

## On Your Bike



A cuppa on the Rimutakas. Big Coast participants in 1992, Brent Anderson from Wellington with daughter Donae and her friend Emily Barrett.

Mountain bikes are the toys of the 90s. All wide wheels and shiny paint work, they're designed for off-road use but are seldom taken further than the local shopping centre.

Considering the rate at which mountain bikes sell — four of every five bikes sold in the past year, the hills should be alive with the sound of muddy derailleurs. But according to the Hillary Commission, a large proportion of mountain bike owners share a reluctance to take their new machines into the territory for which they were designed.

To the commission, that's a real pity — an opportunity to share in a more healthy lifestyle is passing us by. Which is why the commission is so keen on the concept of The Big Coast, where urban cyclists are being invited to pause and smell the mountain's roses in a noncompetitive atmosphere.

The Big Coast is a cunning plan to get thousands of New Zealand mountain bike owners off the roads and into the hills, courtesy of a series of two-day, cross-country cycling excursions dreamed up by Wellington outdoors man and tourism consultant Dave Bamford — who also organises the annual Lifespan Mountains to Sea three-day multi-sports race.

The first Big Coast event was held around the hills of Wellington in mid-April 1992. Although 450 cyclists registered, only 300 were able to make the trip after the windy southerlies so typical of the year in Wellington had the event postponed for a week.

More than 90km of grass and rubble were covered by riders aged between 11 and 66 as they followed the historic Rimutaka Incline railway route over the Rimutaka Range and into the Wairarapa, stopping for several cups of tea on the way. One four-year-old did the entire traverse on the back of his father's cycle.

By the fringe of Lake Pounui — a privately owned stretch of water — the riders spent one night recovering, eating, singing and staring into the flames of a giant bonfire constructed by the local farmer.

On the second day, the mountain bikers rounded Cape Palliser and trailed the coast into Wellington Harbour, finishing the tour with another cup of tea, a muffin and a ferry ride across the water and back to the city.

A formal survey of participants was carried out and 90 per cent of respondents said they were coming back in 1993, and they were bringing their friends. Dave

Bamford was rapt. "The event will now market itself," he said. "So far we've got about 300 sales reps working nationwide."

What was so good about it? Most praised the fact that it wasn't a race — apparently that's a rare thing in the world of mountain biking events.

After a train ride from central Wellington, participants in The Big Coast departed from Upper Hutt at any time between 10am and midday, arriving at the evening camp site whenever they felt like it — or could manage. There were no prizes and no losers.

Participants tended to be non-traditional outdoors people. Most were pure urban types bleached white by fluorescent lights. Several had purchased their first mountain bike during the week preceding the event. As one rider said on completing the course, "The word 'incline' almost put me off. It meant I was going to have to ride up a hill. But my kids forced me to come. They won't have to do that next year."

The 1993 Wellington Big Coast will be held during the last weekend of February (27 and 28), and the inaugural Auckland Big Coast will circumnavigate Waiheke Island in the second weekend of March (13th and 14th). Over the next few years, Big Coasts will appear in several other major centres — with Christchurch tipped for 1994.

All events will include boat and train rides, or both. And all will feature the traverse of land not normally open for mountain biking. "We spend a great deal of time finding the route," says Bamford, "but almost as much time talking with land owners and local iwi to gain access for the hundreds of people we plan to accommodate. If we make sure each ride includes terrain that cyclists couldn't normally reach, then we're going to offer events that have immediate appeal.

"This is a real growth area," he predicts. "In the next few years, noncompetitive events geared for mass participation are going to gain a very high profile. We are expecting up to 1000 people at each event in each region within the next few years."

It's been dubbed "achievement cycling" and is a fad that's catching. In Australia, Bicycle Victoria — the cyclist's equivalent of Australia's Automobile Association — organises annual long-distance rides attracting up to 4000 participants. Almost 800 Australian and New Zealand cyclists also toured the South Island *en masse* for 10 days early in 1992.

Portable toilets and showers, dedicated radio stations and mobile catering services make the events as much an orgy of picnics, tent cities, sealed roads and cycle romances as a challenging ride.

As the Big Coast's advertising blurb says, if you want to be there, you'd better get on your bike. The hills — and the mud — beckon you.

Rob Greenaway □



A camp site minstrel serenades 300 tired Big Coast bike riders.