomes available, and will require the ongoing cooperation and participation of the public. As a guiding document, the GQTE will continue to be refined and further implemented as opportunities arise and funds allow.

The guidelines outline a general approach to trail development that can be applied to any trail project regardless of scope, scale, or location. This approach allows for the flexibility to develop an appropriate trail design solution within a variety of settings, and will result in planning and design solutions that are responsive to the unique physical, social, and environmental circumstances presented by a particular area.

There are a number of reasons why the BLM has developed the mountain biking GQTE:

- **To recognize the changing demographics, increasing populations, emerging technologies, and issues unique to mountain biking.**
- **To provide consistent planning, design, construction, and management approaches among BLM state and field offices.**
- **To provide best management practices (BMP) related to mountain bike-specific planning, design, construction, maintenance, and management techniques to provide socially and environmentally sustainable trails, quality visitor outcomes, and adequate risk management.**
- **To establish BLM trail definitions specific to mountain bike trail objectives.**
- **To capture tools and techniques that may be applicable for other private, local, state, or federal land managers looking to sustainably manage mountain bike use.**

To accomplish these objectives, this guidebook:

- *Integrates guidance from related programs, directives, and best management practices including Recreation and Visitor Services.*
- *Establishes easy-to-use design guidelines for a variety of different mountain bike trail types and difficulty levels.*
- *Addresses a diversity of settings that are representative of BLM public lands.*
- *Presents a suggested process for planning, design, and construction of mountain bike-specific trails on BLM-administered lands.*

## Scope

The GQTE is designed to accomplish the following:

- *In specific recreation management areas where mountain biking has been identified as the targeted activity, the GQTE can be used to achieve the overall recreation objectives of the area.*
- *Create a consistent mountain bike trail language that can be used internally and externally to communicate with BLM staff and our partners.*
- *Provide practical management guidance to the BLM's field office managers and staff, interest groups, and individuals regarding mountain bike-related activities on BLM-administered public lands.*
- *Provide technical guidance to the BLM recreation staff to improve BLM's capability to more effectively plan, design, construct, and manage mountain biking on BLM-administered public lands.*

## Sideboards

The GQTE is:

- *An effort to enhance the management and protection of public lands managed by the BLM.*
- *A general guidance document for BLM field offices, interest groups, and individuals on ways to address mountain biking on BLM-administered lands.*
- *A set of guidelines that may be used by BLM land managers for local trail planning.*
- *A means of sharing best management practices (BMP) with other local, state, or national land managers.*

The GQTE is not:

- *A new regulation.*
- *A means to close, limit, or open trails and roads to mountain bike use.*
- *A forum for changing any proclamations or legislation relating to national monuments, National Conservation Areas, designated Wilderness and Wilderness Study Areas, National Scenic and Historic Trails, or National Wild and Scenic Rivers.*
- *A decision document—land use plans are, and will continue to be, the principal decision documents guiding BLM lands. There will continue to be activity-level plans to address local issues. The GQTE is intended to provide BLM staff the necessary tools to plan and design high-quality mountain biking opportunities during implementation-level planning.*



*Sandy Ridge Trail System*  
Sandy, Oregon

### The GQTE can:

- **Provide a toolbox for BLM field staff to more effectively communicate with the public about mountain biking management.**
- **Assist with proper trail planning and design guidance specific to mountain biking that will protect soil, water, wildlife habitat, threatened or endangered plant and animal species, native vegetation, heritage resources, and other resources while providing for high-quality mountain biking opportunities.**
- **Establish definitions for trail types and difficulty levels based on regional trail characteristics.**

### The GQTE cannot:

- **Formulate regulations (this can occur only in the formal rulemaking process, with full public participation).**
- **Change any legislation, proclamation, or executive order.**
- **Provide the additional funds and/or staffing needed for effective mountain biking management.**





## Chapter 2

# Background & History

Over the course of its history, BLM staff, trail contractors, and volunteers have developed thousands of miles of motorized and nonmotorized trails on public lands. Several BLM-administered and internationally recognized trail projects incorporate innovative mountain bike-specific design practices resulting in some of the most unique and highly sought after mountain biking experiences found on public lands. However, these ideal mountain bicycling opportunities are currently the exception rather than the norm.

Understandably, not all BLM-administered trails are viewed as models of excellence simply as a result of the manner in which many existing trails in the BLM's network have been developed over time. Trails on BLM lands are often a by-product of other resource management objectives, or have been developed by users rather than professionally planned and designed to provide a specific user experience.

### *Bureau of Land Management Mission Statement*

It is the mission of the Bureau of Land Management to sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of the public lands for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations.



### *Vision of BLM's Recreation and Visitor Services Program*

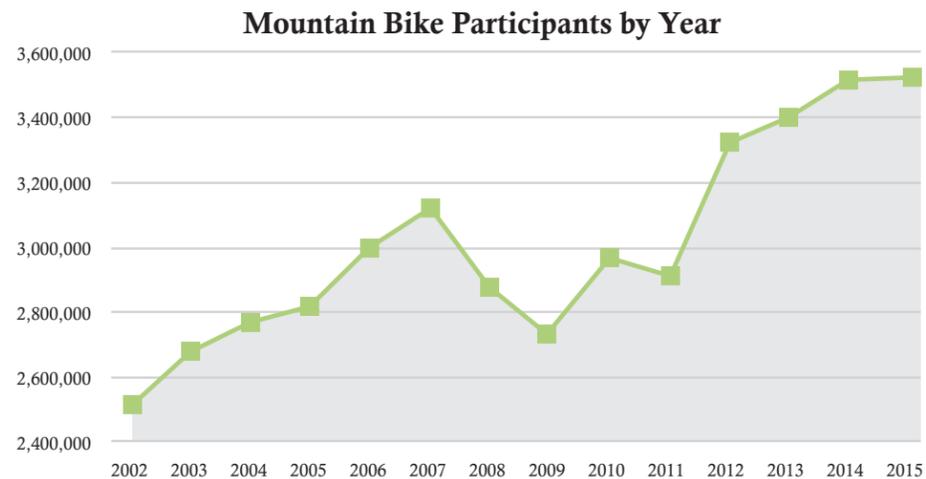
By increasing and improving collaboration with community networks of service providers, the BLM will help communities produce greater well-being and socioeconomic health and will deliver outstanding recreation experiences to visitors while sustaining the distinctive character of public lands recreation settings.

## Mountain Bike Participation Rates and Trends

**National:** In 2015, 8.3 million Americans participated in mountain biking. This represents a 2.8 percent increase in the past three years and an 8.1 percent increase since 2006. This makes it one of the more popular active recreation pursuits in the U.S.

**Bureau of Land Management:** The number of mountain bikers using BLM-managed public lands has increased dramatically since the last strategic action plan was completed by the Bureau in 2002. An estimated 3.5 million mountain bikers visited public lands to participate in this activity in 2015, this represents a 40 percent increase in mountain bike participation since the BLM completed the last mountain bike action plan in 2002\*.

What was once a low-use activity that was relatively easy to manage has become more complex as use has increased and riders' expectations have evolved. Land managers are now challenged with millions of mountain bikers and advanced technologies that enable riders to more easily reach remote areas. At the same time, land managers must deal with environmental impacts and visitor conflicts, as well as the need to provide high-quality experiences, information, and education.

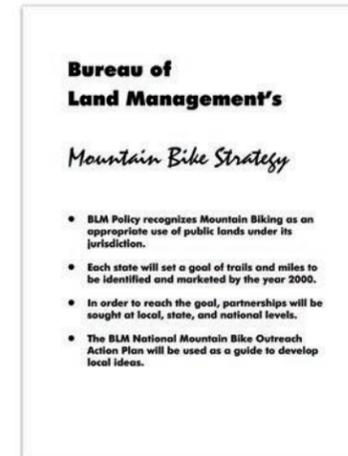


\* Mountain bike participation data extracted from the BLM's Recreation Management Information System, Report 27: Visitor Days and Participants by Activity, National Office Summary.

## Previous National Mountain Bike Strategies

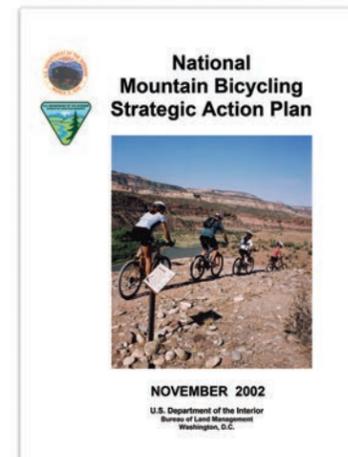
The BLM has completed several strategic planning efforts at the national level to address mountain bike management. Mountain bike-specific action plans were previously completed in 1992 and 2002. Trail design and construction techniques have evolved significantly over the past decade, resulting in the need to update the national strategy, so the BLM is currently updating the 2002 plan, working in conjunction with its national partners. Additionally, evolving mountain bike component and suspension technology has motivated the BLM's desire to provide a high-quality trail experience while managing potential resource impacts.

BLM trail management has traditionally relied on existing US Forest Service guidance, which fails to include experience-based trail design guidelines for mountain biking. To keep pace with the demands of mountain bikers, the BLM and national partners have collaborated since 1992 to develop tools that help create and better manage sustainable mountain biking opportunities.



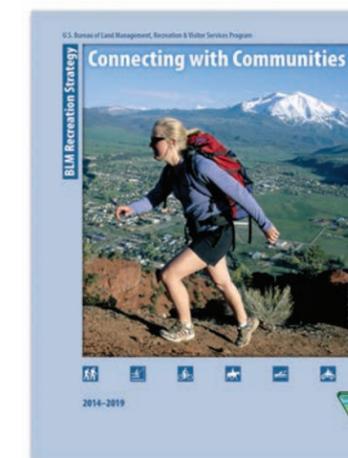
### BLM National Mountain Bike Strategy (1992)

The BLM has a long-standing history of progressively developing and managing mountain bike use on public lands, completing the first national mountain bike strategy in 1992. The goal of the initial mountain bike strategy was to identify and implement diverse mountain biking opportunities into the multi-use system of trails and roads by the year 2000. The plan recognized mountain biking as an appropriate use of public lands under its jurisdiction, and established some key trail ethics for users based on IMBA's "Rules of the Trail" as well as identified key strategies to assist with mountain biking-specific outreach to be used during project-level planning.



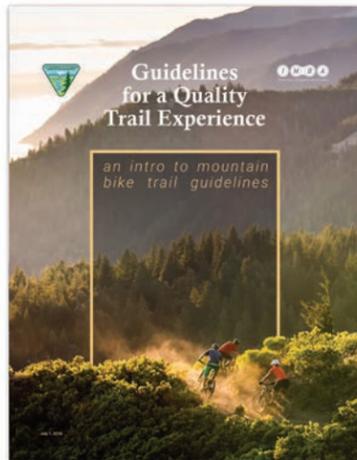
### National Mountain Bicycling Strategic Action Plan (2002)

The BLM completed a National Mountain Bicycling Strategic Action Plan in 2002. This plan provided guidance to BLM field offices, interest groups, and individuals on techniques to address mountain biking and other nonmotorized/mechanical trail management issues. The action plan focused on several mountain bike-specific issues, identified subsequent management goals, and established action items to address emerging issues.



### National Recreation and Visitor Services Strategy (2014)

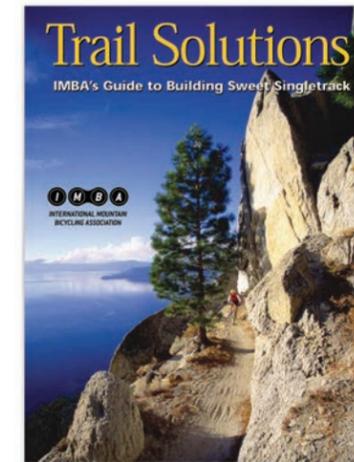
In March 2014, the BLM released an updated Recreation Strategy – Connecting with Communities. This strategy further developed BLM's successful recreation and visitor services program, which provides effective tools in cultivating partnerships and establishing closer ties with communities.



### National Mountain Bicycling Action Plan (2016)

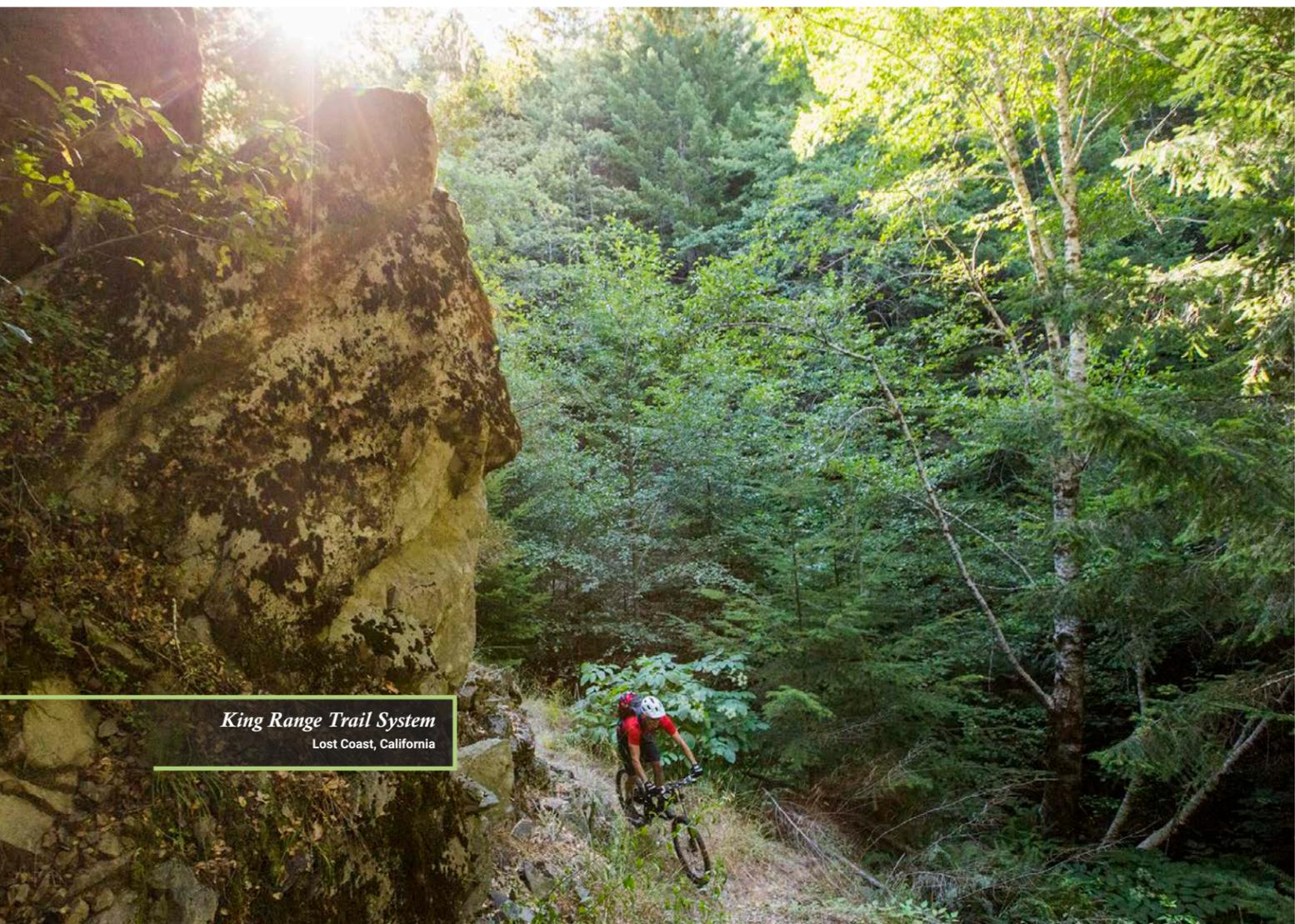
Changing public demands, evolving trail planning, new design and construction techniques, and the repositioning of the national BLM recreation strategy to more effectively work with its partners and the communities they serve have led to the need to develop an updated National Mountain Bicycling Action Plan. A strategic, community-driven approach will increase the capacity of the BLM and provide sustainable, high-quality trail experiences to the public. A long-standing national partnership with IMBA has positioned the BLM, its partners, and the communities they serve to effectively establish a strategic action plan to identify and manage mountain bicycling use across BLM-administered lands.

**Existing Mountain Bike Guidance:** The BLM currently relies on guidance developed by several national partners to assist with mountain bike planning and management needs.

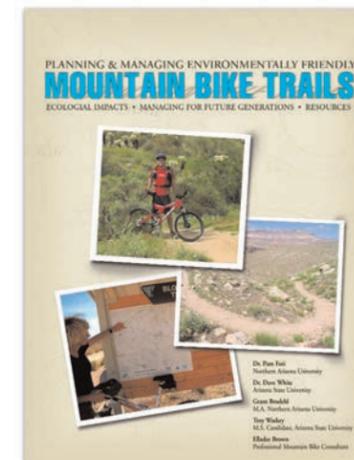


### Trail Solutions: IMBA's Guide to Building Sweet Singletrack (2004)

This resource has emerged as the leading source of sustainable trail-building information. The broad-based guidelines have been adopted as official policy by numerous land management agencies and recreation service providers.

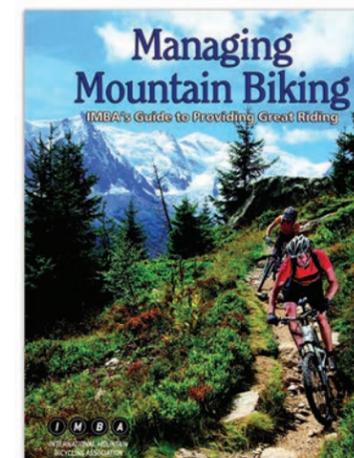


*King Range Trail System*  
Lost Coast, California



### Planning and Managing Environmentally Friendly Mountain Bike Trails (2006)

This study, developed through a partnership between the Arizona office of the BLM, Shimano Corporation, and Arizona State University was designed to achieve three goals: (1) to evaluate the physical impacts of mountain biking on recreation trails in multiple physical environments in the U.S. Southwest; (2) to document relationships between impacts, use-related factors, and environmental factors; and (3) to develop guidelines to contribute to best management practices for trail resource management. The study was intended to address gaps in the scientific understanding of recreation impacts, inform natural resource managers in the development of sustainable recreation environments, provide practical advice for sustaining riding, and offer clear advice for policymakers.



### Managing Mountain Biking: IMBA's Guide to Providing Great Riding (2007)

This resource provides guidance on managing trail-based user conflict, minimizing environmental impact, managing risk, and providing technically challenging riding.

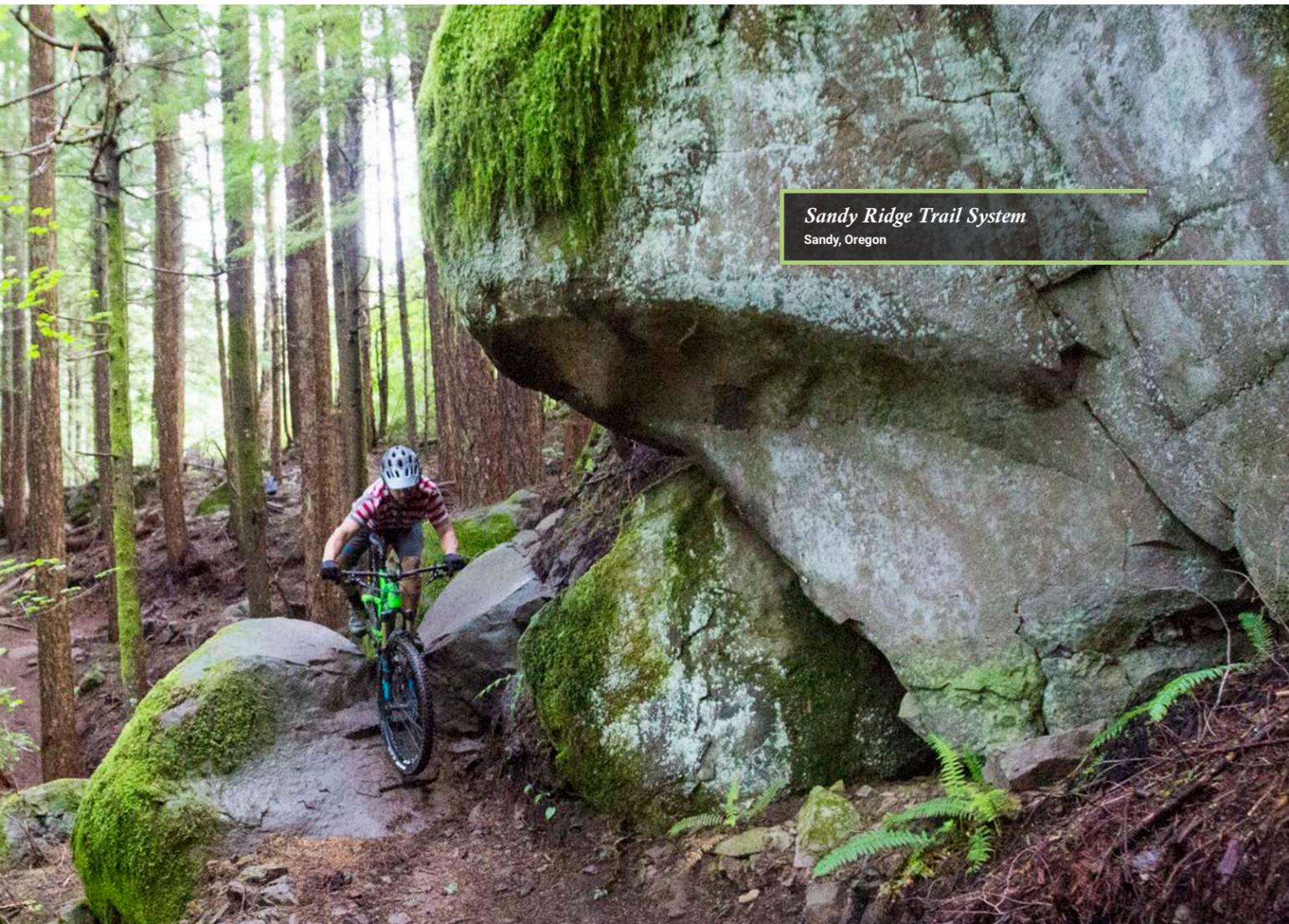
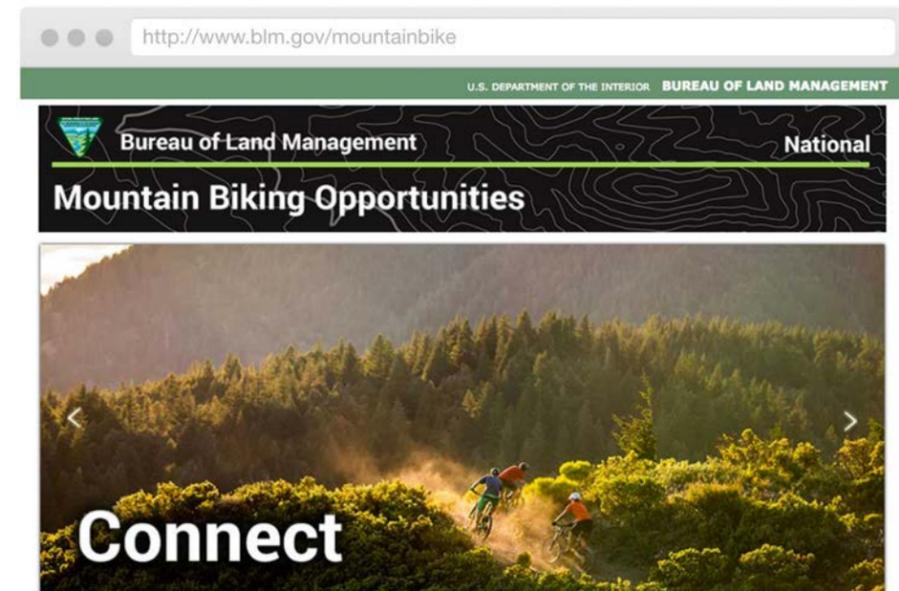


### Bike Parks – IMBA's Guide to New School Trails (2015)

An essential resource for anyone planning a bike park project. Bike parks are being designed to appeal to every skill level, with enough variety to keep riders coming back, and municipalities are funding them at the same level as other types of recreational facilities. This book examines all phases of planning, designing, building, and operating these facilities, with real-world success stories and multiple essays provided by leaders in the field.

