

Trouble in Paradise: Kingdom Trails Just Got Smaller for Mountain Bikers

Three landowners have revoked bike access in the heart of one of the country's most popular trail systems.

By [Jessica Coulon](#) Jan 27, 2020



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This story has been updated to reflect new information.

On December 16, the Kingdom Trails Association (KTA)—the

organization that oversees one of the biggest trail systems in the northeast U.S.—announced that three landowners had revoked bike access on the trails that run through their respective properties. These trails are situated in the heart of the system, known as Darling Hill, and are some of the most popular and beginner-friendly trails there.

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The news comes as a blow to both the local mountain biking community in Vermont and those who were ever lucky enough to ride the trails that will now be off-limits to riders for the unforeseen future.

The Kingdom Trails, located in East Burke, Vermont, boasts over 100 trails and was founded [25 years ago](#) through the hard work and collaboration between local trail builders and more than 50 private property owners. Since then, the down-and-out ski town has been transformed into one of the best mountain biking destinations in the country.

Today, the trail system has grown to such magnitude in large part thanks to 97 landowners who allow for the creation, maintenance, and public use of those trails on their private property.

It's unclear exactly how many miles of the multi-use trails will be affected (though property records have given the mountain

bike community a [rough idea](#)). The ban pertains solely to mountain biking, too. Other trail users, like hikers and horseback riders, may continue to use the trails on those three properties.

"We fully respect their decision, as it is their private property and they have the sole right to determine the use of their land," the KTA said [in a statement](#). "We are beyond grateful to each of them for allowing Kingdom Trails access over the past 25 years and continuing to allow Nordic skiing, snowshoeing, hiking, jogging, and horseback riding."

The question, inevitably, on everyone's mind now is, why? The KTA [did not disclose the landowners' reasons](#) for revoking bike access. The association did acknowledge that the mountain biking destination's growth in popularity in recent years—perhaps last year in particular—has placed regrettable pressure on the small and (once) peaceful Vermont community.

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According to the [The North Star Monthly](#), the Kingdom Trails saw close to a 50 percent increase in mountain bikers from 2016 to 2018, with over 137,000 visiting in 2018. Eighty-four percent of visitors came from out of state, too.

"Kingdom Trails understands the concerns for the pressure

and stress the continued strong growth in trail use and area visits has put on landowner's properties as well as the roads and small villages where trail access exists. While the success of the trails has brought meaningful economic benefit to the area, challenges and tension points exist around traffic, congestion and pedestrian safety of residents and visitors alike," stated the KTA.

The association went on to describe its goals for managing heavier traffic in a way that will benefit both locals and visitors in that area, including installing a bike lane on East Darling Hill Road and expanding connector trails to deter mountain bikers from riding on main roads.

The KTA then [released an update](#) on January 23 that further outlined its plans for addressing these problems. The statement also served as an apology to the community, acknowledging that it has "been slow to respond to issues and concerns."

"It is clear that we have insufficiently managed the exceptional growth of Kingdom Trails, which has placed undue stress and impacts on our community," the KTA stated in its update. "We, like many others, have been caught up in the trail network's economic successes but have missed the unintended consequences and negative outcomes that growth brings."

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The KTA also [announced](#), alongside the New England Mountain Bike Association (NEMBA), that it won't play host to NEMBAfest this year—a popular three-day mountain biking festival held every year in New England since 1997. The festival has been held at Kingdom Trails every year since 2012—in 2017, it drew a record-breaking [7,100 attendants](#). (NEMBAfest has been postponed until 2021 as it secures a new location.)

Another key part of the plan is to create a Landowner Committee, to give landowners an official platform for their feedback.

Lastly, the KTA will focus more heavily on enforcing and educating trail users on proper trail etiquette. This will be done by expanding its trail user policy and creating a new code of conduct that users must acknowledge through their waiver. You should also expect to see more trail ambassadors out on the trails enforcing these rules.

"We have not done enough to educate trail users," the KTA stated. "Nothing undermines goodwill and a culture of sharing more quickly and effectively than a dishonoring of common values in how we treat one another."

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Ultimately, this is a huge disappointment for the local and greater mountain biking community. There are concerns about its impact on the local economy of East Burke, too. Despite this, the Kingdom Trails will retain much of what makes it such a beloved [mountain biking destination](#). There are still many miles of trails to be enjoyed, and there will undoubtedly be many new trails built in the future by the KTA—if the past 25 years have shown us anything.

“Kingdom Trails is much more than a network of epic trails: it is the very embodiment of community,” the KTA said.

It serves as a good reminder as well. These trails, and others, shouldn't be taken for granted. They're the result of countless hours of hard work, the generosity of others, and the often delicate co-existence of visitors and long-time residents in such communities.

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