

ORV – Social & Management Issues

ORV riding, particularly ATVs, have been cited as an increasing social problem related to conflicts with other outdoor visitors. Off-road vehicles can have a substantial impact on the experience of other non-motorized visitors on trails that are shared or even on adjacent forest or park settings. The intrusion of engine noises disrupts the natural quiet and solitude that many visitors are seeking in protected areas (Webb & Wilshire 1983). Visitor safety can be threatened by the fast-moving machines along woodland trails due to their limited visibility from changing topography and thick vegetation. Deep ruts and muddiness caused by knobby ORV tires degrades trails, making them difficult and unsafe for use by non-motorized visitors. Experience has shown that these combined effects frequently drive away and displace hikers, horseback riders, mountain bikers, hunters, and fishermen (Badaracco 1976; Hope 2004).

Visitor surveys reveal that conflicts from ORV users are typically “one-way,” causing noise and motorized intrusion impacts to all non-motorized visitors, which in turn, present no impacts that threaten motorized uses (Kockelman 1983). Social scientists attribute the conflict to goal interference, with non-motorized visitors desiring experiences emphasizing learning/discovery, escape from personal or social pressures, introspection and scenery, and ORV users desiring action/excitement and social contact with others (Noe, Wellman & Buhyoff 1982). The one-way nature of the conflict is indicated in the proportions of each group viewing noise and tire tracks as problems; for ORV users the figures were 3% and 10%, while for non-motorized visitors the figures were 33% and 46%.

Finally, managers from both federal and state land management agencies have experienced significant problems controlling ORV access, particularly for ATVs. New York State Department of Environmental Conservation staff describe ATV use as “out of control” in many areas of the Adirondacks, including substantial trespass and careless use on both public and private lands (Association for the Protection of the Adirondacks, 2004, <http://www.protectadks.org/atv.html>). Further, Forest Rangers report that catching an illegal ATV user is difficult due to insufficient staffing. In Ohio’s Wayne National Forest agency staff built a 118-mile trail system for ORV riders but despite regulations restricting riding to designated routes, steel gates, and signs, illegal traffic onto non-motorized trails and the pioneering of new trails are widespread. Signs are shot or pulled down, along with the gates, and rock barriers and ditches have failed to contain ATV use on designated routes.

Similarly, Forest Service officials in Missouri’s Mark Twain National Forest acknowledge that illegal off-road trail use is uncontrollable: “Field surveys indicated that ATVers are not hesitating to leave the trail in order to go around trees or other objects that block the trail. Signs and tree trunks blocking these trails have a 24-hour half-life. The efforts to keep up a plastic ‘trail closed’ sign are futile as I have replaced it up to 4 times in a day. It serves more as a target for the front wheel than a deterrent” (Hallet, 2004). A survey of 60 U.S. Forest Service managers in California found that almost all (97%) reported that staff had observed or received reports of ORV use on closed roads or trails that exclude motorized vehicles (Chavez & Knap 2004). Land managers are increasingly spending a greater proportion of their limited budgets on enforcement actions (Hope 2004).

References

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