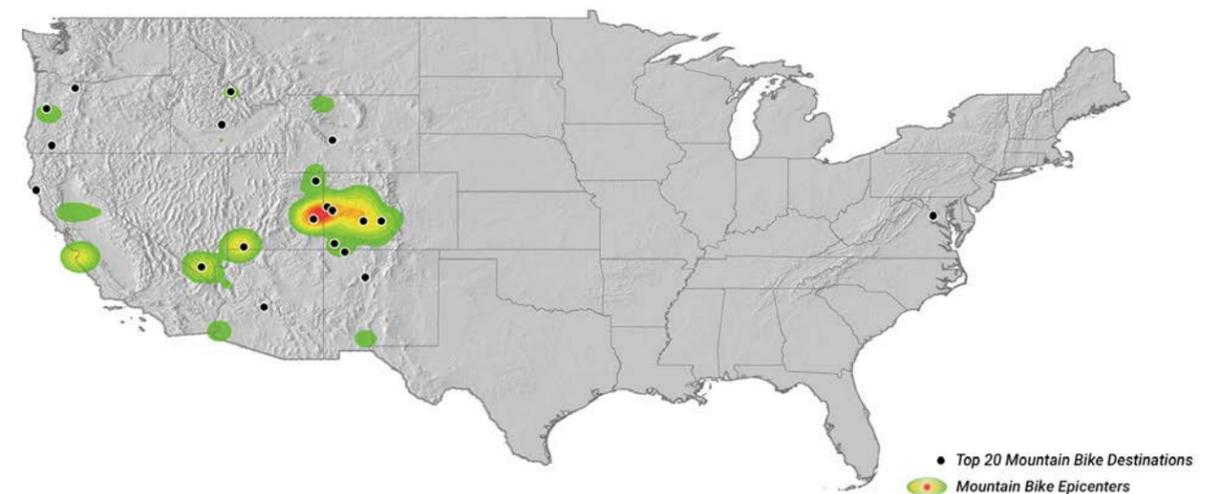
### Existing High-Quality Experiences on BLM-administered Lands:

Through a national partnership with IMBA and MTB Project, the BLM developed an interactive map of the top 20 mountain biking trail opportunities that exist on BLM-administered lands across the United States. The BLM's new suite of online maps provides helpful information and eye-catching visual images of mountain bike recreation sites and trails. BLM Director Neil Kornze released this interactive website to the public on October 5, 2015, in Moab, Utah. The interactive top 20 mountain bike trail opportunities site can be accessed at [www.blm.gov/mountainbike](http://www.blm.gov/mountainbike).



### BLM Mountain Bike Destinations and Epicenters

The map below depicts concentrations of trails with the top 20 mountain biking trail opportunities that exist on BLM-administered lands across the United States. While opportunities exist all over the country, particularly in the West, areas displayed in the range from green to red represent a higher density of trails used by mountain bikers. More details can be accessed at [www.blm.gov/mountainbike](http://www.blm.gov/mountainbike).



## Mountain Biking — The Next 10 Years

The steady growth in mountain biking's popularity in the U.S. is more than just the sport retaining a static slice of the growing general population. The initial novelty that prompted mountain biking's rapid growth in the 1980s has matured into the second most popular human-powered trail activity in the country.

Good planning rewards foresight and trail development is no exception. It is therefore important to consider what factors will influence the growth of mountain biking over the next 10 years.

### **Bike Technology**

Mountain bikes will become increasingly capable of handling the rigors of trail riding. Lighter, stronger, and more efficient bikes will allow riders to push the limits of what is possible. Technological increases for high-end products will trickle down to mid- and low-cost bikes, making increased performance, and enjoyment, available to a broader range of enthusiasts.

### **Communication Technology**

Mountain bikers have proven to be enthusiastic adopters of websites, apps, and other social media tools. From highlighting quality experiences to navigating new trails, riders are sharing and using information to get out more often.

### **Climate Change**

In many parts of the U.S. the rideable season is increasing, with an earlier spring and later autumn. Inclement weather is a major factor in deterring many outdoor sports, including mountain biking, and decreasing snowfall will increase riding opportunities.

### **Trail Development**

Exponential growth in the number of professional and volunteer mountain bike trail builders has influenced the creation of fun, sustainable singletrack. Bringing bike-optimized designs and features to trails is forecast to continue as innovative builders to "dig deep."

### **Outdoor Recreation Culture**

For a new generation of recreationists there has never not been mountain biking. It is part of the range of activities that are expected and anticipated to be a component of one's outdoor adventure, whereas participation in more traditional experiences, such as hunting or camping, is shrinking.

### **Access**

Thanks to the efforts of individuals and organizations such as IMBA, mountain bikers will see an overall trend of increased access to local, state, and federal lands. Easier access to more and better trails will allow more people to become enthusiasts.

While these and other factors may change, there is one aspect that will remain a constant in the growth of the sport: it is a fun, challenging way for millions of Americans to enjoy the outdoors.



*Wildcat Trail System*  
Sandy, Oregon



Mountain of the Rogue  
Rogue River, Oregon

## Chapter 3

# Trail Settings, Characteristics and Experiences

## Who?

The way in which the Bureau of Land Management and other land managers design and construct trails has a significant impact on a rider's experience. By making the necessary trail planning and design tools available to all BLM staff, contractors, volunteers, and partners, the quality of trails can be improved and a consistent level of excellence can be achieved when targeting specific trail objectives, targeted outcomes, and rider difficulty levels.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an introduction to and overview of the following key concepts that will be applied in Chapter 5: Take Action.

- **Types of trail users and trails are described, identifying the trail outcome goals that are common among different users as well as those that are different.** The distinctions between shared use trails and those designed specifically for mountain biking access are explored. Several considerations are established for planning and designing trails intended to provide access for a range of activities and users.
- **Recreation Setting Characteristics (RSC)** are introduced to form a solid foundation for the development of landscape-appropriate trails. An understanding of the setting in which trails are located will ensure the BLM develops trails that are sustainable, and provide targeted mountain biking objectives and difficulty given the physical, social, and operational recreation settings that define an area.
- **Types of Trails** and many trail objectives are shared, but others differ markedly depending on whether or not a trail is designated for shared use or designed specifically for bikes. Several considerations are established for planning and designing trails intended to provide experiences for a range of activities and users.
- **Trail Objectives** are defined in order to create a common and clear "trail language," with photos and renderings provided to illustrate the appropriate interaction between targeted trail objectives, settings, and mountain bike trail features.
- **Mountain Biking Trail Features** are documented to illustrate how a rider's experience can be affected by the construction and placement of trail features specific to mountain biking. Experiences are translated into trail features that look and feel different depending on where the development is located within the landscape, as well as the desired experience and intended level of difficulty.

# What?

## Trails for All

A trail is a facility that allows the public to access and interpret landscapes while concentrating impacts to a defined corridor. A trail is considered to be sustainable when it allows users to enjoy an area with minimal impact to natural and cultural resources and requires only modest maintenance. When a trail fails to provide desired outcomes, the resulting impacts can be crowding, conflict, and the creation of unauthorized trails, so a truly sustainable trail must also align with desired user experiences.

Traditional trail guidelines offer best management practices in design and construction from an engineering standpoint that focuses on environmental sustainability (e.g., Half Rule, trail-slope alignment, full-bench construction, etc.). These guidelines also broadly define trail difficulty (easier, more difficult, most difficult, etc.), but not what the experience of that trail is intended to offer for the user. While factors such as length, grade, and obstacle size are important considerations for trail managers and users, they reveal very little about how the trail will actually feel for the user. How does the level of trail exposure affect a rider's experience? Is the trail playful? Is it challenging because it has rocks or because it has jumps?

**For trail managers, the GQTE seeks to develop the tools to describe the trail experience and plan accordingly as they seek to protect resources, address risk, and achieve their objectives. This framework recognizes that trails are truly successful only when they provide the experience a user is seeking.**

**For users, the GQTE helps with the critical step of establishing expectations. The more efficiently trails can be described, the more informed a user will be in deciding where and what to ride.**

**For advocates, the GQTE provides a means to describe the user experience in direct, shared, and consistent terms, allowing for a more constructive dialogue as trails are managed, maintained, and constructed in a collaborative way.**

**Trail Experiences > Social Sustainability**

- Reduce user conflict
- Reduce informal and unauthorized trails
- Fulfill management objectives
- Engage stakeholders in balanced and positive trail management

## Trail Users

The trail-based activities and allowable-use decisions made for a recreation area will have a dramatic impact on what tools are used to control trail access and manage settings. Understanding these areas of goal interference is critical to creating trail systems that minimize user conflict while also accommodating user expectations for both shared-use and mountain bike-only access.

The recreation objectives for a specific recreation management area identify the specific outcomes (experiences and benefits) to be produced or realized and recreation activities to be emphasized. For areas where mountain biking is the targeted activity, more specific trail objectives and trail outcomes can be defined, in support of the recreation area objectives.

Input from the users of specific areas and residents of adjacent communities during the planning process will help determine if these generalizations apply to your area.

## Singletrack Trail Users

- **Hikers** – more focused on setting and destination, most mobile users, capable of cross-country travel
- **Equestrians** – less affected by tread condition, prefer loops, greatly prefer water access, require longer distances than hikers for a valued experience
- **Trail Runners** – most similar in movement to mountain bikers (speed, distance, preferred trail conditions) where the trail itself is an important factor along with exercise
- **Mountain Bikers** – wide range of desired experiences, but the trail itself is generally the primary factor, rather than destination or setting
- **Motorcyclists** – less commonly share trails with other users (outside of designated OHV areas), can be similar to mountain bikes but present unique challenges in trail design and flow due to throttle power
- **Electric-Powered Mountain Bikers** – similar in desired experiences to human-powered mountain bikers but able to cover more distance for a given fitness level



### Factors important to all trail users

- Setting/Nature
- Singletrack
- Exercise
- Loops, connectivity
- Variety

### Factors more specific to mountain bikes

- Play
- Technical challenge
- Skills progression
- Trail rhythm

**Sandy Ridge Trail System**  
Sandy, Oregon

## Trail Designations

### Shared Use versus Bike Only

Trail designations greatly influence the user experience. Deciding whether a trail should accommodate all users or be designated for limited uses such as hiking or biking only is not always a simple endeavor. Historically, single use trails have only applied to hikers. Trails that might be for a purpose other than hiking had not been considered. Given varied trail objectives and the interaction of wheeled modes of recreation with trail surfaces, it's clear that a trail built specifically to support mountain bike use might look quite different from one designed for shared use. Naturally, there are pros and cons for any trail designation, as outlined below.

### Shared Use

Shared-use trails allow two or more distinct user groups to access a trail, and have a number of advantages that have made them popular among trail manager and users:

- Shared-use trails best accommodate the needs of the broadest array of users, whereas single- or restricted-use trails tend to concentrate users, sometimes creating negative social impacts due to crowding.
- Sharing helps build a trail community. Visitors are encouraged to cooperate in order to preserve and protect a common resource, and encountering other types of users on a trail helps to establish mutual respect and inspire courtesy.
- Shared-use trails take better advantage of available space and trail mileage. Quite simply, they provide more trail for everyone to enjoy.
- Systems with shared-use trails require fewer miles than would be necessary to accommodate trails for individual user groups, and therefore have less impact on the surrounding ecosystem.
- Shared-use trails support the most visitors. Trails that lead to specific major destinations, such as waterfalls and scenic vistas, should be considered for shared use, since most visitors will be drawn to the point of interest regardless of the mode they'll use to get there. Likewise, trails that serve as major travel corridors can be more efficient when shared.

### Single Use

Since use and terrain conditions can vary greatly, there are cases where single-use trails may be the best solution:

- **Trails:** Popular recreation areas with crowded trail systems can benefit by providing access to both shared- and single-use routes, helping to ensure that visitors can avoid traffic jams if they simply want to hit the trails seeking relaxation and a connection with nature.
- **Trailheads:** Trail systems can avoid crowding at trailheads by providing separate access points to accommodate specific users. For instance, one entrance can be designated for equestrians and include horse-trailer parking, while another parking area can be designated for hikers and mountain bikers.

- **Targeted Experiences:** For mountain biking diehards, the experience of riding a narrow roller-coaster trail with a rocking rhythm of twists and turns unfolding under their wheels is a highly valued prize. These are the trails that envelope riders in a zone of exhilaration and successfully provide that desired result when they are specifically designated for mountain bikers.
- **High-Speed Trails:** Trails designated for speed can allow advanced runners and riders to race train at higher speeds without affecting other visitors. They are designed to separate visitors by skill level and the experience sought.
- **Skills Areas:** Skills facilities at trailheads or within developed parks can incorporate a practice area with a wide variety of challenging obstacles, from easy to progressively difficult. Skills clinics could also be conducted in these specialized areas.



*Black Canyon Trail*  
Black Canyon City, Arizona

### Preferred Use

While preferred-use trails allow two or more user types to access a trail, they are designed to primarily accommodate the experience of only one of the users. Used as a management tool, preferred-use trails can combine the benefits of both multi-use and single-use trails, but due to user preference of the design elements they may become de facto single-use trails.

### Bike-Optimized Features

*Bike-optimized features are those that are developed specifically to enhance the mountain biking experience. They can be located on shared-use, single-use, or preferred-use trails.*

*White Ridge Trail System*  
Rio Rancho, New Mexico



**Appropriate for Shared/Preferred Use:** Bike-optimized features can be appropriate for shared or preferred-use trails depending on their amplitude and frequency. A small feature placed strategically within the trail corridor would be enjoyed by riders but could go unnoticed by other trail users.



Rollers



Small Berms



Rock Gardens



Slow-speed  
Technical Features



Clear Sightlines on  
Faster Trail Sections



**Bike-Optimized Features Not Appropriate for Shared/Preferred Use:**



High-speed Features



Jumps



Large Drops



Elevated Structures



Gravity Trails



Any feature where a  
rider cannot safely  
yield



Any feature where rider experience is primary  
and trail use would be significantly diminished  
by other uses (including riders traveling in opposite direction)

## How?

### Outcomes-Focused Recreation Management

Advances in recreation management knowledge and practices have been responsible for the evolution of activity-based management to experience-based management and, more recently, benefits-based management. Outcomes-focused management is defined as an approach to recreation management that centers on the positive outcomes gained from engaging in recreational experiences. Positive recreation outcomes consist of experiences and benefits, defined by the BLM with distinct criteria.

**Experiences**—Immediate states of mind resulting from participation in recreation activities that result in benefits.

Experiences that may often be associated with mountain bikers include:

- Developing skills and abilities
- Testing endurance
- Enjoying risk-taking adventure
- Enjoying nature
- Enjoying strenuous physical exercise
- Getting away from family for a while
- Enjoying solitude, isolation, and independence
- Releasing or reducing stress
- Enjoying the closeness of friends and family
- Enjoying meeting new people with similar interests
- Having others nearby who can help if needed

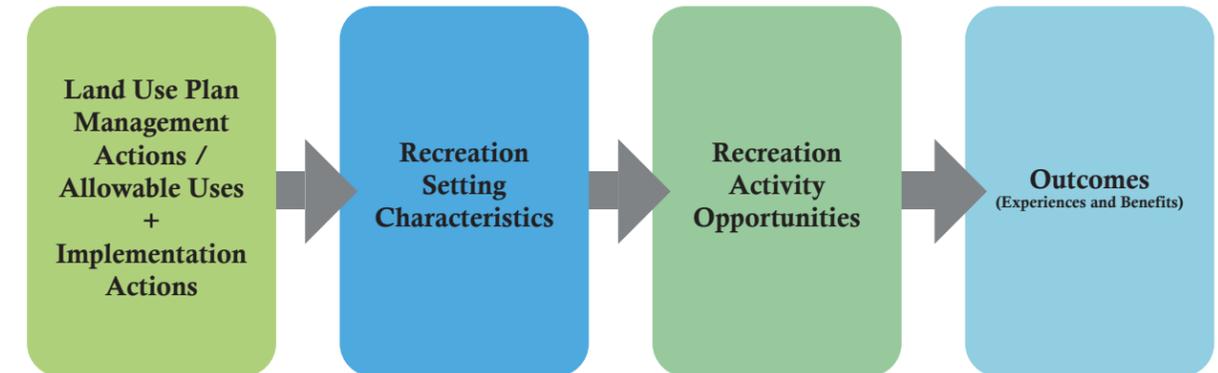
**Benefits**—The result of a satisfying recreation experience that improves or maintains a desired condition. Benefits accrue from recreation participation, are both short- and long-term, are realized on-site and off-site, and can be identified in one of four categories: Personal/Individual, Social and Community, Economic, and Environmental.

Benefits that may be realized from mountain biking include:

- A more holistic sense of health maintenance
- Restored mind from relieving stress
- Improved outdoor recreation skills
- Greater sense of adventure
- Greater freedom from urban living
- Improved physical fitness and health maintenance
- Greater opportunity for people with different skills to exercise in the same place

### Outcomes-Focused Management Framework

An individual's ability to obtain specific recreational outcomes is highly dependent on the presence of the physical, social, and operational setting characteristics that support those outcomes. In order to incorporate outcomes-focused management into mountain bike trail planning, it is critical to understand the relationship between outcomes, recreation activities, recreation settings, land use planning decisions, and implementation actions. Understanding this framework as a production process provides a useful structure for mountain bike trail planning. The following figure illustrates the framework by showing that land use planning decisions and implementation actions interact with physical, social, and operational recreation settings to provide recreational activity opportunities, and ultimately facilitate the attainment of targeted outcomes.



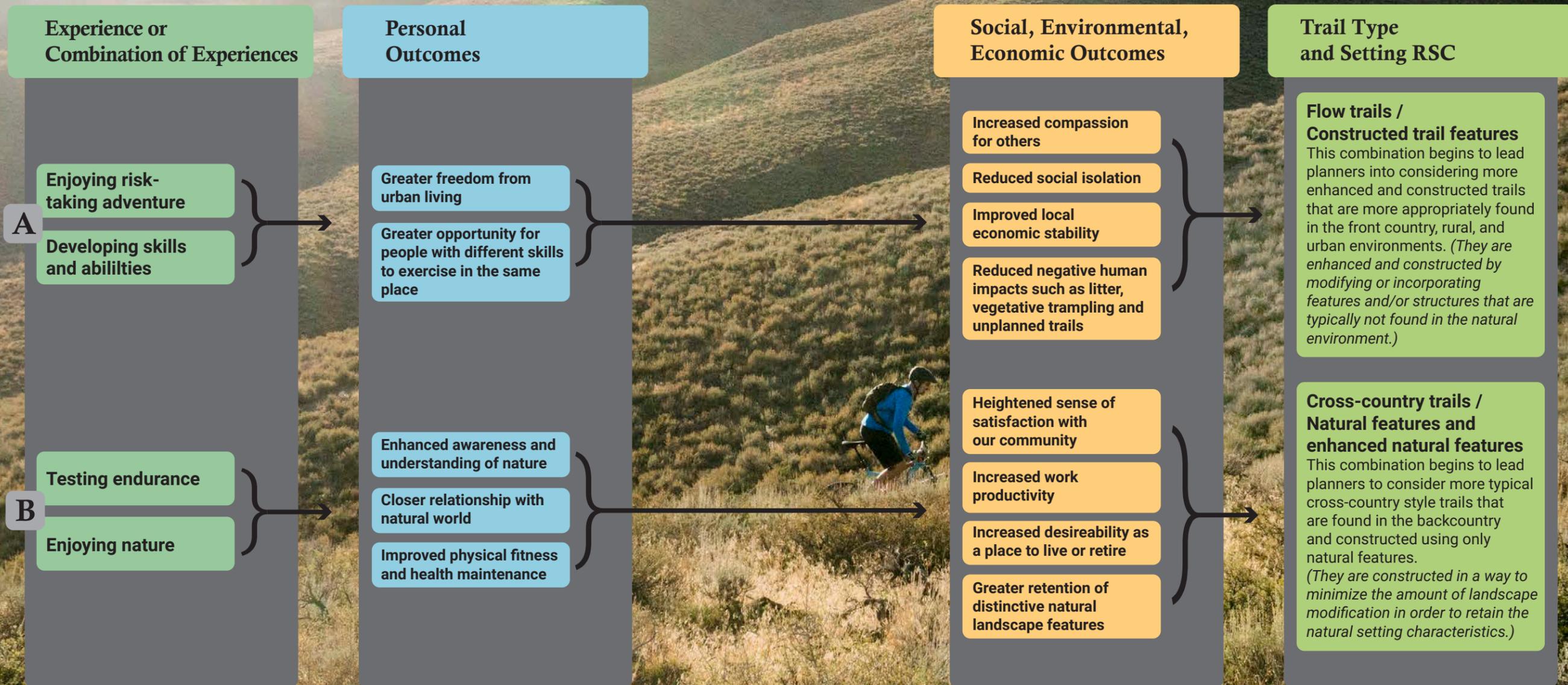
These experiences can be influenced by the type of existing and prescribed Recreation Setting Characteristics to be managed (incorporated trail features, trail location, facilities associated with a trail system, etc.) as well as the physical components (remoteness, naturalness, visitor facilities) and operational component (public access, visitor services, management controls).

For additional information and to assist in the planning and management of recreation and visitor services on BLM-administered public lands, refer to BLM Manual 8320 and BLM Handbook H-8320-1 Planning for Recreation and Visitor Services.



# Incorporating OFM into Trail Design, Construction and Management

For the best results (user satisfaction and minimizing impacts to cultural and natural resources) it is important to gather OFM data prior to planning and designing new trails or modifying existing trails. OFM data is helpful in guiding the types of trails that are desired and the locations in which these trails should be placed. It is important to look at each trail-planning area as a unique unit and not to generalize the OFM data collection process or conclusions.



## Trail User Objectives

Creating trails in terms of user objectives means establishing a common language in describing these factors. Trail users, land managers, and trail builders don't always use the same terms to describe trail features, and terms that mountain bikers use to describe desired trail user objectives can be confusing to non cyclists—terms like “flowy” and “rowdy” not only mean different things to different riders, but they may be completely misinterpreted by land managers and trail builders. This document seeks to break down trail user objectives into a set of defined terms to better describe a trail experience. Each term can be imagined as on a spectrum, low to high, poor to excellent, none to total. The following table highlights some of the common objectives.

