

## Shattered Solitude: Off-Road Vehicles on our Public Lands



Photo by Kirk Condyles

All across America, irresponsible and illegal off-road vehicle (ORV) use - driving all-terrain vehicles, four-wheelers, motorcycles, swamp buggies, jet-skis and snowmobiles off designated routes and into the back country - is threatening our national parks, wildlife refuges and other public lands. Off-road vehicles pollute our air and water, degrade wildlife habitat, and carve countless miles of new roads into wildlands.

More than twenty years ago, the White House Council on Environmental Quality had already recognized that: "ORVs have damaged every kind of ecosystem found in the United States... In some cases the wounds will heal naturally; in others they will not, at least for millennia." Sadly, not only do these abuses continue on our public lands today, but in many areas ORV use has increased dramatically. In addition, the machines themselves have become bigger, faster, and more destructive.

That's why the Sierra Club and other conservation groups are pressuring federal land management agencies to stop irresponsible off-road vehicle use and step up enforcement of current laws to protect the wildlands and wildlife that have been left in our care.

### ORV Impacts: Lasting and Widespread Scars on the Land, Retreating Wildlife

As off-road vehicles leave legally designated routes, they carve new "ghost roads" through sensitive habitat like forests, streams, wetlands and deserts. Illegally created routes erode and compact soil, destroy plants, degrade wildlife habitat and water quality, and spread invasive weeds.

From deer and elk to panthers and bears, wild animals are frightened by the sight, sound, and smell of off-road vehicles and will leave an area where use is occurring – sometimes permanently. ORVs harm wildlife directly, when they run over and kill or injure animals. ORVs also impact wildlife indirectly by harming habitat and food sources, polluting water and displacing animals from their homes. Erosion caused by ORV abuse can fill streams with sediment choking out popular fish species including trout and salmon and harming aquatic plants.



Yellowstone Park ranger resorts to a gas mask to protect herself from noxious fumes from snowmobiles  
Photo by Tom Murphy

ORVs also emit large amounts of pollution, including carbon monoxide, hydrocarbons, and carcinogens such as benzene. The small, inefficient two-stroke engines of some of these machines spew out as much as 30 percent of their fuel unburned – polluting the soils, air, and water of our National Forests, National Parks, and other public lands. For example, one jet-ski driven for one 8 hour period emits the same amount of pollution as a car driven for 100,000 miles.



ORVs can leave permanent scars on fragile deserts throughout the West.  
Photo Bloxam/ SUWA

### ORV Policy on Public Lands: Inadequate and Unenforced

Americans treasure our public lands as places to hike, hunt, camp, fish, and explore with their families. Unfortunately, whether it's ATVs in a desert landscape, dirt bikes carving new roads through a National Forest, a jet-ski buzzing down a quiet stretch of river, or snowmobiles in Yellowstone and Voyageurs National Park – there are fewer and fewer places where people can go to escape the roar of engines.

Currently, hundreds of thousands of miles of routes give off-road vehicles abundant access to our parks, forests, and other public lands and waters – creating an imbalance between the amount of land available to off-road vehicles and the amount of land available to non-motorized users. For example, off-road vehicles are allowed on 93% of the 264 million acres managed by the Bureau of Land Management. Although ORV users represent only a small percentage of the total number of people recreating on public lands – they are having a disproportionately large and harmful impact. Since the roar of

motors can be heard by people and wildlife miles away, these vehicles can ruin the experience for those who choose to experience the outdoors without motorized vehicles.

Federal agencies have failed to enforce laws designed to protect our wildlands and drag their feet on implementing important new regulations. Exacerbated by inadequate or no route planning as well as severe lack of monitoring by these agencies, illegal and inappropriate off-road vehicle use has continued largely unchallenged. Fortunately, agencies are coming under increasing pressure from conservationists, sporting groups, and many other Americans who want to experience natural quiet – to camp, hunt, hike and fish with their families on their national public lands free from the roar of engines and the pounding of pistons.

### ORVs and Our Public Lands: Towards a Balanced Policy



*Photo by PhotoDisc*

The majority of Americans want off-road vehicle use regulated and reined-in. A 1999 poll done by the Mellman Group showed that 67 percent of respondents want ORVs prohibited in the undeveloped “roadless” areas of our National Forests. To protect the wildlife and wildlands that make America beautiful, Sierra Club members are drawing attention to the damage from motorized recreation and encouraging federal land management agencies to enforce the law and stop irresponsible off-road vehicle use. Sierra Club supports a policy that will:

- Protect our wildlands and wildlife;
- Protect all fragile areas, wildlife habitat, native vegetation and archeological sites from off-road vehicle damage;
- Allow off-road vehicle use only on designated roads and routes;
- Assume all wild areas are closed unless posted open for off-road vehicles; and
- Ensure agencies fully fund monitoring and enforcement activities on all motorized trails.

The process to designate an area open to off-road vehicle use should include careful environmental review to ensure the health of these public lands and provide assurance that the safety and enjoyment of all users will be protected. The goal is to encourage responsible use of our public lands – use that leaves the land healthy and unspoiled, use that protects our wildlife and wildlife habitat, and use that allows for the continued enjoyment of these lands for our families, for our future.

ORVs & Our Public Lands:

TOWARDS A BALANCED POLICY

For more information, please contact us at (202) 547-1141

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A rider ignores a sign indicating that the trail he is riding on is closed to vehicles over 40 inches wide in Hyalite Canyon – one of the most popular national forest recreation areas in Montana’s Gallatin Range.