



PATRICK STOLL

FREEWHEELING: Riders glide along the 72-mile-long Trail of the Coeur d'Alenes, whose official opening isn't until June.

ENVIRONMENT

Poisonous past

A 72-mile bike path covers northern Idaho's once-toxic mining debris.

By GUY HAND
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IDAHO will officially open the Trail of the Coeur d'Alenes, one of the longest bike paths in the country, on June 5. It is a mostly flat 72-mile-long ride across the state's northern panhandle, through spectacular forests and rivers populated by moose, bear and tundra swans.

But the asphalt-covered trail does more than attract bikers, hikers and in-line skaters. It covers contaminated mining debris strewn along the former tracks of a rail line that served one of the most productive and now most polluted silver mining regions in the world. It's a bike trail built by the Environmental Protection Agency to control toxic waste.

Supporters call the Trail of the Coeur d'Alenes an innovative approach to Superfund cleanup, a win-win situation that not only helps cap pollution with a 2½-inch layer of asphalt but will also draw tourist dollars to an area that desperately needs an economic boost. When the mines played out and the trains stopped running, the small towns that dot the Coeur d'Alene River basin were left with little to show for a century of mining but museums, a watershed awash in heavy metals and a label considered toxic to tourism: Superfund site.

After 20 years of often unwelcome EPA involvement, locals say the trail is the most positive evidence yet that the area is finally making

its transition from mining to recreation.

"In 2000 I probably put a thousand miles on the trail," says Joe Peak, a bicyclist who lives nearby. He started riding the trail before it was paved and still tries to chalk up 100 miles a week. "It's very easy riding and absolutely gorgeous. You go through tight canyons, you cross lots of bridges, you go through small towns. The tundra swans start coming in March and you can see tens of thousands of them."

It's not just the pleasure of riding that makes Peak a trail fan. As owner of a local bar and restaurant, he figures the project is adding \$100,000 a year to his business, even before the trail's official opening. "On weekends, we can attribute 60% to 70% of our business to bike riders," he says.

Yet the trail has its critics. Several landowners believe the contaminants should have been removed from the entire railroad right of way, rather than from only a few areas.

Rog Hardy, a geologist and landowner, says the bike path cannot contain all the toxins in a wet climate like Northern Idaho's. "It's not constrained by cement gutters; there's no rain runoff gutters; it's just a hunk of asphalt sitting up there in the weather," Hardy says.

Gravel covers the sloping sides of the rail bed, but Hardy said he saw erosion on the riverbank cause a 50-yard section of the trail to slump into the water in June 2002. Despite restrictions against overnight stays on the trail, people occasionally camp and hike on the con-

taminated shore.

The rail line, built in the 1880s to serve the mines, was constructed atop mine tailings, and the unlined, uncovered rail cars that once thundered over it also spilled refined, poisonous ore along the way. At the closed mines nearby, millions of tons of lead, cadmium, zinc and arsenic waste lay in heaps or washed downstream, spreading contamination across the countryside. It killed fish and damaged the forest; area children suffered some of the highest blood lead levels ever recorded worldwide, EPA attorney Clifford Villas said. Wildlife officials occasionally find dead lead-poisoned swans along the trail, a reminder of the ongoing toxic legacy.

The EPA declared the 21-square-mile area around the Bunker Hill mine and smelter a Superfund site in 1983.

The agency acknowledges that the trail won't control all the contaminants. Because the adjacent river is polluted, the EPA concluded total containment is unnecessary so long as human contact is minimized. And most critics concede that the trail poses little danger to bikers and hikers if they heed numerous warning signs and stay on the blacktop, wash their hands and faces before eating and keep kids away from the shoreline.

As for maintenance of the trail, Union Pacific agreed to repair and maintain it forever under the cleanup agreement. In exchange, the EPA says the public gets a world-class recreational facility that's safe, scenic and free.