Trail User Objectives	Description
Nature	Connection to nature. This can be anything from being among a few trees in the middle of the city to remote backcountry. Nature is an important factor for many riders.
Escape	Something that takes you away from your daily grind, allows you to get lost in the experience of riding. Often means getting away from the urban environment, but a bike park, even indoors, can provide this as well.
Solitude	Getting away from the urban environment and people; being active, alone, and quiet in the outdoors.
Challenge	Seeking to improve technical abilities, to solve a difficult problem, “clean” a trail feature or segment; sense of accomplishment.
Risk	Exposure to danger, harm, or loss; intentional interaction with uncertainty. The perception of risk creates a thrill for many trail users. It can be a positive or negative part of the trail experience, depending on user expectations and risk tolerance.
Play/Playfulness	Engaging in the activity purely for the enjoyment, bringing a childlike wonder to the pursuit, no destination. On a trail, this often means seeking features to enhance, alter the experience, rather than simply riding from point to point. Playfulness is a hugely important characteristic in mountain bike trails, and distinguishes trail experiences from many other trail user goals (hikers, equestrians).
Exercise	Health and fitness are part of the sport. For some this is a primary goal, for others a bonus, for some an obstacle. Defining the physical fitness needed for a particular ride is important in setting user expectations appropriately. Recognition that some riders have high skill and low fitness (and vice versa) plays a role in trail planning.
Efficiency	Getting to a destination or accomplishing a task with the least amount of time or effort expended. Road climbs are very efficient, as are trails that ascend directly to a destination. Efficiency sometimes means compromising sustainability and fun/play. Hiking trails tend to be much more efficient than biking trails.
Education	Sometimes learning is the objective, such as is the case with interpretive trails for natural, cultural, or historical topics.

## Primary Experience Factors

Bike-optimized trails, designed and constructed to maximize the fun and efficiency of riding a bike, enhance trail experiences specifically for mountain bikers that might differ from traditional trails in several ways: enhanced tread shaping, directional or one-way travel, and the use of man-made technical trail features (MMTTF).

Mountain bikes move differently along a trail than other modes; the movement of the wheels, the use of gravity and friction, and the transfer of energy from the rider to the drive train all offer both opportunities and constraints for trails and trail features not sought after by other users. For instance, berms take advantage of the motion and momentum of the bike, keeping rider forces perpendicular to the tread surface, changing direction in a manner most efficient and least likely to cause soil displacement. Most important for the rider experience is that the feeling of riding a berm is exhilarating and playful.

A hiker or equestrian cannot take advantage of a berm; indeed, these users may find them difficult to negotiate without slipping and more obtrusive in the landscape than a switchback or at-grade turn. For hikers, equestrians, and other trail users, MMTTF designed for mountain bikers can seem unnecessary at the very least and could create safety concerns. Identifying appropriate locations for these features on shared-use or preferred-use trails should consider all users.

Whether a bike-optimized trail is shared, preferred, or single use depends on several factors: recreation activity opportunities, ability to yield, speed, and level of use. As in the example of user experience in a bermed turn, a shared-use, bike-optimized trail would need to provide a flat area through the turn for other users—a hybrid-style turn often referred to as a “switchberm” to accommodate multiple user modes.





*Free Lunch Trail*  
Grand Junction, Colorado

### **Recreation Setting Characteristics**

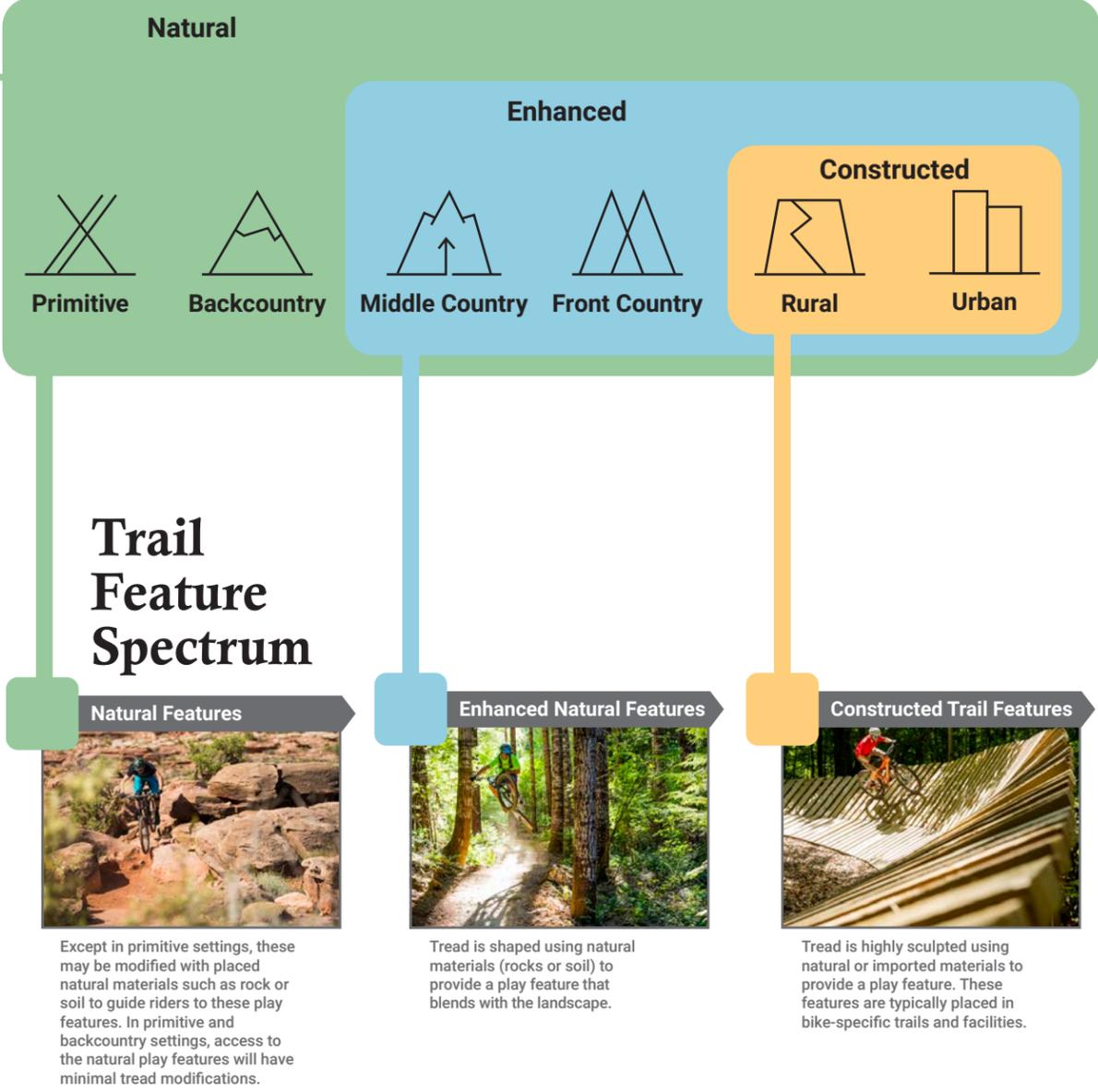
There are a variety of trail experiences that mountain bikers are interested in and for each of these there is a spectrum along which individual users will place their preferences. Recreation Setting Characteristics (RSC) are classified along a spectrum from urban to primitive using the RSC matrix as described in the Introduction. While these characteristics don't provide specific details of the trail objective for the user, they do help to define appropriate uses and use levels within a setting. They address factors like "remoteness" based on number of users encountered (e.g., solitude), and the naturalness of the broad setting that may influence user experience. In contrast, the trail experiences that riders seek are realized by the development, or lack thereof, of specific mountain biking features.

The following pages illustrate how trail user objectives are filtered through the recreation setting to determine what mountain bike trail features are most appropriate.

# Recreation Setting Characteristics

# Play

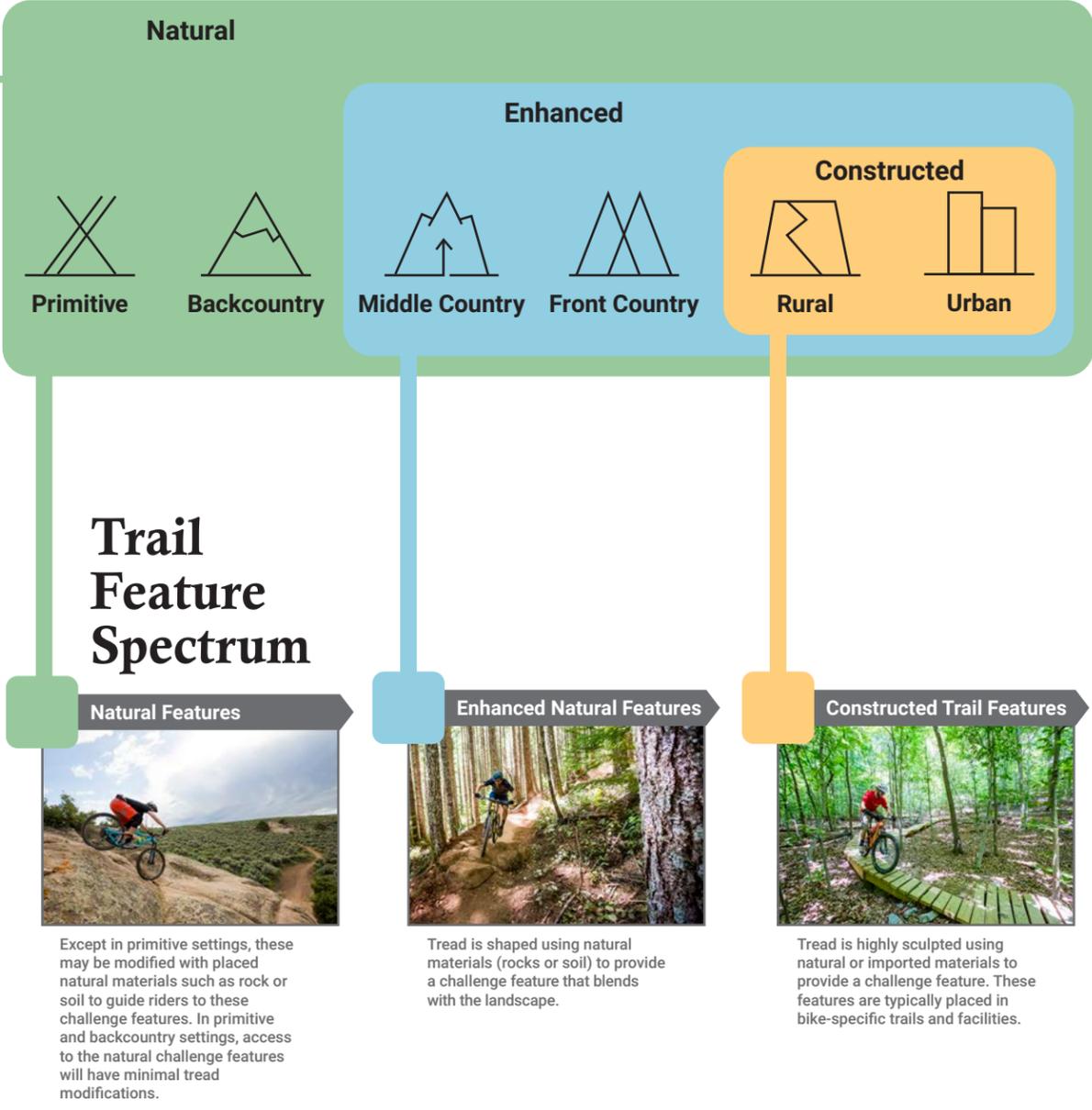
**Engaging in the activity purely for the enjoyment, bringing a childlike wonder to the pursuit or no destination.** On a trail, this often means utilizing features to enhance or alter the experience, rather than simply riding from point to point. Playfulness is an important characteristic in mountain bike trails and distinguishes trail experiences from many other trail user goals (hikers, equestrians).



# Recreation Setting Characteristics

# Challenge

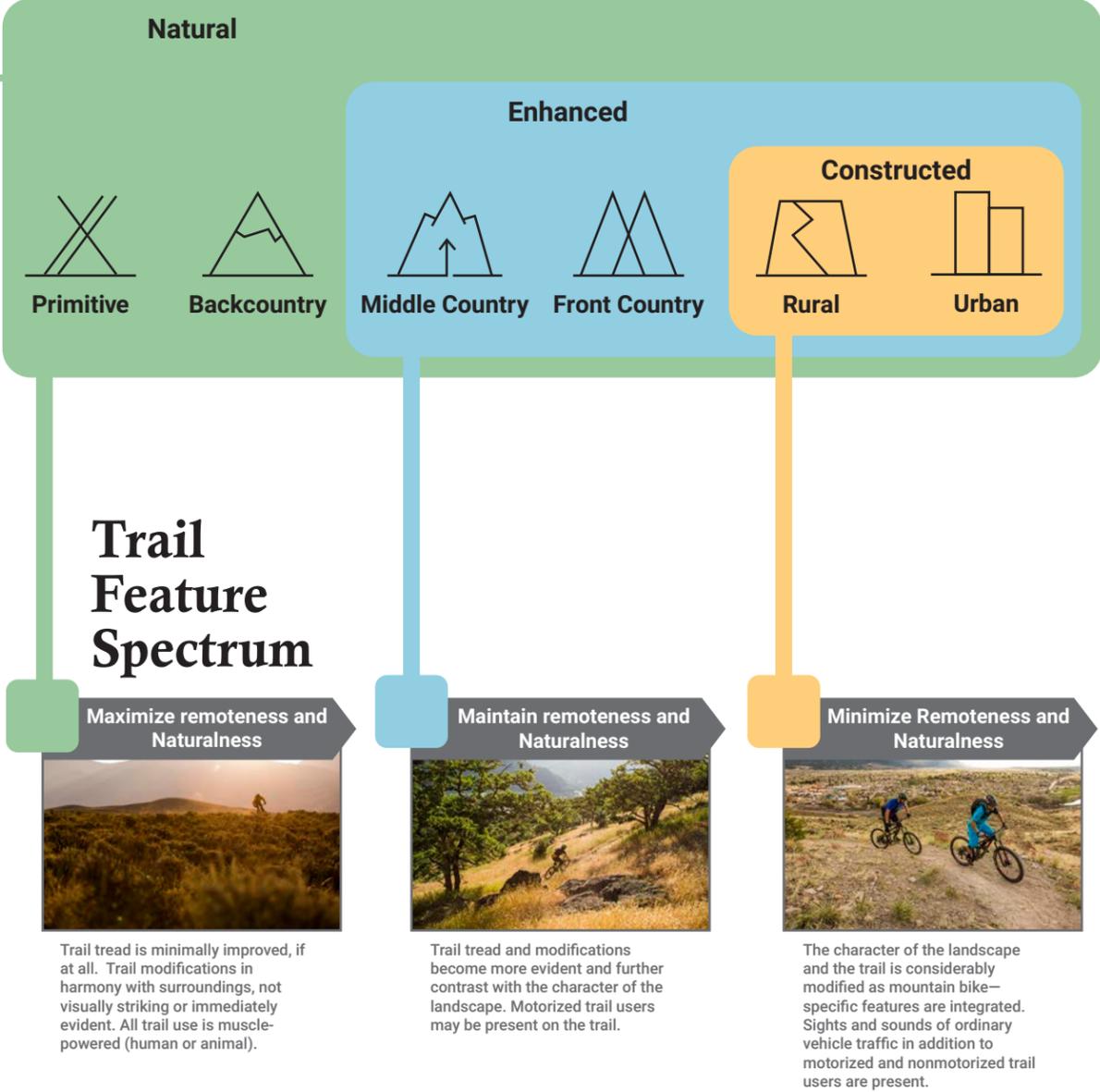
Seeking to improve technical and/or physical abilities, to solve a difficult problem, "clean" a trail feature or segment; sense of accomplishment.



# Recreation Setting Characteristics

# Escape

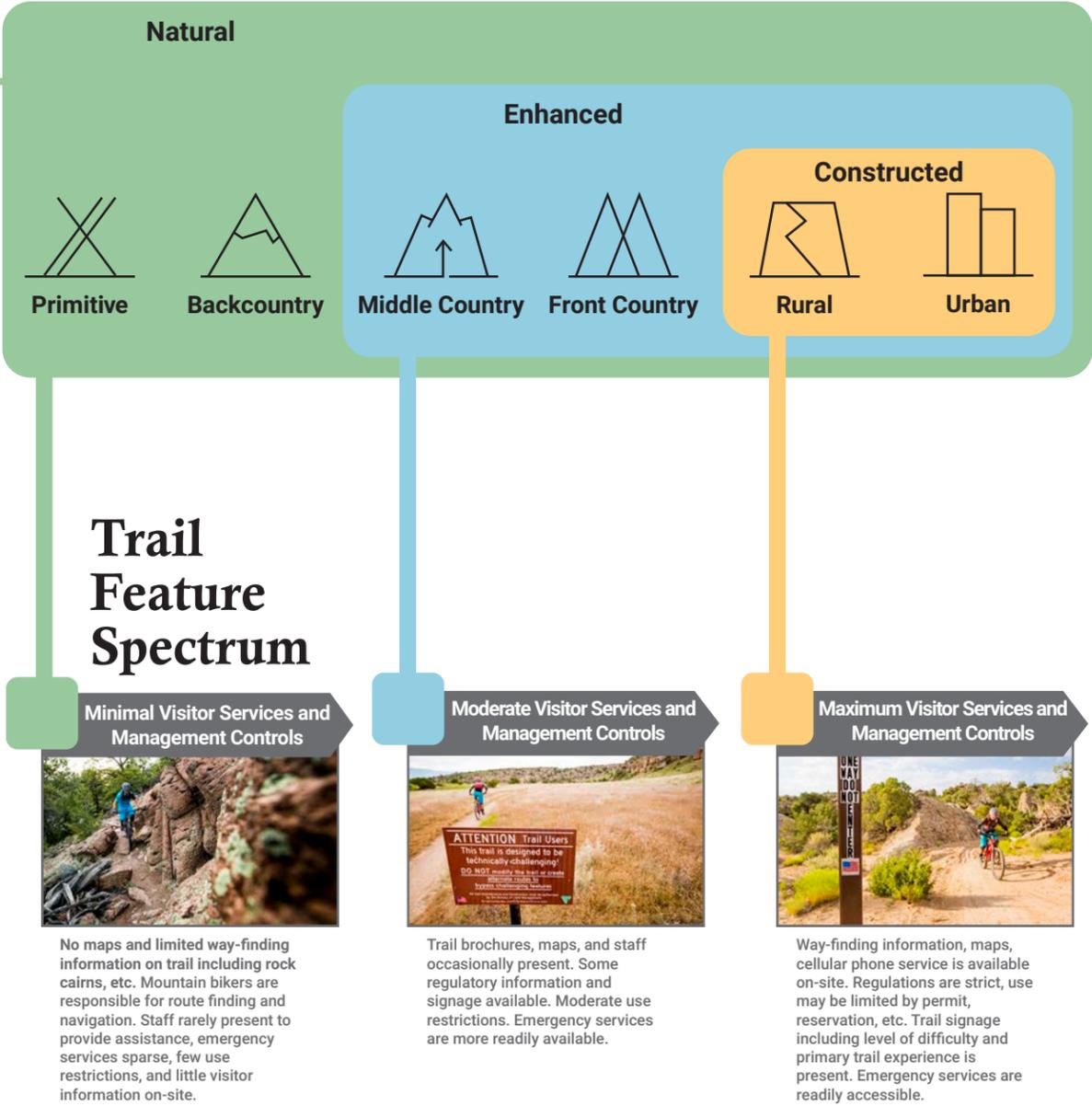
Something that takes you away from your daily grind, allows you to get lost in the experience of riding. Often means getting away from the urban environment, but a bike park, even indoors, can provide this as well.



# Recreation Setting Characteristics

# Risk

**Exposure to danger, harm, or loss; intentional interaction with uncertainty.**  
 The perception of risk creates a thrill for many trail users. It can be a positive or negative part of the trail experience, depending on user expectations and risk tolerance. Risk can appear to be closely related to Challenge but operates independently. The technical challenge of a feature is static but the consequences of falling, and thus the risk, can be minimal or severe.





*Free Lunch Trail*  
Grand Junction, Colorado

## Chapter 4

# Creating Trails and Trail Features

### **Translating Trail Objectives into Trail Features**

The mountain biking experience is enhanced when bike-specific features are incorporated into a trail. As trail planning is completed and the process moves to trail design, the type, scale, magnitude, and frequency at which trail features are provided has a direct impact on the rider's ability to realize a targeted set of outcomes.

Each of the trail user objectives noted in the previous chapter has primary features that can be used to guide trail development. When properly modified for the intended skill level and placed in an appropriate landscape, the combination of features provides the desired user outcomes.

### **Sustainable Trail Development**

Throughout the process of design and construction of any trail, the guidelines for sustainable trail development must be followed, and in no way does the creation of bike-specific trail features contradict this mandate. In fact, the proper implementation of features enhances the sustainability of a trail by countering user forces (berms), hardening the tread against erosion (armoring), and aggressively draining water from the trail (rollers).

The methods for sustainable trail design, construction, and maintenance are well documented in other resources, particularly the trail-building books published by IMBA. Detailed knowledge of these concepts is key to successful implementation of the desired trail features.

### **Features**

After having identified the primary trail user objectives it is necessary to select the appropriate bike-optimized trail features that provide the desired experience. This is where the "knobbies hit the dirt," so to speak, and where communication using shared terms is key. This can be illustrated with the four Primary Trail Characteristic examples from the previous chapter: Play, Challenge, Escape, and Risk.

To successfully create a high-quality trail experience, attention to detail needs to be at the forefront of the design and planning process. This is evident in the way that trails and trail features are placed on the landscape. Illustrations are a key element of this process and are used to define and describe trail user objectives and illustrate how these can be translated into physical trail features. The following renderings show how a rider interacts with the feature to elicit a specific experience as well as how the feature functions as a management element. The effect on rider behavior is clearly evident from the renderings in that each directly influences the way a rider experiences the elements of challenge, playfulness, escape, and risk.



## NATURAL OBSTACLES

NATURALLY OCCURRING OBJECTS, SUCH AS ROOTS AND ROCKS, WHOSE PRESENCE MAKE THE TRAIL MORE TECHNICALLY CHALLENGING THAN THE SURROUNDING TREAD.



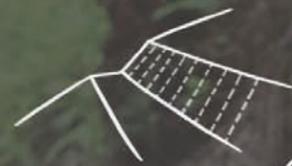
*Alsea Falls Trail System*  
Monroe, Oregon

## Management Controls

In addition to influencing rider experience, trail features can be integrated into the trail planning and design process to function as a tool to accomplish a range of management objectives, including resource protection. For example, constructing a backslope that is blended with the prevailing slope allows soil to stabilize and vegetation to grow. This reduces erosion and creates a more natural trail feel. It also allows the rider to be more in the center of the trail where the tread is most durable, rather than pushed to the edge. The following illustrations depict trail features that serve the dual purpose of providing for a distinct rider experience while simultaneously achieving important management objectives.

