

Six Reasons to Save the Birch Trail for Hiking Only!

1 Lower Hixon has a history of hike-only trails: In 2015, all 10.6 miles of the Lower Hixon trails were hike-only except the new 2.3-mile Vista Trail. Over the years more trails have been made hike-bike (“shared”). The current posted map of Lower Hixon shows 7.1 miles of hike-bike and only 5.72 miles of hike-only.

2 Trail usage is higher for hikers: Despite hike-bike trails taking over, I believe that many more people hike or run on Lower Hixon trails than ride bikes. To test this belief, I made an unofficial count. On June 30, 2024, a beautiful summer Sunday, around 1:15 pm, the Lower Hixon parking lot was full (about 35 cars) and a dozen or so cars overflowed down Quarry Road, so it was a busy day. For an hour I counted people entering or exiting the four trails accessible from that lot (Vista, Miller Bluff, Hickory, Bicentennial). My results:

Hiking adults	105	Biking adults	12
Hiking children	19	Biking children	0

Perhaps before removing hike-only status from any more trails, the city should do a census of trail users. *It’s more important to serve the people who actually use the trails than those who give opinions about how the trails should be used.*

- 3 “Reducing misunderstanding and conflict”:** This is one of ORA’s reasons for allowing bikes on the Birch Trail. I don’t know if this means that bikers don’t understand that the Birch Trail is hike-only or hikers don’t understand that trails leading to the Birch Trail are hike-bike. Either way, clearer signs would help, and I will be making a few suggestions to the Parks Department regarding signage.
- 4 “...would create an excellent opportunity for a short and easy shared-use trail experience that takes users into the forest and past wonderful vistas”:** This is another reason ORA gives for making the Birch Trail hike-bike. I would counter that there are already “short and easy” biking possibilities in Upper Hixon, which has 3.7 miles of “easy” trails besides the pump track. The nearby Gateway Trails have another almost 2 miles of “easy” trails.
- 5 Hikers and bikers have different mindsets:** Take a look at a map of the Lower Hixon and Upper Hixon trail systems. Notice that the Lower Hixon trails originally meant for hiking are long and far apart and feature especially beautiful viewpoints and prairies. This is because hikers generally like relaxing and taking in nature. Now notice that the Upper Hixon trails, built especially to attract mountain bikers, are close together and have lots of twists, turns, and switchbacks. This is because bikers like the excitement of speed and the challenge of quick changes of direction. Neither of these mindsets is wrong; they’re just different and don’t coexist well on narrow (one person wide) trails like the Birch Trail.
- 6 ORA’s Adventure Team program could try a hike!** An important reason for making the Birch Trail hike-bike seems to be that the Birch Trail would give ORA’s Adventure Team an additional place to practice. As stated above, they already have miles of Upper Hixon and Gateway trails to use. Instead of taking over one more piece of hike-only trail, I challenge the Adventure Team participants to try hiking instead of biking for one day! A slow hike on the loop made by the Birch Trail and parts of the Bicentennial and Vista trails with stops at Zoerb and Birch Point viewpoints would be much preferable to a speedy bike trip on the same loop.

One-Mile Loop Including the Birch Trail 
The dotted part is the Birch Trail 