### BACKSLOPE

PREVAILING SLOPE TO BACKSLOPE RATIO, FOR SLOPES >20%. VARIES BASED ON SOIL AND VEGETATION, SHOULD APPROXIMATE A NATURAL ANGLE OF REPOSE.



## CORRAL/ANCHOR

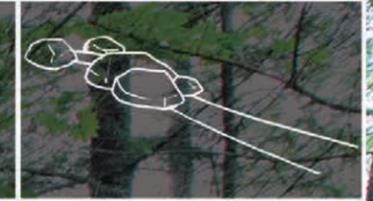
OBJECTS USED TO DEFINE THE SIDES OF THE TRAIL TO REDUCE TRAIL WIDENING, CONTROL SPEED, PREVENT SHORTCUTTING, AND/OR EMPHASIZE UPCOMING TRAIL FEATURES.





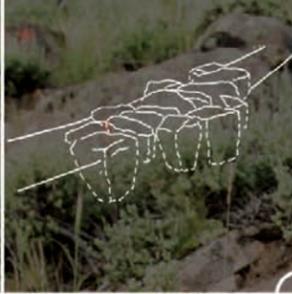
## **FILTER**

A HIGH-SKILL, LOW-CONSEQUENCE OBSTACLE THAT DEMONSTRATES THE DIFFICULTY OF THE UPCOMING TRAIL OR FEATURE (AKA QUALIFIER OBSTACLE).



# STONE PITCHING

AN ARMORING TECHNIQUE WHERE ROCKS ARE SET ON END OR "PITCHED" UP ON THEIR SIDE, PLACED TIGHTLY TOGETHER, AND PACKED WITH SOIL AND AGGREGATE TO TIGHTEN. ENSURES DURABLE TREAD AND CAN BE USED TO ADD CHALLENGE.





## Play

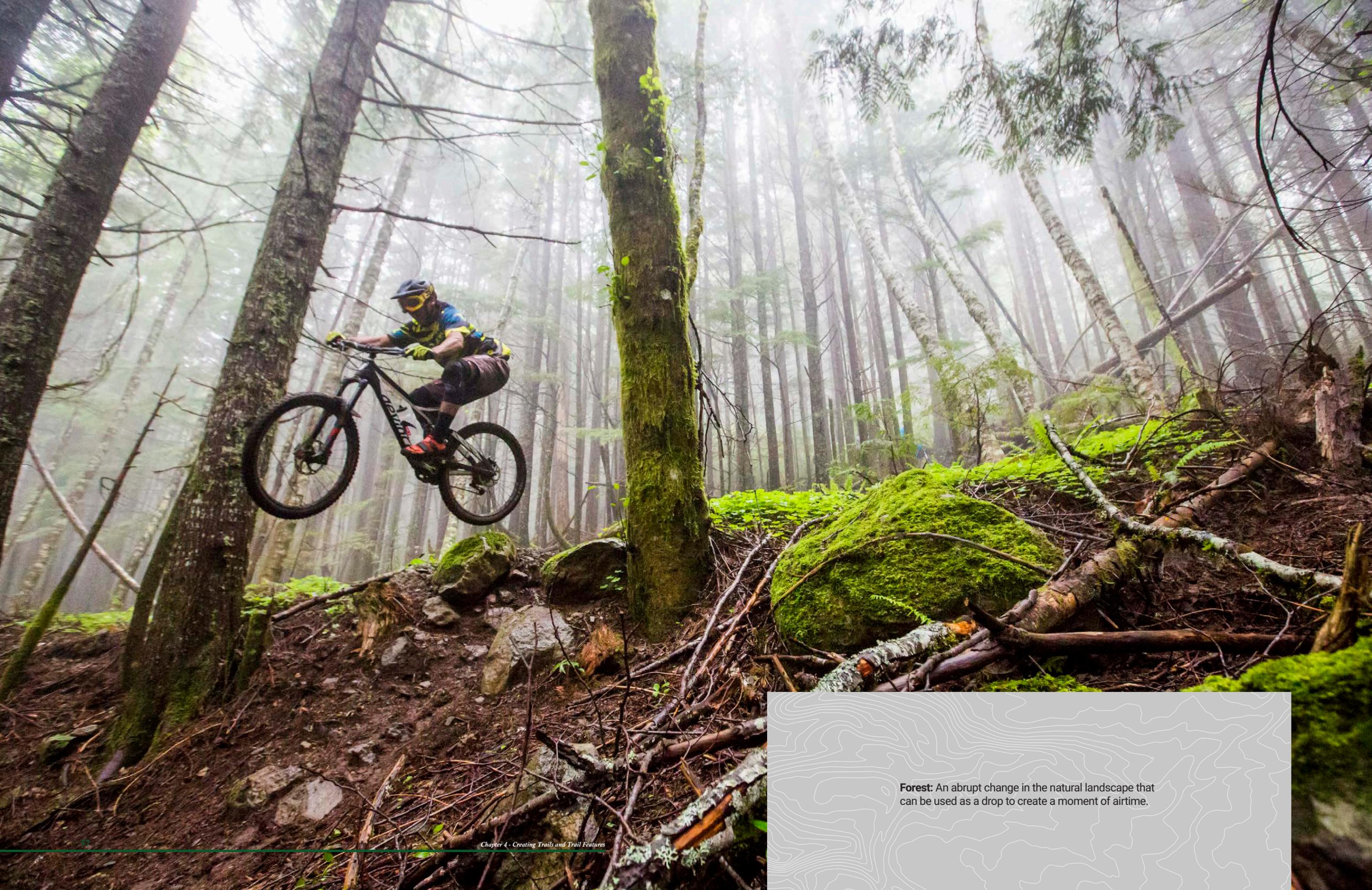
Play is typically valued by mountain bikers more than by other nonmotorized users. Defined as engaging in activity for enjoyment as well as bringing a child-like wonder to the pursuit, on the trail this often means seeking features that enhance the unique characteristics of riding a bike rather than simply moving from point to point.



**Forest:** Constructed dirt jumps in a tight forest corridor. Jumps can be rolled (beginner to intermediate users) or launched (intermediate to advanced users).



**Desert:** Tilted rock slab used as a natural technical trail feature to create an optional line as a mini-berm.



**Forest:** An abrupt change in the natural landscape that can be used as a drop to create a moment of airtime.



**Desert:** Small rollers that can push more advanced riders in the air. Less advanced riders will roll through.

**Trail features that provide for Play**

Illustrations are a key element of this process and are used to define and describe experience characteristics and illustrate how the following two characteristics are translated into trail features that provide for a sense of play.

MINI-BERM

MINI-BERM

TABLE

ROLLER

**SPACING/FREQUENCY OF FEATURES**

UNDULATIONS IN TREAD TO ENHANCE USER EXPERIENCE AND FACILITATE DRAINAGE FREQUENCY, LENGTH VARIES WITH LANDSCAPE, RATING, DESIRED TRAIL EXPERIENCE.



## TABLETOP JUMP

JUMP FEATURE WITH A FLAT TRANSITION FROM LIP TO LANDING TO PROVIDE A SAFE LANDING AREA AND PROMOTE PROGRESSION.

## STEP-DOWN JUMP

JUMP FEATURE IN WHICH THE LANDING IS LOWER THAN THE TAKEOFF. CAN BE USED TO GENERATE SPEED FOR NEXT FEATURE.

## STEP-UP JUMP

JUMP FEATURE IN WHICH THE LANDING IS HIGHER THAN THE TAKEOFF.

## Challenge

Referring to technical, not physical, challenge, this is one of the defining features of mountain biking and separates it from other outdoor pursuits such as road cycling or running. Many riders seek progressively challenging trails and there is a wide range of features for this characteristic including roots, gravity dips, chunky rocks, and jumps/drops.



**Desert:** Moderately challenging natural obstacles embedded in the tread as well as the tread clearance width and height that requires good line choices.



**Forest:** Constructed rock garden with medium to large rocks that challenge a rider to pick an optimal line and maintain a sufficient speed to ride the section without putting a foot down.



**Desert:** Naturally occurring slot between rock slabs limiting tread clearance width. This feature increases both the perceived and real challenge of the trail in this landscape.



**Forest:** A combination of natural technical trail features (drop and overhang) that require advanced skills and comfort with exposure.

### Trail features that provide for Challenge

Illustrations are a key element of this process and are used to define and describe trail user objectives and illustrate how the following two characteristics are translated into trail features that provide a challenge for the rider.

## OPTIONAL LINE

SHORT DETOURS OF DIFFERENT DIFFICULTY THAN THE MAIN ROUTE.

OPTIONAL LINES CAN BE EASIER ROUTE AROUND A TECHNICAL FEATURE ("RIDE-AROUND") IF ON AN ADVANCED TRAIL. ON BEGINNER OR INTERMEDIATE TRAILS, THE OPTIONAL LINE CAN PROVIDE MORE CHALLENGE.

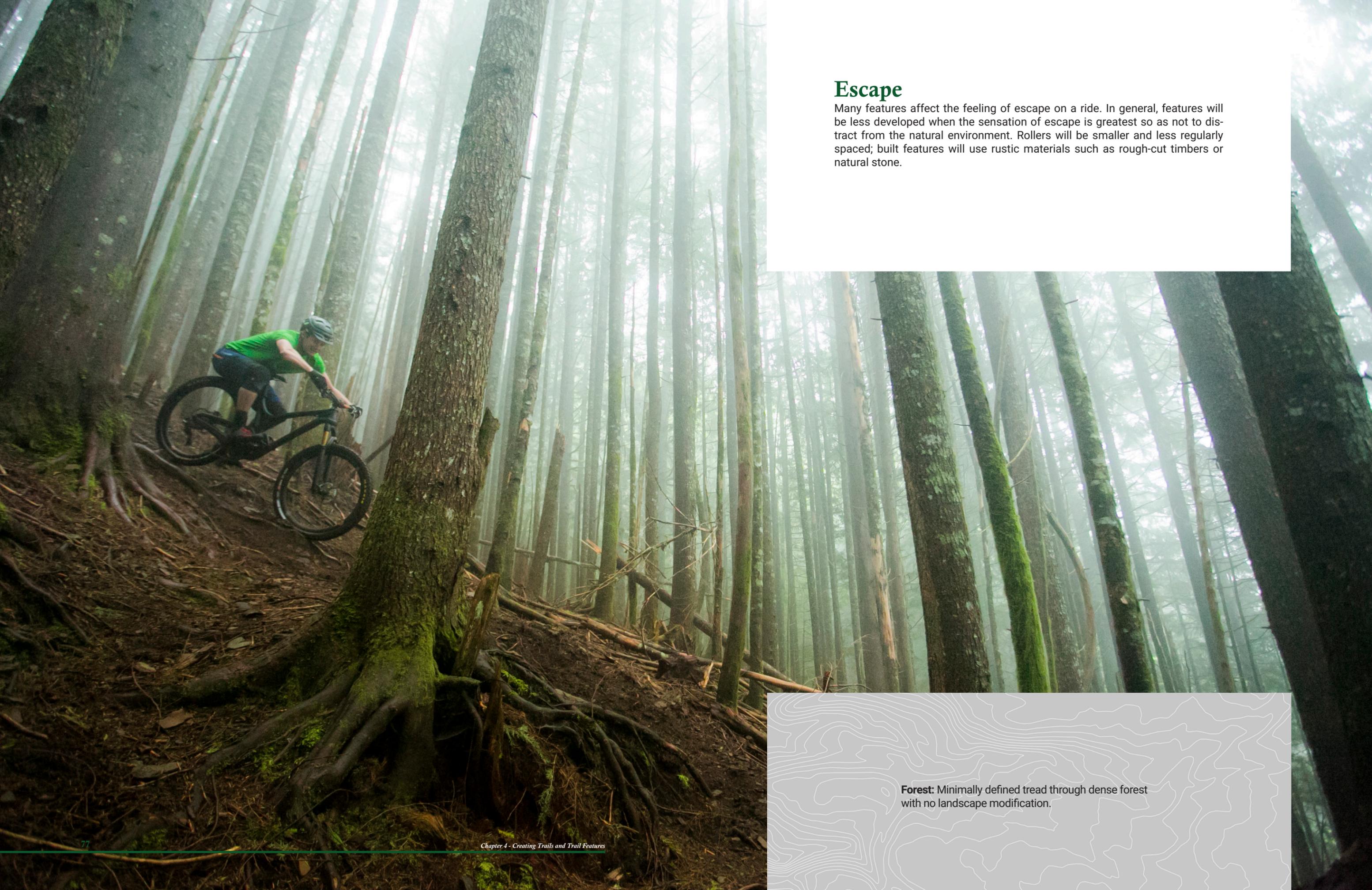


UTILIZE EXISTING TREAD AND NATURAL FEATURES

## RAISED TREAD

AN EXCAVATED, TRAIL-WIDTH TRENCH FILLED WITH STONE AND CAPPED WITH NATIVE SOIL OR AGGREGATE. ENSURES PROPER DRAINAGE AND DURABLE TREAD. THE SIZE, SHAPE, AND TEXTURE OF THE FILL ROCK CAN BE USED TO ADD CHALLENGE.





## Escape

Many features affect the feeling of escape on a ride. In general, features will be less developed when the sensation of escape is greatest so as not to distract from the natural environment. Rollers will be smaller and less regularly spaced; built features will use rustic materials such as rough-cut timbers or natural stone.

**Forest:** Minimally defined tread through dense forest with no landscape modification.



**Forest:** Enhanced tread through natural cliff band with tight forest. Makes use of natural features to provide a deep forest experience.



**Desert:** Narrow singletrack across the top of a small ridge surrounded by open sage desert and large cliffs. Perceived exposure higher than actual exposure.



**Desert:** Moderate technical challenges from natural features. Climbing and descending over unpredictable soils and sloping slickrock.

### Trail features that provide for Escape

Illustrations are a key element of this process and are used to define and describe trail user objectives and illustrate how the following two characteristics are translated into trail features that provide the feeling of escape.

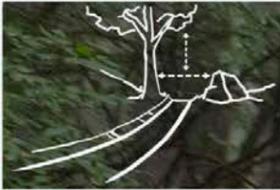


## REMOTENESS

THE FEELING OF BEING FAR AWAY FROM DEVELOPMENT, WHERE THERE IS A LACK OF OBVIOUS HUMAN INTERVENTION AND THE TRAIL INTEGRATES INTO THE SURROUNDING LANDSCAPE.



## TREAD CLEARANCE

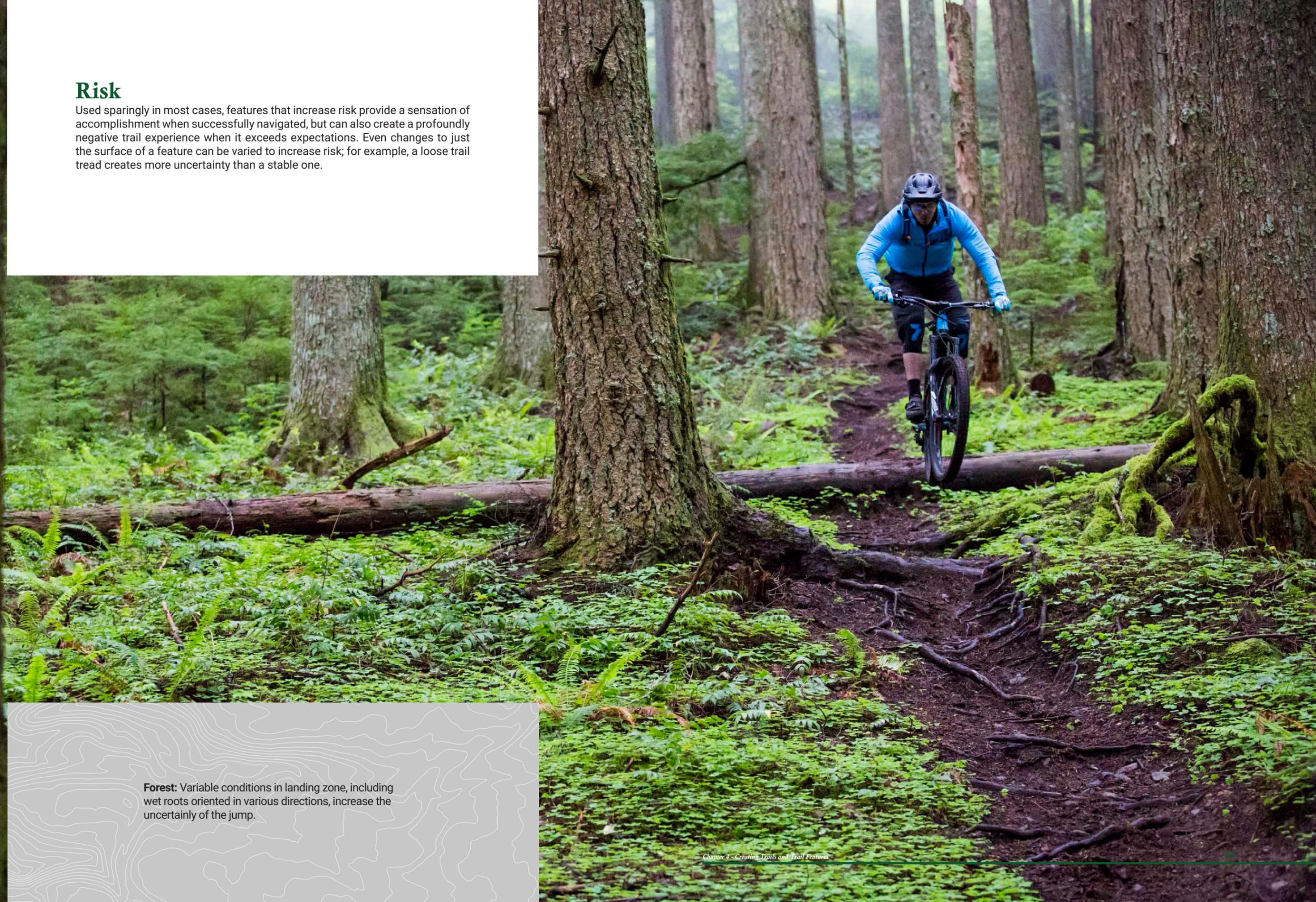


THE AREA THAT IS MAINTAINED CLEAR OF OBSTACLES AND DEBRIS TO ALLOW USERS TO TRAVEL FREELY. DIMENSIONS VARY BASED ON THE ANTICIPATED USER OR DESIRED EXPERIENCE. MINIMAL HEIGHT AND WIDTH CAN CREATE THE EXPERIENCE OF ESCAPE.



## Risk

Used sparingly in most cases, features that increase risk provide a sensation of accomplishment when successfully navigated, but can also create a profoundly negative trail experience when it exceeds expectations. Even changes to just the surface of a feature can be varied to increase risk; for example, a loose trail tread creates more uncertainty than a stable one.



**Forest:** Variable conditions in landing zone, including wet roots oriented in various directions, increase the uncertainty of the jump.



**Desert:** The adrenaline rush from successfully navigating a blind drop is enhanced by the severity of the consequences given the rock surface and exposure.



**Forest:** Blind drop located several miles from the trailhead increases the risk associated with unsuccessfully completing the feature and thus increases the thrill of properly riding it.



**Desert:** Technical challenge created by rocky, loose conditions is enhanced by risk of falling.

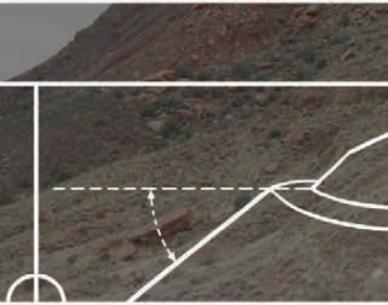
### Trail features that provide for Risk

Illustrations are a key element of this process and are used to define and describe trail user objectives and illustrate how the following two characteristics are translated into trail features that provide a sense of risk.

⚠️ EXPOSURE COMBINES WITH OTHER FACTORS TO CREATE AN ADDED PSYCHOLOGICAL CHALLENGE

## EXPOSURE

THE FEELING OF EMPTY SPACE NEXT TO AND BELOW THE TRAIL TREAD.



30° OF EXPOSURE

200'

24"

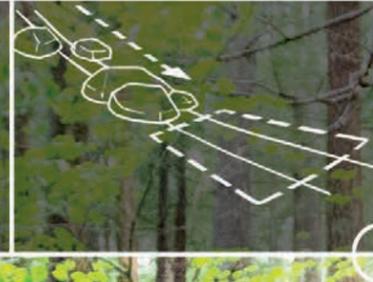
135°

COMBINATION OF TREAD WIDTH, SIDESLOPE GRADE (BACKSLOPE ANGLE/HEIGHT), AND LENGTH OF SLOPE BELOW TRAIL.

18"

## FALL ZONE

AREA BELOW AND/OR ADJACENT TO THE TRAIL CLEARED OF OBSTACLES TO REDUCE CONSEQUENCES OF FALLING IN HIGHLY TECHNICAL, OFTEN ELEVATED FEATURES.



A description of the primary experiences and their associated trail features is detailed in the online appendices. This information should be referenced extensively during the trail design process. It will form the core of the conversation between land managers and trail enthusiasts so that there is consensus on what the trail will look and ride like when it is finished. The details also find their way into trail construction and maintenance documentation to ensure that features are built and preserved as originally conceived by those involved in the planning process.

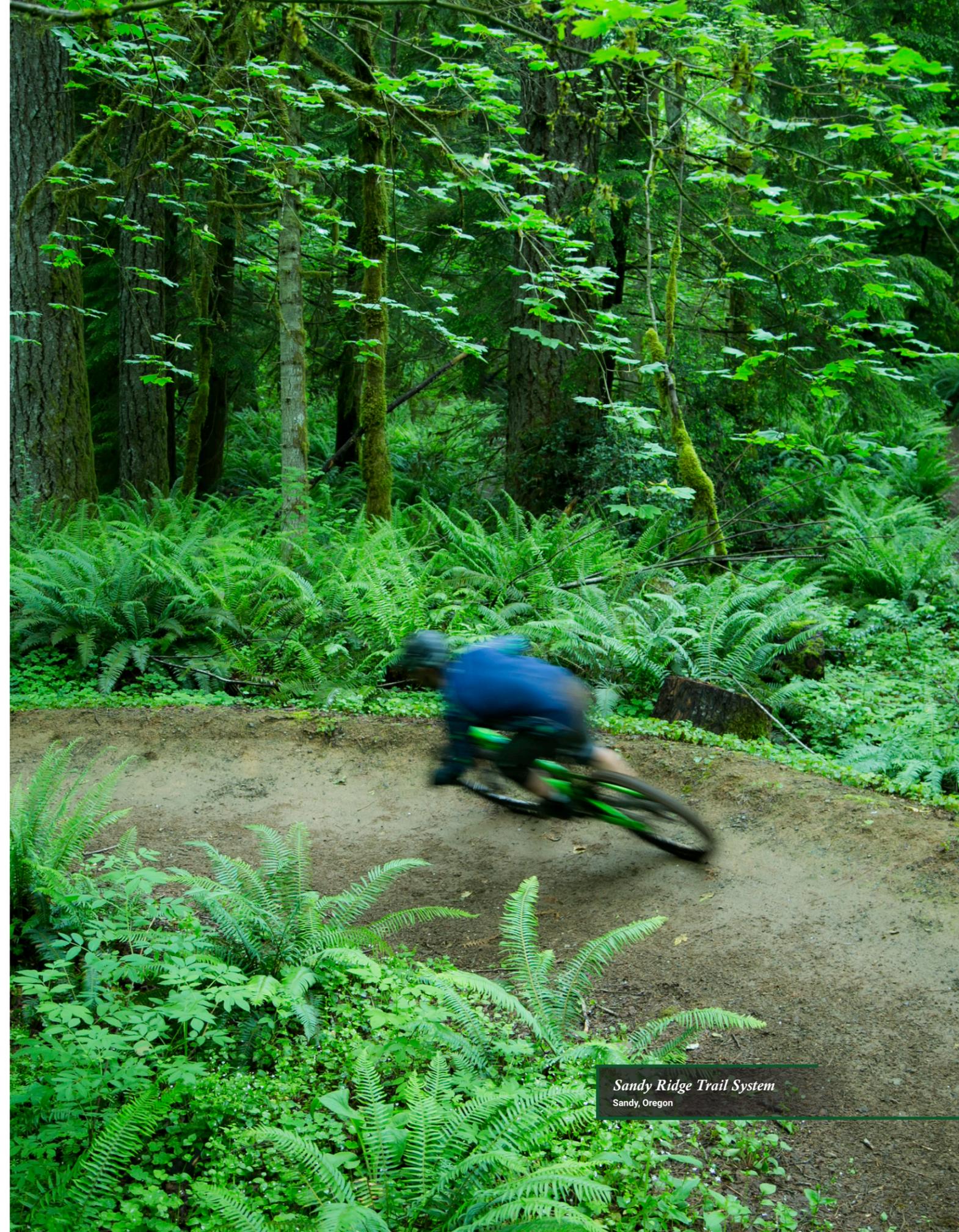
## Trail Difficulty Rating

A critical aspect of a trail experience is whether the trail is too easy, too difficult, or just right. Similar to slopes in ski areas, mountain bike trails can be rated for difficulty to ensure that riders are able to find the experience they seek and, as importantly, avoid a trail they find either too boring or too formidable. The most common mountain bike trail difficulty rating system was developed by IMBA and utilizes the well-known ski area symbols: green circle, blue square, black diamond, etc.

The dimensions and characteristics of a feature are modified by the desired difficulty rating. It is only the first step to declare that achieving the desired degree of play requires a trail with berms. The next set of questions to answer are: How big (or small) are the berms? How frequent? What shape? The answers to these questions depend on the skill level of the targeted ridership.

All the features for a trail should be developed and maintained to the dimensions established for the targeted difficulty rating. This will avoid two common situations that result in socially unsustainable trails: where the difficulty level is increased on a trail, thus removing it as an option for less-skilled riders, or when features are “dumbed down” so that they no longer challenge or stimulate the target audience.

IMBA has established guidelines (<https://www.imba.com/resources/maps/trail-difficulty-ratings>) for trail difficulty rating based on dimensions for four typical trail characteristics: trail width, tread surface, grade, and technical trail features (TTF). This document enhances that information with more detailed specifications for the features associated with each experience characteristic as described in the online appendices.



*Sandy Ridge Trail System*  
Sandy, Oregon

The establishment of an accurate trail difficulty rating system can:

- Help trail users make informed decisions
- Encourage visitors to use trails that match their skill level
- Manage risk and minimize injuries
- Improve the outdoor experience for a variety of visitors
- Aid in the planning of trails and trail systems.

Many trail networks use this type of system. The system best applies to mountain bikers, but is also applicable to other visitors such as hikers and equestrians. These criteria should be combined with professional judgment and trail user input to reach the final rating.

## Trail Rating Guidelines

### 1. Rate Technical Challenge Only

The system focuses on rating the technical challenge of trails, not the physical exertion. It is not practical to rate both types of difficulty with one system. Consider, for example, a smooth, wide trail that is 20 miles long. The technical challenge of this trail is easy, yet the distance would make the physical exertion difficult. The solution is to independently rate technical challenge, and indicate physical exertion by posting trail length, and possibly even elevation change.

### 2. Collect Trail Measurements

Use the accompanying table and collect trail measurements for each criteria. There is no prescribed method for tallying a “score” for each trail. Evaluate the trail against the table and combine with judgment to reach the final rating. It is unlikely that any particular trail will measure at the same difficulty level for every criteria. For example, a certain trail may rate as a green circle in three criteria, but a blue square in two different criteria.

### 3. Include Difficulty and Trail Length on Signs and Maps

Trail length is not a criterion of the system. Instead, trail length should be posted on signs in addition to the difficulty symbol. A sign displaying both length and difficulty provides a lot of information, yet it is simple to create and easy to understand.

Likewise, elevation change is not a criterion. The amount of climbing on a trail is more an indicator of physical exertion than technical difficulty. Mountainous regions may consider including the amount of climbing on trail signs.

### 4. Evaluate Difficulty Relative to Local Trails

Trails should be rated relative to other trails in the region. Don't evaluate each trail in isolation. Consider all the trails in a region and how they compare to one another. This will help you rank the relative difficulty of each trail and will help trail users select an appropriate route. Trails will rate differently from region to region. A black diamond trail in one region may rate as a blue square in another region, but the ratings should be consistent locally.

### 5. Use Good Judgment

Rating a trail is not 100 percent objective. It's best to combine tangible data with subjective judgment to reach the final rating. For example, a trail may have a wide range of tread surfaces – most of the trail is easy, but some sections are more difficult. How would other trail professionals and riders rate it? Use professional and stakeholder feedback to consider all elements and select a rating that best matches the style of trail.

### 6. Consider Other Trail Qualities

Don't forget to consider trail qualities beyond the objective criteria. A wide variety of features could contribute to a trail's difficulty. For example, exposure – the feeling of empty space next to and below the trail tread – provides an added psychological challenge beyond the steepness or roughness of the trail. A 3-inch rock seems like a boulder when a 50-foot drop looms on your side. Other qualities to think about are corridor clearance and turn radius.

### 7. Use Common Sense and Seek Input

No rating system can be totally objective or valid for every situation. This system is a tool to be combined with common sense. Look at trails with a discerning eye, and seek input from trail users before selecting the rating. Remember, a diverse trail network with a variety of trail styles is a great way to ensure happy visitors. Provide both easy and difficult trails to spread visitors and meet a range of needs. By indicating the length and difficulty of trails with a clear signage system, visitors will be able to locate their preferred type of trail.

IMBA Trail Difficulty Rating System					
	 Easiest White Circle	 Easy Green Circle	 More Difficult Blue Square	 Very Difficult Black Diamond	 Extremely Difficult Dbl Black Diamond
<b>Trail Width</b>	72" or more	36" or more	24" or more	12" or more	6" or more
<b>Trail Surface</b>	Hardened or surfaced	Firm and stable	Mostly stable with some variability	Widely variable	Widely variable and unpredictable
<b>Average Trail Grade</b>	Less than 5%	5% or less	10% or less	15% or less	20% or more
<b>Maximum Trail Grade</b>	Max 10%	Max 15%	Max 15% or greater	Max 15% or greater	Max 15% or greater
<b>Natural Obstacles and Technical Trail Features (TTF)</b>	None	Unavoidable obstacles 2" tall or less  Avoidable obstacles may be present  Unavoidable bridges 36" or wider	Unavoidable obstacles 15" tall or less  Avoidable obstacles may be present  Unavoidable bridges 24" or wider  TTF 2' high or less, width of deck is less than 1/2 the height  Short sections may exceed criteria	Unavoidable obstacles 15" tall or less  Avoidable obstacles may be present  May include loose rocks  Unavoidable bridges 24" or wider  TTF 4' high or less, width of deck is less than 1/2 the height  Short sections may exceed criteria	Unavoidable obstacles 15" tall or less  Avoidable obstacles may be present  May include loose rocks  Unavoidable bridges 24" or narrower  TTF 4' high or less, width of deck is unpredictable  Many sections may exceed criteria

## Criteria to Consider

### Tread Width

The average width of the active tread or beaten path of the trail.

### Tread Surface

The material and stability of the tread surface is a determining factor in the difficulty of travel on the trail. Some descriptive terms include: hardened (paved or surfaced), firm, stable, variable, widely variable, loose and unpredictable.

### Trail Grade (maximum and average)

Maximum grade is defined as the steepest section of trail that is more than approximately 10 feet in length and measured in percent with a clinometer. Average grade is the steepness of the trail over its entire length. Average grade can be calculated by taking the total elevation gain of the trail, divided by the total distance, multiplied by 100 to equal a percent grade.

### Natural Obstacles and Technical Trail Features

Objects that add challenge by impeding travel. Examples include: rocks, roots, logs, holes, ledges, drop-offs, etc. The height of each obstacle is measured from the tread surface to the top of the obstacle. If the obstacle is uneven in height, measure to the point over which it is most easily ridden.

Technical Trail Features are objects that have been introduced to the trail to add technical challenge. Examples include: rocks, logs, elevated bridges, teeter-totters, jumps, drop-offs, etc. Both the height and the width of the technical trail feature are measured.

Technical Trail Features (TTF) are objects, frequently man-made, that have been introduced to the trail to add play and challenge to the riding experience. The magnitude, spacing, and frequency by which TTF are integrated into the trail tread will directly impact the trail difficulty rating. Examples include: berms, drops, jumps, rollers, etc.

## Integration with the Landscape

Not all trails and features are appropriate for all landscapes because not all landscapes are the same. Moab, Utah, with its arid climate and abundance of rock, is quite different than the lush forests and loamy soils of the Pacific Northwest. Factors like terrain, soil, and climate will greatly influence the achievable trail experience. For example, building a trail that features technically challenging jumps is complex and expensive on steep sideslopes with no mineral soil. While the experience may be highly sought, building such a trail would be a fruitless pursuit of the desired experience; resources would be better directed to developing a trail more appropriate to the terrain and soils.

The detailed information about size and shape of a given feature for a specific skill level can therefore be used earlier in the planning process to identify likely or reasonable scenarios. If the intention is to create a trail experience that is friendly to beginners, then extremely rocky terrain will need to be tamed. While many construction solutions exist for this problem, they may be cost prohibitive. Conversely, if the desire is to provide challenge through steep, rocky features and the terrain is flat and sandy, the desired experience may not be appropriate for the landscape.

In these cases, it is important to remember that the inability to provide the desired experience does not negate the desire. Instead, land managers and stakeholders should focus resources on creating engaging experiences that are supported by the landscape, search for different opportunities, or acknowledge any difficulties, such as funding, that will need to be overcome for successful implementation.

The following graphics illustrate the decision process used to determine the most appropriate trail for the landscape.



Trail Users Objective

Challenge

Very Difficult (Black Diamond)

Desired Skill Level

Setting

Primitive to Backcountry

Mid-country to Front-country

Rural to Urban

Potential Trail Features

- Natural features
- Tread width
- Tread texture
- Trail sinuosity
- Remoteness

- Everything from Primitive to Backcountry setting
- Enhanced natural features
- Chokes, anchors, gateways
- Jumps
- Drops

- Everything from Mid-country to Front-country setting
- Natural features
- Enhanced natural features
- MMTTF

Constraints

Limited natural features for desired challenge level

Lack of elevation change

Appropriate Features

- Narrow tread width
- Highly textured tread
- Steeper grades
- High trail sinuosity
- Drops (lightly developed)
- Jumps (lightly developed)

- Enhanced natural features: Narrower chokes, anchors, gateways
- Narrow tread width
- Highly textured tread
- Steeper grades
- High trail sinuosity
- Exposure

## Examples

Primitive to Backcountry



**Whistlepunk Trail:** Imported and placed rock to add greater challenge; exposed roots; drops

Mid-country to Front-country



**Red Ridge Trail:** Narrow singletrack on naturally occurring exposed ledge; medium trail texture

Rural to Urban



**Pipe Dream Trail:** Extensive manipulation of native rock to create enhanced natural challenge features

Trail Users Objectives

Play Challenge

Very Difficult (Black Diamond) Desired Skill Level

Setting

Primitive to Backcountry

Mid-country to Front-country

Rural to Urban

Potential Trail Features

- Optional lines
- Natural features
- Tread texture
- Trail sinuosity
- Grade reversals
- Natural features
- Trail grade

- Everything from Primitive to Backcountry setting
- Jumps (medium)
- Berms (medium)
- Drops (medium)
- Optional lines
- Enhanced natural features

- Everything from Mid-country to Front-country setting
- MMTTF

Constraints

Unstable soils; limited vegetation cover

Limited natural features for desired challenge level; urban environment

Appropriate Features

- Natural features - rock features
- Enhanced natural features - placed rock to create obstacles, drops, jumps
- Lots of different optional lines
- Tread texture - high roughness to add challenge
- Trail sinuosity

- MMTTF - wooden constructed features: wall rides, elevated structures, rollers, drops
- Soil-based rollers, jumps, berms
- Optional lines
- Trail sinuosity

## Examples

Primitive to Backcountry



**Free Lunch:** Constructed features not appropriate in the setting; however, natural rock allows creation of a variety of challenge and play features, and numerous optional lines

Mid-country to Front-country



**Punchline:** Natural rock features with multiple options lines; high texture on tread to allow for playful lines

Rural to Urban

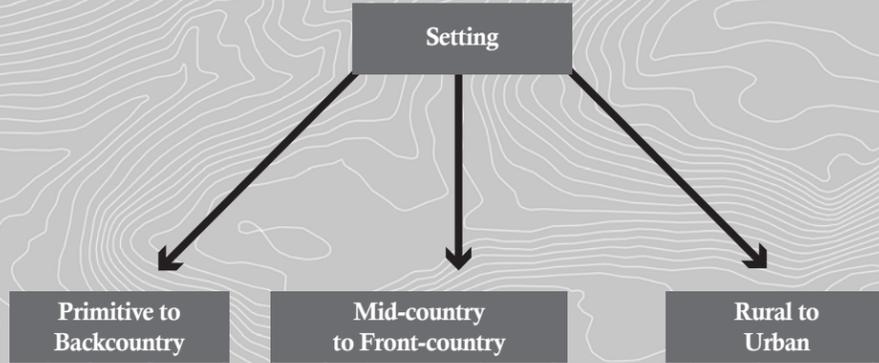


**Boss Trail:** Wooden MMTTF, soil-based features for play and challenge

Trail Users Objectives



Setting



Potential Trail Features

- Trail sinuosity
  - Grade reversals
  - Natural features
- Everything from Primitive to Backcountry setting
  - Trail sinuosity
  - Grade reversals
  - Berms (small)
  - Rollers (small)
  - Optional lines (easy)
- Everything from Mid-country to Front-country setting
  - Jumps (small)
  - Drops (small)
  - MMTTF (small)

Constraints

- Unstable soils; limited vegetation cover
- Powerline easements and old road beds create canopy openings; high-clay soils; high precipitation and year-round use

Appropriate Features

- Trail sinuosity
  - Grade reversals
  - Berms (small)
  - Rollers (small)
- Trail sinuosity
  - Grade reversals
  - Berms
  - Rollers
  - Jumps (small)
  - Drops (small, optional)

Examples

Primitive to Backcountry



**Black Canyon Trail:** Route that maximizes natural landscape features, including grade reversals and sinuous alignment

Mid-country to Front-country



**Lower Hide & Seek Trail:** Extensive tread shaping, tread amendments to create a flow trail with continuous small to large rollers and berms, soil amendments, pavers for durability and to reduce soil impacts during wet trail conditions

Rural to Urban



**PBR Trail:** Small/gentle rollers and berms, shape supported with rock materials, lots of undulations and meanders, flow adjusted to reduce speeds (to reduce breaking, sliding), soil amendments for tread shaping



*Trail Building Workshop*  
Central Oregon

## Chapter 5

# Take Action

## Using GQTE to Provide Bike-Optimized Trails

### Who?

**Trail design and construction techniques have evolved significantly over the past decade to address the advancement in mountain bike technology and the evolution of rider expectations, yet existing trail planning guidance fails to account for the range of experiences that riders seek.** To address this, the BLM worked with the trail communities we serve and our national partners to establish sustainable mountain biking guidelines that help achieve the desired recreation setting characteristics and meet the recreation objectives of the area.

The GQTE was designed to be used by a broader trail-based community—land managers, users, advocates, and stakeholders—to better inform all decisions throughout the trail planning and design process. The GQTE is meant to serve as a tool that establishes a common language under which the trail community can communicate more effectively to better plan, design, construct, and maintain mountain bike trails.

To achieve the goals and vision for providing quality mountain biking trails on BLM-administered land, it is critical that those involved in the planning and design process understand their respective roles and the contributions they are uniquely positioned to make. This includes internal BLM staff at the field, district, and state office levels, as well as specialists from other agencies, partner organizations, or contractors. Also included is the broader trail-based community—advocates, local trail users, partner organizations, and bike industry professionals who have a vested stake in the outcomes of the planning and design process.

### Resource Staff

Within the BLM and other land management agencies, specialists could include recreation planners, engineers, landscape architects, archeologists, hydrologists, ecologists or botanists, wildlife biologists, geologists, and more. Each may make significant contributions to a particular project. The recreation planner can provide critical information regarding visitor use, patterns of recreation activities, and desired settings necessary to achieve recreation objectives. For instance, consultation with the hydrologist could help to identify hydrologic issues affecting placement of trails, buffers from sensitive streams,

or similar aquatic habitat protection issues. Similarly, consultation with the landscape architect and/or visual resource management specialist can be essential in helping to describe the landscape character components that help shape trail layout and design.

It is imperative that BLM staff collaborate early and often in the planning and design stage. The earlier collaboration occurs, the more successful the communication of ideas and possibilities for appropriate design and layout solutions can be achieved. Collaboration must also consider useful and creative solutions for providing accessibility for all users that is integrated into the planning, conceptual design, and design development stages, rather than being addressed as an afterthought.

Depending on the scale of a particular project, collaboration may occur informally or may need to be formalized through a project and/or interdisciplinary team. In most cases, keepers of the specific natural resource data necessary in the site planning process are the aforementioned various resource specialists. Hence, it may be essential that these specialists be part of the project team(s)—both interdisciplinary teams for environmental analysis as well as trail-specific design teams.

In any case, the importance of early, often, and continual collaboration amongst resource specialists cannot be overemphasized. Becoming familiar with the planning and design process will help ensure specialists can provide substantive

input throughout and ensure attention to issues of sustainability, safety, health, and well-being, while also meeting BLM's larger mission goals and resource-specific objectives.

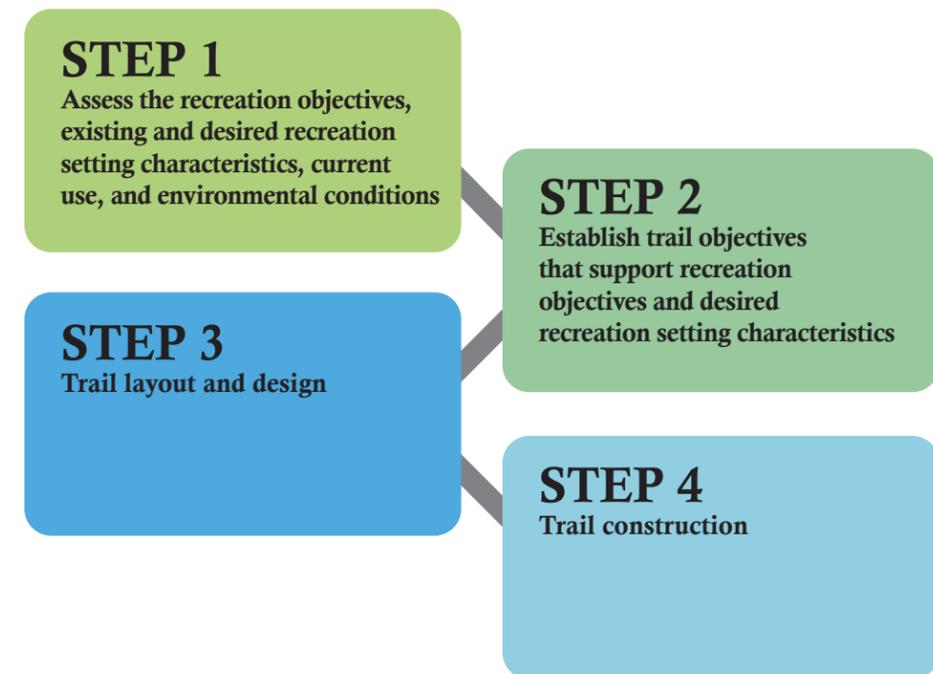
### External

While navigating the planning and design process, it is important to involve the public and project stakeholders in order to learn their point of view, hear about desires, respond to any concerns, and incorporate design components that the internal team may not have analyzed. As with involving internal specialists early and often, bringing in external stakeholders will make sure that numerous voices will be heard and permit all involved to take ownership of the final outcome. Consider reaching out and including adjacent property owners, target user groups, users looking for access, and other governmental agencies.

A planning and design process can benefit from establishing a steering committee that includes internal staff and external stakeholders. Regularly scheduled meetings with the steering committee throughout the entire process keep everyone involved and informed. Including public outreach meetings at strategic milestones (draft concept plan, final plan for comments, pre-construction info) allows the steering committee to convey the planning concepts to the general public with the intent of receiving comments and vetting all concerns within the community.

## What?

The planning and design process is a systematic sequence of steps that, when followed, will produce a quality mountain biking–optimized riding experience. Each step in the process flows smoothly into the next and ensures informed decisions are made in a sequential order. This chapter provides guidance for planning and designing a bike-optimized experience at the trail system and individual trail level for both new opportunities and retrofitting existing opportunities. Several examples are provided to further illustrate this process.



The planning and design process involves steps that begin at the larger land use planning scale and continue through to the more detailed trail construction stage. Before the arduous process of designing a bike-optimized trail begins, well in advance of any ground-disturbing activities, decisions at the land use planning level will be made that can set the stage for the successful development of a mountain bike-optimized trail experience.



*Johnny Behind the Rocks Trail System*  
Lander, Wyoming

## How?

The principles outlined in the GQTE are intended to be used during implementation-level planning after an area has been identified and subsequently designated as a Recreation Management Area that identifies mountain biking as one of the targeted recreation activities, as outlined by BLM recreation policy.

## 5.1 GENERAL RECREATION PLANNING

### LAND USE PLANNING

This “big picture” level of planning serves as a basis for future decisions. To ensure the best balance of uses and resource protections for America’s public lands, the BLM undertakes extensive land use planning through a collaborative approach with local, state, and tribal governments, the public, and stakeholder groups. The result is a set of land use plans—called Resource Management Plans—that provide the framework to guide decisions for every action and approved use on the BLM-managed Public Lands. The BLM currently manages over 245 million acres of surface land and 700 million acres of subsurface mineral estate.

Recreation resources and uses are allocated through the land use planning process, during which an interdisciplinary team considers various management scenarios for all resources that are present within a geographic area to achieve management goals and objectives. Some form of recreation use and associated recreation resources are typically present in a specific area’s lands and waters, and are consequently allocated through the land use planning process.



To assist in the planning and management of recreation and visitor services on public lands and adjacent waters, the BLM relies on its existing guidance contained in Manual 8320 and Handbook H-8320-1 (Planning for Recreation and Visitor Services). Released in March 2011, Manual 8320 provides general policy, direction, and guidance for planning recreation and visitor services on the public lands and associated waters under the administration of the BLM. The purpose of Handbook H-8320-1 is to assist in providing guidance at the land use planning and implementation level. This handbook also supports the policies in BLM Manual 8320, and related program guidance in BLM Handbook H-1601-1, “Land Use Planning.”

The BLM’s Recreation Planning process is an outcome-focused management approach that stresses the management of recreation settings to provide opportunities that allow visitors and local communities to achieve a desired set of individual, social, economic, and environmental benefits. Planning for recreation resources focuses on fulfilling the BLM’s mission to sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of public lands for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations.

The online appendices include several examples of Recreation Management Area (RMA) frameworks that have been completed at the land use planning level where mountain bike trails were identified as one of the primary visitor activities, and the recreation values and outcome objectives were developed to manage this activity and setting.

### IMPLEMENTATION PLANNING

Implementation planning can take many forms but generally includes applying the broad guidance of the “big picture” to a specific place or issue. This often involves completing a plan with a narrower focus (e.g., a specific recreation area) and generally requires additional National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) analysis. Implementation actions may also be proposed and approved through recreation-specific implementation plans, including recreation area management plans and project plans at the trail system and individual trail level.

### IMPLEMENTATION BY DESIGN, NOT DEFAULT

Indicators that will be used to define a quality recreation visit for a Recreation Management Area or Recreation Management Zone are based on the recreation activities and outcomes included in the Recreation Management Area objective. The recreation objectives then become the focus of all implementation actions. Implementation actions that focus on achieving the objectives limit unanticipated and unacceptable changes to Recreation Setting Characteristics or negative affects to recreation opportunities. Implementation actions that do not have a functional purpose should not be undertaken. The need, appropriateness, or relevance of each implementation action must be evaluated by its ability to:

- **Support the RMA objective**
- **Maintain or enhance desired physical, social, or operational Recreation Setting Characteristics**
- **Comply with allowable uses and management action decisions identified in the LUP**
- **Support LUP decisions where SRPs will be issued, and/or mitigate visitor health and safety issues, recreation impacts on natural and cultural resources, and use or user conflicts**

### RECREATION AREA MANAGEMENT PLANNING

Recreation Management Areas with complex implementation issues not resolved during the land use planning process may require a subsequent implementation plan—called a Recreation Area Management Plan (RAMP). The RAMP typically sets goals and objectives, works to resolve management issues such as capacity and environmental impacts, and provides specific direction for on-the-ground implementation of the land use plan. The four implementation categories addressed in the RAMP are management, administration, information and education, and monitoring. When RAMPs are completed for these areas, funding sources for future developments should be identified, including funds not only for construction, but also planning, design, and maintenance.

RMA’s with complex implementation issues may require a subsequent RAMP to: (1) address implementation issues not addressed in an LUP, or (2) provide specific direction for on-the-ground implementation of the LUP over a discrete management unit. RAMPs should address actions, roles, and responsibilities for the BLM and, perhaps, other collaborating community recreation-tourism providers who affect RSCs or the kinds of recreation opportunities being produced. They also may include other actions necessary to achieve interdisciplinary LUP objectives. RAMPs may be developed for an RMA, multiple RMA’s, or areas with connected recreation actions. RAMPs may precede project plans.

The online appendices include several examples of Recreation Area Management Plans that have been completed for mountain bike trails and trail systems.

## 5.2 TRAIL SYSTEM PLANNING

When a new area or existing trail system has been identified for more in-depth trail planning, mountain bike project planning can be developed on a case-by-case basis to establish the trail design requirements for construction, tiered to the Land Use Plan or Recreation Area Management Plan. It is during this phase that initial planning for the proposed project occurs; the process identifies the targeted level of difficulty, desired trail objectives, and general trail construction guidelines that would provide and deliver the targeted mountain bike trail experiences. At this level, data collection includes review of pertinent BLM documents, manuals, Land Use Plans, Activity Level Plans, baseline trail experience evaluations (if trails exist), etc. The Guidelines for a Quality Trail Experience theories discussed in Chapter 3: Trail Settings, Characteristics and Experiences, and Chapter 4: Creating Trail and Trail Features establish the foundation for creating a high-quality trail system plan that:

- Is setting appropriate  
(based on the desired Recreation Setting Characteristics)
- Supports the recreation objectives  
(based on targeted activities, experiences, and benefits)
- Provides the desired level of difficulty  
(based on the trail difficulty rating classes)
- Identifies the mountain bike trail features that when placed on the landscape will achieve the overall trail system goals

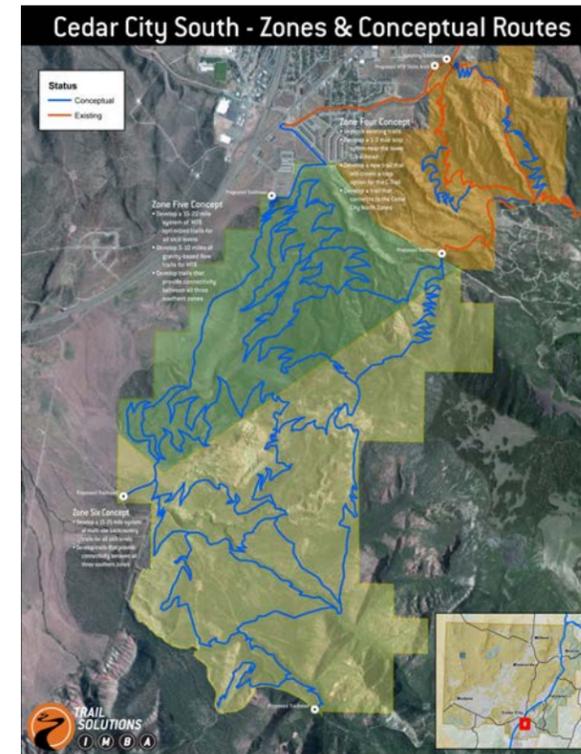
*The following trail system planning steps should be followed when the goal is to design a trail system that provides a high-quality mountain bike trail experience:*

### STEP 1: Identify recreation objectives and desired setting characteristics, current use, and environmental conditions

- Review recreation objectives and desired RSC for the entire project area or a portion of the project area (such as a recreation management zone)
- Use geographic information system data to map the physical characteristics (such as remoteness and naturalness) that are based on existing roads, access

### STEP 2: Describe Trail User Objectives

- Using the trail objectives described in Chapter 3, establish goals and narratives for reach route within the system
- Trail objectives and trail narratives should describe the desired outcomes in a way that all stakeholders can understand
- These objectives and narratives will guide the trail design, construction, and management



### STEP 3: Trail Layout and Design

Trail system design and layout should support the area's objectives and consider any environmental constraints.

- **Site Planning** – Build a base map for the planning area and start conceptualizing where trails can go and what kinds of features can be created to produce the desired experiences.
- **Conceptual Design** – What is possible on the site? Consider opportunities and constraints. Create a rough conceptual system by identifying generally where trails and experiences fit.

- **Trail Design:** Preliminary alignments from the conceptual plan are refined based on field visits and corridor flagging. The design is influenced by and evaluated with respect to the GQTE, including desired trail objectives specific to the trail or system and IMBA's alignment guidelines for environmental sustainability. The appropriate types of construction and procurement procedures are determined once field flagging, cost estimating, project phasing, and inventory of man-made technical trail features (MMTTF) is completed. Once the trail corridor is defined, any required environmental review and/or additional public input can occur prior to construction.

- The flagged alignment represents a corridor through which the trail will go, but not its precise location. Providing a corridor rather than a tight alignment at this step allows for flexibility in the field to adjust the tread within the corridor to highlight various desired experiences and minimize environmental impacts.

### STEP 4: Trail Construction

Trail construction should be influenced by the targeted user objectives identified in the previous steps. Construction techniques should follow best management practices, using features to create experiences within the environmental constraints, as guided by the Trail Characteristics tools in Chapter 4 and in the online appendices.



*Mountain of the Rogue*  
Rogue River, Oregon

## **EXAMPLE: Mountain of the Rogue Conceptual Trail System Planning**

*Using the GQTE approach to develop a system in Southern Oregon from the ground up*

The Mountain of the Rogue Trail (MOTR) project provided guidance and suggestions for the creation of a new shared-use trail system in a small study area near Rogue River, Oregon. The trail system addressed the growing demand in this region for mountain bike–optimized trails while also serving the needs of recreation users who prefer hiking or trail running by providing a core route that is multi-use. The BLM created a trail network that appealed to the surrounding communities yet also provided a high quality mountain biking destination. To that end, the BLM engaged local mountain bike advocacy organizations to ensure that users’ needs were met and that they were able to contribute to construction and maintenance. The study area is approximately five miles south of the town of Rogue River, Oregon, five minutes from Interstate 5, and sees thousands of potential users passing north and south between the larger regional cities of Seattle, Portland, Sacramento, Oakland, and San Francisco. It is also within an hour’s drive of growing, outdoors-oriented populations in Medford and Ashland.

This project was crafted with the idea of developing an improved network of trails comprising both traditional singletrack and purpose-built singletrack trails. Clusters or stacked loops of trails were crafted to feature sustainable design and construction as well as meet conservation, education, and recreation objectives. These loops were designed to create a progression of experiences and challenges as trail users explore them in more depth with each visit. The individual segments provide targeted experiences that meet user expectations. The design of this system is similar to that of a well-designed ski trail system, with a collection of easier (green circle), more difficult (blue square), very difficult (black diamond), and extremely difficult (double black diamond) areas. This network was designed to provide efficient way-finding signage and a variety of trail types. These managerial characteristics were targeted to appeal to a broad cross-section of mountain bikers, from family-oriented entry-level riders to highly skilled enthusiasts.

While all trails within the MOTR trail system are open to multiple uses, they vary in their designed (i.e., bike-optimized) and preferred use, and for some trails, in the preferred direction of travel. Trail “style,” as identified in the Conceptual Plan index and maps, uses two designations to describe conceptual routes: Multi-use and Flow-MTB. Routes labeled “Multi-use” were designed with traditional shared-use trail characteristics and it is intended that traditional yield rules apply. Routes labeled “Flow-MTB” are bike-optimized trails and may include berms, jumps, drops, and other natural and man-made technical trail features.

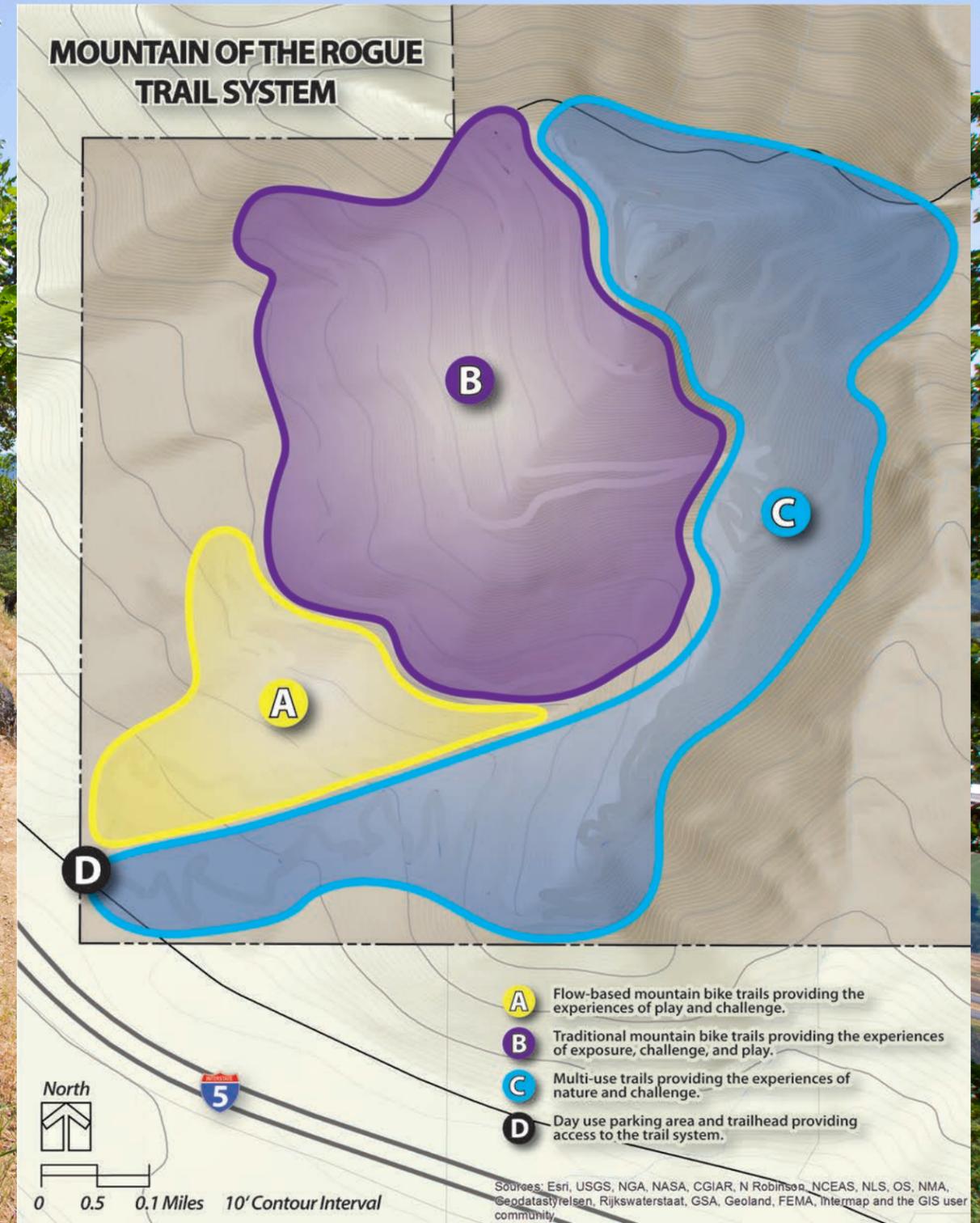
Additionally, some of the Flow-MTB trails were designed to optimize the experience specifically for descending mountain bikers. To provide the best experience for users, these trails were intended to be managed for mountain bikes as the preferred use and one-way (descending) as the preferred direction of travel. For these trails, traditional yield rules were altered for user experience and risk management—it may not be possible for a rider to safely yield on these descending trails, so other users must yield to riders in the descending direction (including mountain bikers traveling uphill). It is expected that other users will seek multi-use trails, as they may find the Flow-MTB trail features less optimal for achieving their desired experiences. Trailhead information and intersection signs are critical in relaying information to users about targeted trail experiences and appropriate trail etiquette based upon trail descriptions and designations.

***The following pages highlight the steps taken by the BLM and the IMBA Trail Solutions team to move through the trail development process.***

## STEP 1: Identify Recreation Setting Characteristics

Based on the visibility of and proximity to the urban environment, as well as existing and planned management controls for the site, the Mountain of the Rogue system fell within the Rural RSC Class.

The topography, terrain, soils, and vegetation varied slightly within the planning area, lending itself to the creation of three separate trail types, generally outlined and described in A – C on the attached map.



## STEP 2: Establish Trail User Objectives Supported By Trail Narratives and Trail Descriptors

To effectively accomplish the experience-based characteristics that were identified for the individual routes within the Mountain of the Rogue trail system, the following route-experience goals and trail narratives were developed to focus the design, construction, and management within the project area.

Trail Index				
Route ID	Status	Difficulty	Style	Phase
Paydirt	Conceptual	Green	MTB-FLOW	1
Trail Objective		Trail Narrative		
An easy route, purpose built for MTB users. A descending trail with excellent flow and small rollers and berms. Returns riders to the parking lot in a safe, controlled manner.		This trail will be slightly wider (30") as it descends towards the trailhead through relatively dense vegetation. This trail will be the perfect opportunity for less advanced riders to experience dynamic features that allow them to lean through curves and swoop over rollers. The smooth surface will allow riders to focus on bike and body separation.		

Trail Index				
Route ID	Status	Difficulty	Style	Phase
Breakdown	Conceptual	Blue	MTB-Flow	1
Trail Objective		Trail Narrative		
A moderately difficult route, purpose-built trail for MTB users. A descending trail with superior flow and modestly sized rollers, jumps, and berm turns.		This trail will be slightly wider (30") as it descends towards Breakdown trail through increasingly dense vegetation. This trail will have tighter flowing feel which rewards riders for maintaining momentum by pumping trail features and linking turns. Modestly sized features will challenge riders' upper body strength as they compress and extend through series of rollers and jumps.		

Trail Index				
Route ID	Status	Difficulty	Style	Phase
Ratpack	Conceptual	Blue	Multi-use	2
Trail Objective		Trail Narrative		
A moderately difficult but technically challenging route for all users. Primarily a climb for most MTB users. Provides access to higher trails and forms part of a loop.		This trail will be narrow (24") in width as it ascends and winds along a rockier ridge and traverses a steeper slope. The grade will be moderate to steep and will be a challenging climb with modest technical challenges. The trail surface will be rough and will feature occasional low, natural obstacles in the trail tread; riders will focus on maintaining balance and traction.		

Trail Index				
Route ID	Status	Difficulty	Style	Phase
Armbar	Conceptual	Black	MTB-Flow	2
Trail Objective		Trail Narrative		
A very difficult route that was a purpose-built trail for MTB users. A descending trail with open flow and nearly constant technical rock challenges.		This trail will be slightly wider (30") as it descends towards Breakdown trail through open terrain. This trail will have an open flowing feel that rewards riders for maintaining momentum which they will need to carry them over the rough, rocky surface. Modest ledges, jumps and rock gardens will challenge riders to maintain speed while negotiating obstacles.		

Trail Index				
Route ID	Status	Difficulty	Style	Phase
Darkside	Conceptual	Red	Multi-use	3
Trail Objective		Trail Narrative		
A very difficult and technically challenging route for all users. Primarily a climb for most MTB users. Provides access to the descent (#015) of the peak and forms part of a loop.		This trail will be very narrow (18") in width as it ascends and traverses a steep slope to access the peak. The grade will be moderate to steep and will be a challenging climb with expert technical challenges. The trail surface will be rough, natural, and narrow, providing riders with a chance to test their tolerance for exposure as they enjoy the scenic vista.		

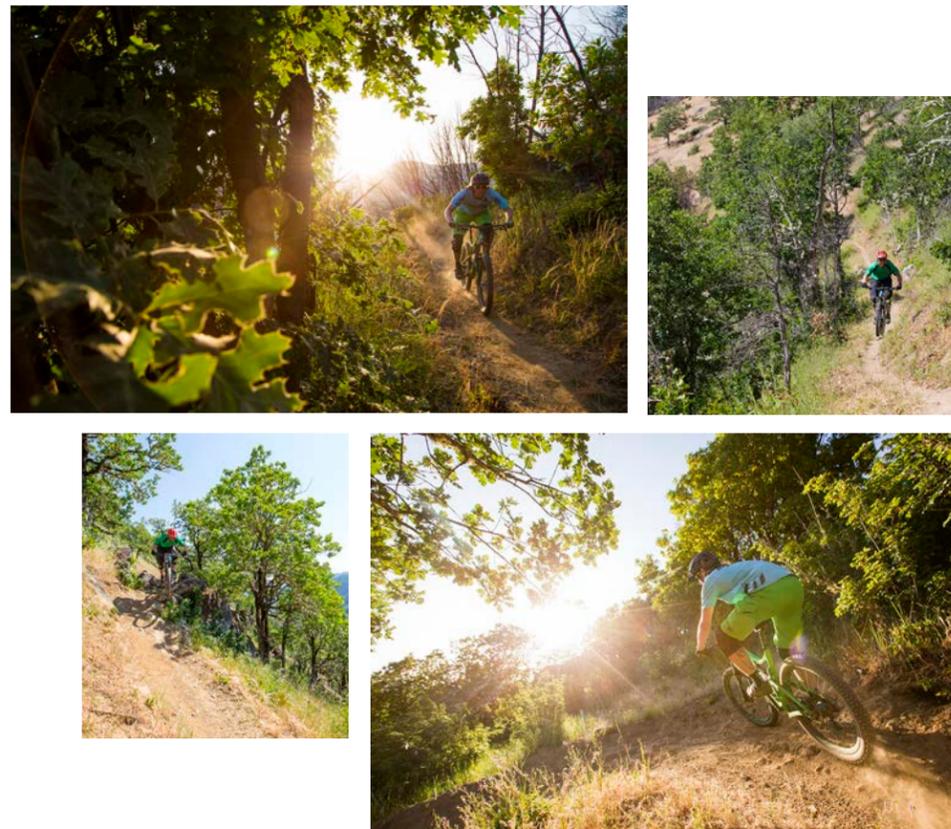
### STEP 3: Trail Layout and Design

**Site Planning:** Initial layout and design for Mountain of the Rogue began with base maps showing existing structures (roads, gates, utilities, etc.) and environmental attributes (slope, vegetation cover, soil conditions, etc.).

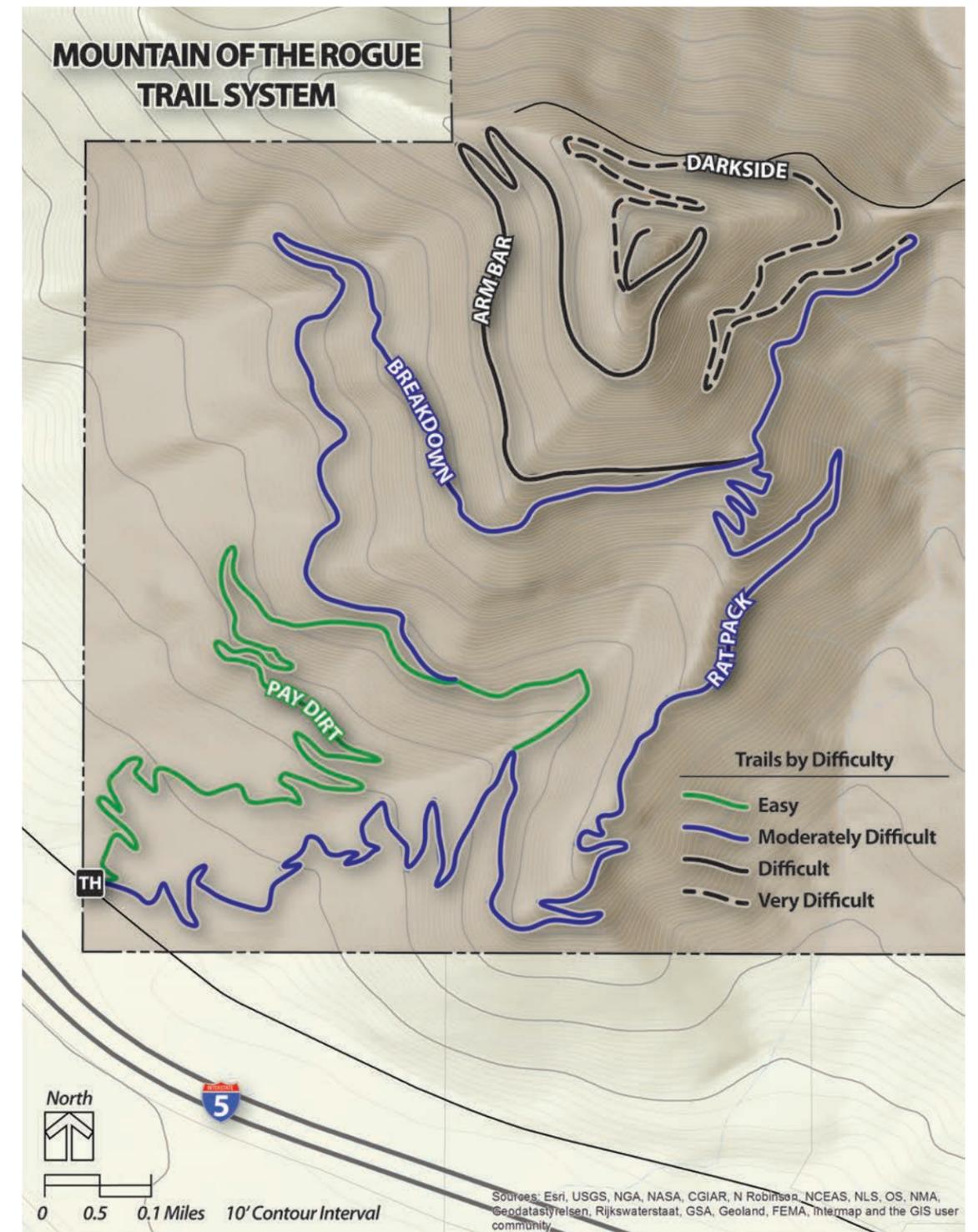
**Conceptual Design:** Site visits contributed to the understanding of project site opportunities and constraints to guide the conceptual design. Targeted trail objectives guided the conceptual system design and each trail layout.

**Trail Design:** Field flagging followed the conceptual design, using a wide corridor to allow for flexibility in the field to adjust the tread within the corridor to highlight various desired experiences and minimize environmental impacts. The design was influenced by and evaluated with respect to the GQTE including targeted trail user objectives specific to each trail. Site-specific construction techniques and project phasing was determined. Four phases were planned for the construction, starting with beginner- and intermediate-level flow trails, and multi-use trail loops planned to serve the widest range of users with the initial construction.

For several trails at Mountain of the Rogue, play and flow were considered particularly important. Site conditions are composed of dry, sandy soils, which limited some of the features that could be constructed using native materials. While jumps and berms are common features used to create play and flow trail user objectives, in this instance different kinds of features were needed, e.g., rollers instead of jumps, and importing materials to create a more durable tread for berm surfaces.



### Mountain of the Rogue Trail System: Conceptual Plan



## STEP 4: Trail Construction

### Mountain of the Rogue: Trail Outcomes Realized

Through a regional assistance agreement with IMBA, the BLM developed eight miles of new trails within the Mountain of the Rogue Trail System project area in the summer of 2015. As highlighted in the following images, by following the GQTE principles in applying targeted user objectives and using trail planning narratives to guide trail construction, trail users were provided distinctly different experiences throughout the trail system.



**Trail Name:** Armbar

**Trail User Objectives:**  
Challenge, Exposure, Play

**Trail Narrative:** The most difficult purpose-built trail for mountain bike users including a descending trail with traditional build style and optimized yet variable flow, near-constant technical rock challenges and a rougher tread characteristic.



**Trail Name:** Breakdown

**Difficulty:** More difficult/Intermediate

**Trail User Objectives:**  
Flow, Challenge, Play

**Trail Narrative:** This trail is slightly wider (30") as it descends through increasingly dense vegetation. It has a tighter flow feel that rewards riders for maintaining momentum by pumping trail features and linking turns. Modestly sized features challenge riders' upper body strength as they compress and extend through a series of rollers and jumps.



**Trail Name:** Pay Dirt

**Difficulty:** Easy/Beginner

**Trail User Objectives:**  
Play, Risk

**Trail Narrative:** An easy route, purpose-built for mountain bike users, a descending trail with excellent flow and small rollers and berms. Trail returns riders to the parking lot in a safe and controlled manner. This trail is slightly wider (30") as it descends toward the trailhead through relatively dense vegetation. This trail is the perfect opportunity for less-advanced riders to experience dynamic features that allow them to lean through curves and swoop over rollers. The smooth surface allows riders to focus on bike and body separation.



## 5.3 TRAIL-SPECIFIC PLANNING

Incorporating the GQTE principles at the ground level will provide the trail planner/designer with the opportunity to develop a level of fine detail, which reinforces the planning and design as it transitions into the construction phase. As the project progresses, opportunities arise to seek additional guidance through trail construction guidelines and specifications, as well as photos, to provide refined specifications for the volunteers, agency staff, or trail contractor to effectively place a trail on the landscape that meets the rider's expectations. Trail-specific planning should generally follow a logical seven-step process:

- STEP 1: Establish Primary Trail User Objectives**
- STEP 2: Conceptual Trail Design**
- STEP 3: Master Plan/Field Design**
- STEP 4: Establish Trail Construction Guidelines**
- STEP 5: Establish Trail Construction Specifications**
- STEP 6: Procurement/Construction**
- STEP 7: Experience Evaluation and Monitoring**

### **EXAMPLE: Whistle Punk Trail**

The existing trail system at the BLM-administered Alsea Falls site in Western Oregon provides several flow-style trails for beginner and intermediate riders, with sculpted berms, rollers, and jumps. Additionally, a few short user-created trails that have been improved and adopted into the system have a traditional shared-use feel, with some bike-optimized features such as open, slightly insloped turns. The plan for the system included several additional miles of trails to offer a variety of experiences and showcase the setting. Local users voiced their desire to create opportunities to provide a more technically challenging riding option for advanced users within the system.

Planning and design for the Whistle Punk Trail began as an effort to effectively provide the desired trail objectives and level of difficulty. The combination of the recreation setting characteristics (Mid-country) and specifically the physical characteristic of remoteness provided the opportunity to establish a trail with a different character than what was available within the existing system. During the public outreach, stakeholders communicated with the BLM that they wanted a trail experience with a more rugged, less predictable feel, one that blended with the setting and provided an immersive experience with the forest. Ideally, Whistle Punk would feel like a signature trail, one that would embody the setting and form the backbone for the system.

## STEP 1: Establish Primary Trail User Objectives

A key component of this step is providing detailed information that further defines the targeted trail user objectives and include any available photos to better communicate the primary trail characteristics to agency staff and public stakeholders. The online appendices include a library of trail characteristics across a range of difficulty levels.

Primary Trail User Objectives: *Challenge, Nature*

Trail Objectives	Range
Setting	Relatively primitive
Nature	Immersed in nature
Challenge	High intermediate
Playfulness	Moderate
Risk	Relatively low exposure



The trail and features should be integrated into the natural landscape as much as possible. The trail should have a lot of texture, and should be narrow in finished width, with a lot of hidden, natural features. It should look and feel more like what people consider traditional or classic singletrack, a bit more unpredictable with a less manicured or engineered feel to keep riders on their toes. That said, the trail should avoid awkward turns and movements that frustrate the momentum achieved while riding a bike.

Where possible, the tread should have a lot of small- to medium-sized (2"–8") obstacles to create challenge and a more natural trail feel. In general, this means leaving obstacles (roots and rocks), recognizing that many small obstacles will become "proud" as the trail bed wears in with use. Where large roots are exposed, especially if highly off-camber, use chokes (logs, rocks, existing tree trunks) on the downhill side to keep users from widening the tread. Placement of larger obstacles for challenge, including optional lines/avoidable obstacles (e.g., drops), is encouraged. The area near the top is a bit flatter with good road access for importing material as needed.

Trail Roughness: Moderate (left and center) to high (right)



Optional lines and more advanced features



## STEP 2: Conceptual Trail Design

**The design team utilizes detailed mapping, GIS data, site inventories, site analysis, and geotechnical reports to determine what is possible on the site.** Conceptual design places the trail onto the landscape to generate a trail layout needed to accomplish design and user objectives, and offers quick design solutions to generate comments and responses. Design concepts are evaluated with respect to GQTE principles, preliminary cost estimate, and the budget. Once a conceptual trail design option is approved, the determination is made as to whether the project will be constructed by trail advocates, volunteers, BLM personnel, or contractors, which dictates the level of plans and oversight needed.

For Whistle Punk Trail, the landscape helped to define the conceptual trail design. The remoteness to the rest of the trail system combined with the old-growth characteristics of the forest complemented the targeted user objectives. Based on an understanding of the site, integrated with GIS data for environmental factors (slope, vegetation cover, boundaries, soil type, etc.), a conceptual alignment was designed to further reflect desired objectives within the environmental and regulatory constraints.

## STEP 3: Master Plan/Field Design

**Further development of the conceptual design occurs in this phase.** The Whistle Punk conceptual design was refined in the field and the corridor flagged for review. The flagged alignment represented a corridor through which the trail would go, but not its precise location. Providing a corridor rather than a tight alignment at this step allowed for flexibility in the field to adjust the tread within the corridor to highlight various desired experiences and minimize environmental impacts. For example, winding the trail between trees provided a more intimate nature experience while also adding challenge.

## STEP 4: Establish Trail Construction Guidelines

Trail construction guidelines should be general in nature and should support the attainment of the primary trail objectives identified in Step 1.

### **Whistle Punk Trail Construction Guidelines:**

1. ~1.7 miles flagged corridor (can be reduced to ~1.4 by eliminating upper trail segment)
2. 3% to 6% average trail grade (400' elevation loss), 15% maximum for short sections (<50ft)
3. Downhill directional from near high point of system, connects upper access road and Sexy Tree trail/lower access road
4. Difficulty rating: more difficult/very difficult
5. Bike-optimized, but not a "flow trail"
6. Moderate to high surface roughness
7. Tread shaping should blend with environment
8. Corridor will be cleared by youth crew with volunteer assistance
9. Portions of route will have a marbled murrelet construction restriction

## STEP 5: Establish Trail Construction Specifications

**Construction drawings, details, and technical specifications are completed during this phase.** Construction documents describe the quantity, quality, configuration, and size of trail features to be included in the design, and ensure the project is consistent with the design, program, budget, and schedule. If appropriate, agency agreements are finalized and a final cost estimate is produced. Trail guidelines are developed from the GQTE matrix and include the magnitude and frequency of trail features, trail difficulty, etc.



### Alsea Falls-Whistle Punk Trail Specifications Matrix

The specifications are particular to the skill rating and user objectives for the trail—High Intermediate skill rating with a focus in nature and technical challenge.

Category	Trail Characteristic	Trail User Objectives	Intermediate	Int-Adv	Description
<b>Tread</b>					
	Grade	Challenge, Exercise			
	Average grade, soil	Challenge, Exercise	0-10%	0-12%	
	Maximum grade, soil	Challenge, Exercise	15%	20%	Maximum grade along a trail or trail segment for soil tread (unarmored), for distance >50lf. Can exceed max grade when part of a gravity dip.
	Maximum grade, rock or armored, climbing	Challenge, Exercise, Exposure	20%	25%	<~10lf
	Maximum grade, rock or armored, descending	Challenge, Exercise, Exposure	30%	40%	<50lf
	Grade reversal, frequency	Play, Nature	50-200'	50-200'	Varies with terrain, look for natural features and topography to guide grade reversal placement.
	Tread width	Exposure/Risk, Challenge, Nature	18-36"	12-36"	The average width of the active tread or beaten path of the trail. Mostly narrow and twisty, except where high exposure and/or at technical trail features and optional lines.
	Clearance width	Exposure/Risk, Challenge	12-96"	12-96"	The area that is maintained clear of obstacles and debris to allow users to travel freely. Dimensions vary based on the anticipated user. The width includes the tread, outslope, backslope, and any additional clearance requirements. The height dimension is measured from the ground surface to the edges of the clearance width to create the full corridor.
	Outslope	Exposure/Risk, Challenge	0-10%	0-15%	For regular tread, outslope should not exceed 10%. Up to 15% at drain apex. Excludes berms.

Category	Trail Characteristic	Trail User Objectives	Intermediate	Int-Adv	Description
<b>Tread</b>					
	Inslope	Play	0-10%	0-15%	Along elevated tread and for gutters above turns, inslope should not exceed 10%, up to 15% at drain apex to basins or for microtopography-forced drainage. Excludes berms.
	Roughness	Challenge, Play	Moderate	Moderate to high	Surface roughness—amplitude and frequency of tread obstacles. High surface roughness is desirable for this trail.
<b>MMTTF</b>	Natural obstacles, unavoidable	Nature, Challenge, Play	</=8"	</=10"	Choke tread to keep users from going around obstacles. Larger avoidable obstacles may also be present. Add optional larger features to tread where fits with trail flow.

<b>Turns</b>					
	<b>Berm</b>	Play			
	Radius		8-10'	7-10'	Tread is insloped or banked throughout the turn. Berm face should be convex. Usually constructed at grade. Bermed turns should blend with the landscape at Whistle Punk, generally smaller, tighter than flow trail berms.
	Grade		3-7%	5-10%	Change in elevation from upper to lower leg (e.g., the grade through the turn).
	<b>Switchberm</b>	Play, Efficiency			Hybrid bermed switchback used on steeper slopes or tighter trails. Uses a constructed platform, but the turn is super elevated/bermed to provide better user experience and reduce lateral soil displacement.
	Radius		5-7'	4-7'	
	Grade		3-7%	5-10%	
	<b>Climbing Turn</b>				
	Radius		8-15'	8-15'	
	Grade		5-10%	7-12%	Max grade varies by soil type.

## STEP 6: Procurement/Construction

**Once the construction specifications are completed the trail construction method is determined.** If a contractor is going to be used then the required procurement process is followed: bid documents are produced, the package is prepared, and advertised for a formal public bidding process. Once awarded, the project then proceeds according to the construction drawings and specifications.

The best trails are those that appear to be placed into the landscape, not on top of it. These trails celebrate the unyielding variations present in the natural environment and avoid the stifling sensation of uniformity, allowing the builder to display creativity and flexibility to develop the best experience possible.

While this makes for memorable trails it tends to confound the typical procurement process mandated for most government agencies. Fixed-price installation, measured against established construction standards, allows for the best quality at the lowest price when installing roads or plumbing fixtures, but when used to bid trails it typically leaves the contractor, the agency, and the trail users unsatisfied.

For the Whistle Punk Trail, the BLM hired a contractor experienced with the construction of bike-optimized trails and bike parks, and used the construction specifications and the conceptual plan (from Steps 1 to 5) to relay the desired trail objectives to the builder. This was a critical step, because while the contractor was skilled in building highly sculpted bike features and trails, they were less experienced in building in a manner that highlighted the natural environment, with the objectives of nature and ruggedness as the highest priorities. Additionally, IMBA and the BLM checked in with the contractor regularly throughout construction to assure that the trail was being built to specifications. Developing build specifications, additional meetings with the contractor, and follow-up field visits incurred greater project costs but were critical in yielding desired outcomes for the stakeholders.

## Meeting the Objectives

Some options are available to increase the likelihood of creating the trail experience that everyone in the process envisions.

- Mandated minimum experience requirements for bidders, such as 3–5 years in the industry working on similar projects, can keep unqualified contractors at bay. References from satisfied previous customers will help verify the purported expertise.
- Trail builders, especially those who create high-end mountain bike trails, can and should be considered “specialty contractors.” The ability to provide a fun, risk-managed adventure via sustainable singletrack requires unique skills, artistry, and the ability to translate targeted user objectives into a physical manifestation of dirt and rock. The typical contractor will struggle with even the most basic trail project.
- Design-build contracts are ultimately the most cost-effective way to get a good trail. Most procurement processes do not allow this option but Cooperative Agreements and Assistance Agreements may provide the needed mechanism.
- Performance specifications, combined with trail-specific construction specifications, allow the contracting agency to ensure that what is built is not just a “trail-shaped object” but a piece of infrastructure that delivers the intended outcomes.



Whistle Punk construction specifications reflect the conceptual plan and design guidelines to produce the desired experiences. In this case, rock was imported and placed to provide more technical challenge than native materials could provide.

## STEP 7: Experience Evaluation and Monitoring

***The trail is made ready for public use and the project is completed.*** If constructed by a contractor, the project is turned over to BLM after final acceptance. BLM continues routine maintenance, plus experience and condition assessments throughout the life of the trail.

### **Whistle Punk: Outcomes Realized**

Targeted Trail User Objectives: *Nature and Technical Challenge. Emphasis on ruggedness, use of natural features to provide challenge at intermediate to advanced skill level.*

Trail design and construction took advantage of many trees and large stumps to wind the trail over roots and through tight tree gaps, adding challenge. To add technical challenge, rock material was imported and placed into the tread to create a more rugged yet sustainable trail.





*Free Lunch Trail*  
Grand Junction, Colorado

## 5.4 ASSESSING EXISTING TRAILS

In most cases, planning areas aren't presented as a clean slate, but rather have an existing network of trails and roads available for recreational use. These systems often have a variety of designated uses and likely have some form of trail rating established. A system may have dozens of routes open to mountain biking, but it's possible that few of them provide the desired outcomes that riders are seeking. For instance, former extraction routes provide access to landscapes, but they typically provide a poor user experience as they were constructed for transportation needs rather than to provide a fun mountain bike ride. Even trails that were designed for recreation don't always provide high-quality experiences, with mountain biking often added as a trail designation to existing trails built for hiking and/or equestrian use. More recently, built trails, even if designed with mountain bike use in mind, frequently fail to account for varied trail experiences among users. That's not to say that some of these trails don't provide excellent experiences for mountain bikers, but there is insufficient information to distinguish high quality from lesser experiences.

### Experience Evaluations

An experience evaluation is a tool that has been developed to better understand the range of experiences currently available within a given trail system or on a single trail, and can be used to identify the various types of rider experiences that are available within a given geographic area, trail system, or on a specific trail. This information can be used to inform future planning for a different trail experience, different level of difficulty, or to develop trail ratings for existing routes.

When conducting an experience evaluation, basic information on trail length, width, grade, and maximum obstacle size should be included. While these data points are objective and easier to collect and disperse, the experience that the trail provides is subjective, making collecting information on trail experiences and describing those experiences more challenging. However, experience-based evaluations can be used to establish meaningful trail experience descriptions and skill ratings through a systematic approach of focusing on a set of well-defined experience criteria and utilizing a range of users to assess existing trails.

BLM and IMBA Trail Solutions staff traveled to several iconic trail networks that the BLM manages in Colorado, Utah, and Idaho to conduct experience evaluations on existing trails. The team utilized the following steps that outline the process for evaluating and documenting existing trail experiences.

## Evaluating Existing Trails

### STEP 1:

**Understand trail user objectives.** Get a feeling for each factor using the descriptions, graphics, and photos found in Chapters 3 and 4, and in the online appendices.

### STEP 2:

**Make a plan.** Using online tools and other available resources, identify the trail system and the individual trails you will be evaluating, determine the amount of time it will take to assess the identified trails, and prepare for the assessment.

### STEP 3:

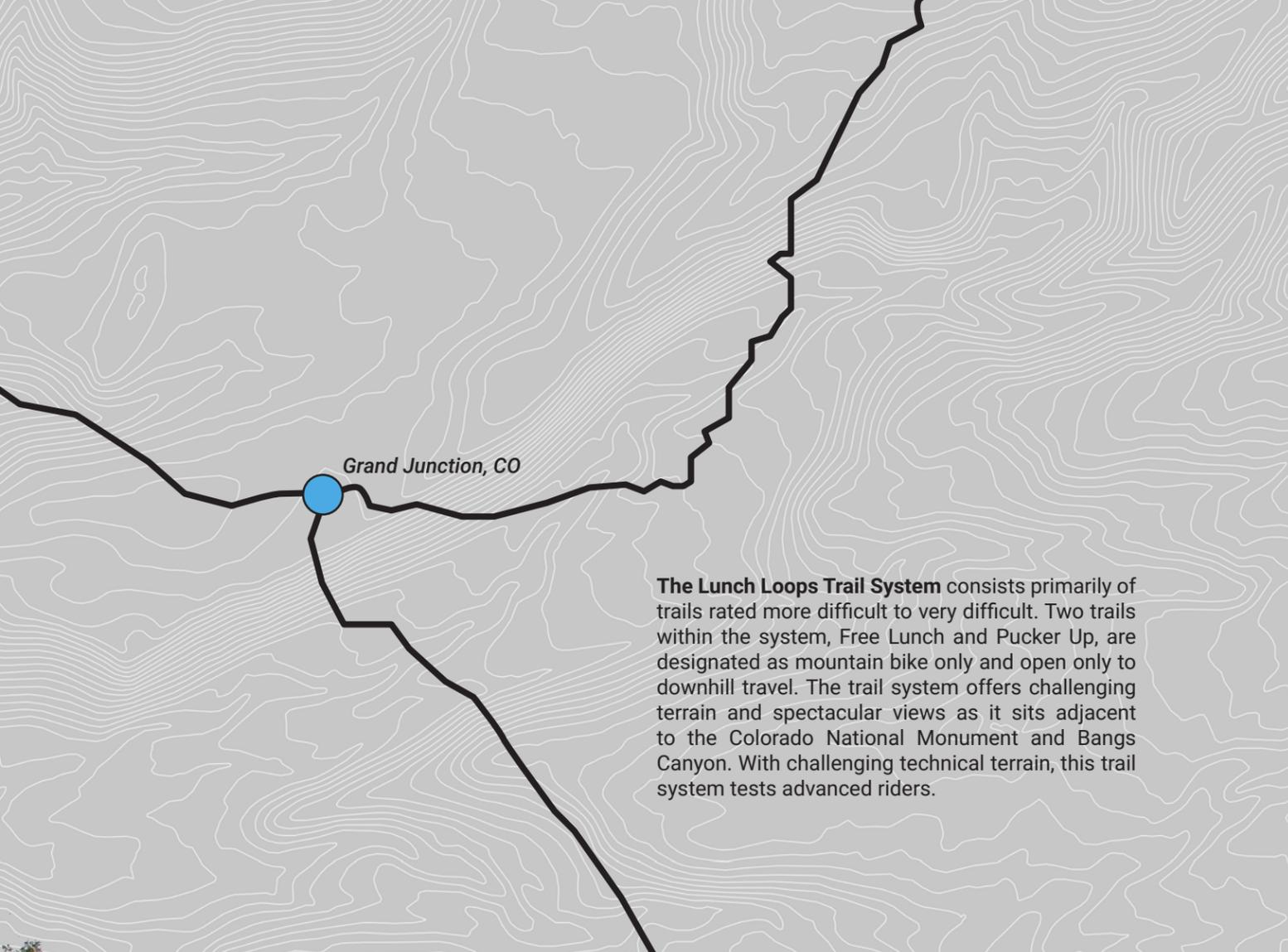
**Ride and Report.** Ride the individual trail segments you will be evaluating to get a sense of the primary trail features and types of outcomes that are present. After you've completed each trail or distinct trail section, fill out the evaluation form using the instructions provided. Remember, it should be about your experience and what you felt on the ride—not what you think it should be or what you think someone else might experience. When assessing existing trails, document and report on the following trail assessment components:

Trail Assessment Components	Description
Trail Identification and Length	Unique identifier (typically a trail name or number) and mileage
Trail Status	Open, closed, or limited by activity type or season of use
Level of Difficulty	Easiest/Easy/More Difficult/Very Difficult/Extremely Difficult
Trail Style	Multi-use, multi-use nonmotorized, flow mountain bike, traditional mountain bike, etc.
Management Controls	Use Status: Directional, 2-way, users yield to downhill riders, timing restrictions, etc.
Trail User Objectives	Select a primary objective for the trail (e.g., play, escape, challenge) and a secondary objective if needed.
Trail Narrative	Describe trail tread width, trail grade, and provide a brief narrative of how the trail is interpreted by the rider and how the individual trail characteristics impact a rider's experience.

### STEP 4:

**Submit the evaluation.** Ideally, evaluations can be compiled from a range of rider skill and interest (crowdsourcing) to assess the trails. This will give the best overview of the experiences provided.





The Lunch Loops Trail System consists primarily of trails rated more difficult to very difficult. Two trails within the system, Free Lunch and Pucker Up, are designated as mountain bike only and open only to downhill travel. The trail system offers challenging terrain and spectacular views as it sits adjacent to the Colorado National Monument and Bangs Canyon. With challenging technical terrain, this trail system tests advanced riders.

### Lunch Loops Trail System

Route ID	Status	Length	Difficulty	Style	Preferred Direction	Management Controls
Holy Cross	Existing	2.7 Miles	Difficult	Technical Singletrack	Downhill Only	Bike Only

### Trail Objectives

Primary Objectives	Description:
Challenge	After climbing for some time, the overall downhill of Holy Cross is an enjoyable and challenging trail for the advanced rider. Challenge comes in the form of technical rock features including drops, tech lines with choke points, and steep punchy climbs. As a result of these challenge features, the rider's fitness level is tested. A slight feeling of risk is experienced due to the challenge features along technical lines rather than to exposure.

### Trail Narrative

5% average grade with sections of 15% maximum grades. Typical 24" wide tread with 12" choke points, some widening around technical features. Consistent, relatively smooth texture connecting the countless sections of rough, rocky texture. Ridden more than Free Lunch with the preferred line more obvious to rider. Flows quite well without confusing decision points. Numerous unexpected punchy climbs due to limited sight lines.



### Lunch Loops Trail System

Route ID	Status	Length	Difficulty	Style	Preferred Direction	Management Controls
Free Lunch	Existing	1.1 Miles	Extremely Difficult	Technical Downhill	Downhill Only	Bike Only

### Trail Objectives

#### Primary Objectives

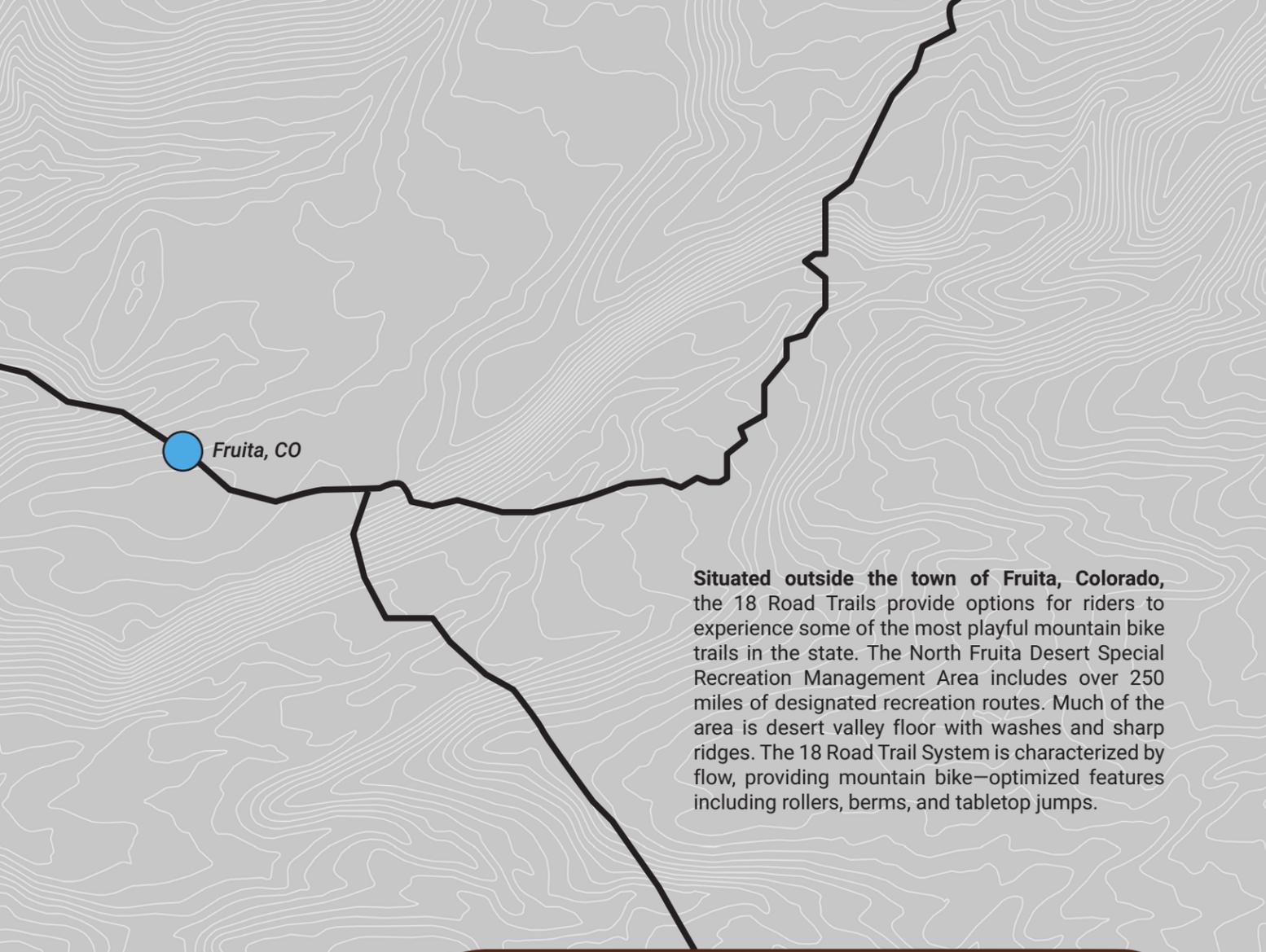
Challenge

**Description:** Challenge expectations are set high with trail entry signage and crowdsourced online descriptions. This downhill directional trail has an onslaught of technical rocky features including various-sized drops, technical downhill lines with many options, and steep climbs. At times the signage can be confusing and fatiguing. Risk comes from high consequence drops and can be a result of misinterpreting the signage. The rider gets a strong sense of discovery and mental workout as you wonder what is around the next turn. Due to the difficult climbs and descents the rider also gets a physical workout.

### Trail Narrative

6% average grade with maximum slope of 13%. Trail tread with ranges from 24" – 36" with some 12" choke points. A few "play areas" up to 30' wide allow riders to explore numerous lines of different difficulty and risk levels. The trail is signed as black diamond with double black diamond options. Texture varies from smooth to very rough; surprisingly enough the smooth texture comes along more difficult rock slab areas associated with challenge features. Trail builders use the landscape efficiently to connect challenge features and play areas. Play areas didn't look like they were being thoroughly used; prime line was often beyond black diamond. At times signage seemed to be too late, therefore causing confusion and taking wrong line if rider is not familiar with the trail.





Situated outside the town of Fruita, Colorado, the 18 Road Trails provide options for riders to experience some of the most playful mountain bike trails in the state. The North Fruita Desert Special Recreation Management Area includes over 250 miles of designated recreation routes. Much of the area is desert valley floor with washes and sharp ridges. The 18 Road Trail System is characterized by flow, providing mountain bike-optimized features including rollers, berms, and tabletop jumps.

### 18 Road Trail System

Route ID	Status	Length	Difficulty	Style	Preferred Direction	Management Controls
PBR (Pumps, Bumps, and Rollers)	Existing	2.0 Miles	Easy/Intermediate	Bike Optimized DH Flow	Downhill	Downhill traffic only, nonmotorized

### Trail Objectives

Primary Objectives	Description
Play	This is an entry into playful trails for beginner and intermediate riders. The trail rides as a continuous grade which starts to wear out the rider; the downhill could be broken up with rest sections of flat or climbs. Slight sense of escape since riders do not see any other development.

### Trail Narrative

5% average grade with max slope of 8%. 24" wide, very smooth trail tread. In order to clear jumps and doubles, riders have to work hard to keep speed up; speed is controlled by flow, 5% grades, and grade dips.



### 18 Road Trail System

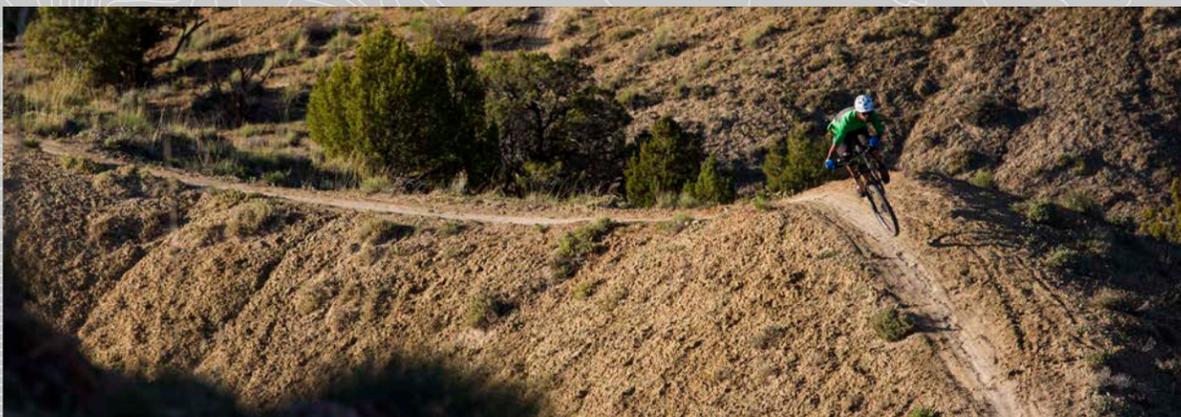
Route ID	Status	Length	Difficulty	Style	Preferred Direction	Management Controls
Joe's Ridge	Existing	1.9 Miles	Intermediate/Difficult	Bike Optimized Singletrack	Downhill	Nonmotorized

### Trail Objectives

Primary Objectives	Description
Risk	Access to the top of Joe's Ridge and along saddles between ridges can be a workout for the intermediate rider. The smooth and flowy line gives the rider a roller coaster sensation. The trail follows the ridge line with some sense of exposure since the slopes fall away in all directions.

### Trail Narrative

24" wide tread at a 5% average grade and 17% max grade. Smooth texture with rocky edges and a handful of technical rock features. Brake bumps coming into corners and along steep descents.



### 18 Road Trail System

Route ID	Status	Length	Difficulty	Style	Preferred Direction	Management Controls
MoJoe	Existing	1.1 Miles	Intermediate/Difficult	Bike Optimized DH Flow	Downhill	Nonmotorized

### Trail Objectives

Primary Objectives	Description
Play	This is an entry into playful trails for beginner and intermediate riders. The trail rides as a continuous grade which starts to wear out the rider; the downhill could be broken up with rest sections of flat or climbs. Slight sense of escape since riders do not see any other development.

### Trail Narrative

5% average grade with max slope of 8%. 24" wide, very smooth trail tread. In order to clear jumps and doubles, riders have to work hard to keep speed up; speed is controlled by flow, 5% grades, and grade dips.



Hailey, ID

The Croy Creek Trail System is a skills development area jointly managed by BLM and Blaine County located in south-central Idaho, west of Hailey. The trails were designed and constructed primarily for motorcycle riders and mountain bikers, but hikers and equestrians also frequent the system. The trails receive approximately 15,000–20,000 visits per season. The Croy Creek Trail System offers mountain bikers a long riding season because of the system's low elevation. The ride experience at Croy Creek includes traditional singletrack and modernized mountain bike trail features including rollers, berms, and tabletop jumps.



### Croy Creek Trail System

Route ID	Status	Length	Difficulty	Style	Preferred Direction	Management Controls
Hidden Valley Loop	Existing	5.8 Miles	Intermediate	Multi-use, existing, designated	Bi-directional 2-way travel, suggested direction of travel is counter clockwise	Open to nonmotorized (hike, bike, equestrian) and motorized users (motorcycles)

### Trail Objectives

Primary Objectives	Description:
Exercise	The Hidden Valley Loop provides riders visiting the Croy Creek system with opportunities for a backcountry riding experience. The terrain and design of the trail provides riders the ability to feel a sense of escape from the sights and sounds present within other zones of this trail system. It provides fit riders who seek to challenge themselves physically with a high-quality experience. When riding this trail counterclockwise, the backside descent provides all levels of riders with quality opportunities to carve turns through a series of stacked berms that allow for speed control and environmental sustainability.

### Trail Narrative

This trail is narrow in width (24" to 30") and climbs/descends at a moderate grade of approximately 7%. It has moderately challenging climb and steep sideslopes that provide the rider with some moderately challenging switchbacks to climb and descend. There are medium-sized bike-optimized features (series of bermed turns and rollers) present on the backside of this trail, when riding counterclockwise, that are built to enhance the riding experience for all skill levels.



### Croy Creek Trail System

Route ID	Status	Length	Difficulty	Style	Preferred Direction	Management Controls
Two Dog	Existing	6.7 Miles	Intermediate	Multi-use, open, designated	Bi-directional 2 way travel; evaluation performed by climbing from trailhead	Open to nonmotorized (hike, bike, equestrian) users

### Trail Objectives

Primary Objective	Description
Efficiency	<b>Description:</b> The Two Dog Trail provides another critical link from the secondary trailhead at the Croy Creek trailhead. It allows riders an efficient climb to access some of the bike-optimized flow trails within the trail network. There are bike-optimized trail features present within the trail tread that allow riders to maintain their speed as they make their way from the trailhead to connect to the other existing trails within the system. The climbing grade is moderate (6%), allowing a wide range of riders the ability to experience an efficient connection to the other trails within the system.

### Trail Narrative

This trail is narrow in width (24" to 30") and climbs/descends at a moderate grade of approximately 6%. It has moderately challenging climbs and steep sideslopes that provide the rider with some moderately challenging switchbacks. There are medium-sized bike-optimized features (bermed turns) present within the trail tread allowing riders of all skill levels the ability to maintain speed while climbing, traversing, and descending along this route.



### Croy Creek Trail System

Route ID	Status	Length	Difficulty	Style	Preferred Direction	Management Controls
Punchline	Existing, Open, Designated	1.2 Miles	Advanced, Intermediate/Expert	Flow Trail and technical rock sections	One way, downhill only, S to N	Open to nonmotorized bike only

### Trail Objectives

Primary Objectives	Description
Play	<b>Description:</b> Built for advanced and expert riders looking for a flow and techy experience with numerous, tight-spaced berms/rollers/doubles, and technical rock sections.

### Trail Narrative

Moderate climb leads to technical and flow section. 36"-40" wide trail with choke points. Technical rock sections act as entrance to flow section of trail. Bigger features, steeper sections that turn up the speed, large grade reversals lead to step-ups, high frequency of berms and rollers down a pronounced ridgeline. Trail finished with a climb back to Two Dog.





## Trail Assessment

Observation of the physical characteristics of existing trails can indicate experience problems. A trail sustainability assessment, when combined with experience evaluations and stakeholder feedback, can give a more complete picture of the experiences provided by an existing trail system and the potential for improvements. Trail sustainability assessments are common components of a monitoring and maintenance protocol, assuring that environmental impacts fall within designated parameters and user experiences are maintained. Sustainability assessment protocols and examples are discussed in Chapter 6. Presented here are assessment characteristics related specifically to the trail experience; common environmental impacts associated with user experience are highlighted.

### STEP 1: Assess trails for environmental sustainability

- 3-tiered rating system: Sustainable, Maintainable, Unsustainable/Unmaintainable
- Define limits of acceptable change
- What level/type of trail change triggers management actions?

### STEP 2: Evaluate the range of opportunities (from Experience Evaluations)

#### What's there, what's missing, what's needed?

- Define what existing experiences are provided and where they are within the current system
- Identify where gaps can be filled, whether with new routes or retrofitting existing trails
- Think about experience zones and/or specific trails to provide targeted experiences

### STEP 3: Retrofit system

- Spatial arrangement should follow skills and experiences desired
- Create loops and connections, eliminate redundancy
- Prioritize areas for maintenance, reroutes, and reclamation based upon sustainability and user experience goals



## Chapter 6

# Sustainable Experiences

Over the past several decades, the concept of sustainable trails has gathered support from land managers and trail users alike. The reasons for this are both valid and obvious: poorly built and maintained trails are expensive to manage, can result in environmental damage, and are wildly inconsistent in the experience they provide for users.

There has also been an understandable backlash against the concept of sustainable trails by mountain biking enthusiasts who think minimizing the environmental impact of a trail means “dumbing it down” by removing any challenging elements. While this is not an inherent condition of a sustainable trail, it is true that a historically narrow understanding of sustainability has led to a homogenization of trail standards.

Fortunately, progressive land managers and mountain bike trail builders understand that the principles of an environmentally sustainable trail, such as erosion control and minimization of potential resource impacts, do not intrinsically mandate a flat, smooth trail. They also appreciate that a sustainable trail engenders a full range of sustainability tenets, not just resource protection. Indeed, if a trail minimizes erosion but does not meet the desires of the users, it cannot be deemed a truly sustainable trail.

One significant goal of this book is to help the trails community better understand the factors that comprise sustainable trails. By establishing a common language for communicating a variety of needs that encompass trail user objectives, experiences, and benefits as outlined in this guide, the three primary components of sustainability—environmental, social, and economic—can be considered and balanced to achieve a broader definition of durable, engaging trails that last for generations.



Even if a trail is properly designed to provide a desired user outcome by minimizing resource protection, it can still fail to be socially sustainable. If the location of the trail is unsupportable from a political or social standpoint, the long-term sustainability can be called into question as a case of “right trail, wrong place.”

For example, a trail could be developed that has negligible resource impact and focuses on the identified objective of exercise. But if the trail was developed deep in the backcountry where it’s only accessible by a limited number of people, it will have missed the mark for social sustainability. As most people live in urban areas, it would have been better to develop the trail closer to a population center.

The converse is also true, with many people desiring to escape the hustle and bustle of urban life with a close-to-home trail outing. While this may be an identified desire, it is difficult to achieve the objectives of escape or solitude when you can hear traffic, see buildings, or encounter other trail users every few minutes. The desired outcomes need to be moderated based on the characteristics of the site and those who will be using it.

Like other groups, mountain bikers are not monolithic in their desires, and the sport continues to evolve and stratify. Different bike cultures, influenced by topography, weather, the bike industry, and innumerable other factors, populate different parts of the U.S. In some areas, racing is a critical component of the local scene; in others, pushing the boundaries of technical riding drives the community. Using the network of trail stakeholders to identify the dominant culture of a specific area will foster the development of proper trail user objectives, ultimately leading to establishing the right trail in the right place.

Finally, the preservation of cultural and archeological artifacts is also a component of social sustainability. The determination of whether evidence of previous human presence has value is purely a social construct; it has no inherent value other than that which we assign to it, yet consideration of cultural impact is paramount. The NEPA process outlines steps for assessment and protection of cultural resources during the trail planning and development process, and is typically guided by the input of a resource specialist as outlined in Chapter 5.

## The Three Components of Trail Sustainability

### **Environmental Sustainability**

When considering what will or will not define a trail as sustainable, a primary question to be answered is, “Will the trail provide resource protection?” The mountain bike trails community has become well versed in the tenets of environmentally sustainable trail development, and implicitly understands that recreation access is threatened when trails cause erosion, harm sensitive plant and animal species, or promote the spread of invasive species.

When proposing new or modified trails, the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process identifies potential impacts that are weighed against the benefits that the trail will otherwise provide. As described in Chapter 5, an iterative approach is used, beginning with geographic information system (GIS) data for identifying physiographic regions and site topography for high-level zone planning that aligns with trail user objectives and desired difficulty levels. Extensive natural resource GIS data, which includes information such as soil type, elevation, slope, ground cover, and hydrology, is then applied to conceptual planning. Spatial data informs on-the-ground flagging for routes and features, site-specific soil testing, construction-level markings, and, finally, any construction issues that hinge on environmental conditions at the micro level including individual trees, rocks, water crossings, and other terrain features.

IMBA has published several books on the topic of environmentally sustainable trails, including *Trail Solutions: IMBA’s Guide to Building Sweet Singletrack* and *Managing Mountain Biking: IMBA’s Guide to Providing Great Riding*. These resources and others provide a wealth of applicable knowledge and should be consulted regularly throughout the planning process to ensure that the proposed trail creates the least amount of environmental resource impact possible.

### **Social Sustainability**

The most overlooked aspect of the trail development process is social sustainability, and a primary goal of the GQTE is to elevate awareness and consideration of this component. Each trail user seeks a specific experience, and while this seems simple enough to achieve, the complicated reality is that various types of users may be seeking dramatically different experiences on the same trail on the same day, and some users may have varying expectations of the trail itself depending upon their unique recreational objectives on any given day. Failure to consider or provide for a wide range of desired user outcomes (experiences and associated benefits) is easily evidenced by overcrowded trails, trails with little use, trail users who feel “pushed out” by other users, and the creation of unauthorized routes.



### ***Economic Sustainability***

Applying financial resources to a problem can be a short-term solution for many situations, and trails are no different. A trail that provides a valuable user experience but causes damage to the natural resources can likely be mitigated through increased maintenance, but at what cost?

It can be difficult to evaluate whether a trail deserves extraordinary investment to create or maintain it. In some cases, the lack of available land or the desire to provide a unique experience may warrant any additional costs that are incurred. Typically, though, budget constraints dictate that resources be spread evenly across the available infrastructure.

Economic consideration must include the potential for users to create their own opportunities and incur unmitigated impacts if their recreational desires or expectations are not being met. For instance, a trail will always form to a viewpoint, even if it is steep and prone to erosion, so it would be beneficial to consider this factor and invest in creating an accommodating, sustainable route at the outset.

Another example is the unauthorized creation of technically challenging mountain bike trails. If a trail system lacks the desired range of riding opportunities, the user community will create an unsustainable management situation, causing resources to be diverted to closing trails even while new, unauthorized trails emerge in different locations. Such a scenario can be avoided by assessing the existing trail network at the outset using the GQTE process, and engaging the riding community to determine experience gaps. Solutions can then be presented and implemented that meet all three components of sustainability.

### **Moving Forward**

Across the country, each trail has a unique combination of soil, topography, vegetation, and climate. The need for updated trail design, planning, construction, and management tools is also driven by the regional diversity that exists among rider culture, visitor use levels, landownership, and agency policies.

The principles outlined in this guide will help the land manager, the trail builder, and the trail advocate understand the desired outcomes that a rider would like to see accommodated, and establish a process for effectively delivering those outcomes while also maintaining environmental integrity.

The information provided in this guide is intended to provide advice and direction for those involved in trail development, and can help facilitate conversation among BLM staff as well as with contractors, volunteers, and the public at large. These guidelines will exist as both a physical book and an online document that can be referenced during all phases of trail planning, design, construction, and maintenance.

*Moab Trail System*  
Moab, Utah





# Appendix

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Additional planning resources are available via an electronic appendix at the following link.

<http://gqte.imba.com>

