

No right way to do the wrong thing on our public lands, so ban ATVs

By GEORGE WUERTHNER

Right now various national forests and Bureau of Land Management districts are beginning to put together travel management plans. Most of these plans are focused on corralling the growing abuse of our public lands by "thrillcraft" – ATVs, dirt bikes, dune buggies, swamp buggies, Jet Skis, snowmobiles and other associated toys used by neotenus adults. Many residents are agonizing over which parts of our public domain should be designated legalized "abusement" parks, and which lands should be protected from such abuse. The underlying assumption of all these travel management plans is that some level of abuse and vandalism of our public domain by ATV owners is inevitable.

I do not accept the premise that

abuse of our lands is something that we must tolerate as inevitable. It is our land. We have a responsibility to pass these lands on to the next generation in better condition than we found them. And we have a responsibility to protect our national heritage.

The real problem isn't the machines. It's not even the people. Many otherwise decent people ride ATVs, but when they straddle one of these machines they become participants in a culture that sees our public land as nothing more than a giant sandbox. This culture represents a lack of respect for other people's property and the quality of their outdoor experience. What people do on their own property is not my concern, but when they ride their machines on public lands it becomes a societal issue. Our public lands are as close as our society has to shared

"sacred" ground.

The operation of any thrillcraft has a disproportional impact upon the landscape, wildlife and other people. They pollute the air and water. They compact soils. They damage wetlands and riparian areas. They spread weeds. They displace wildlife. The noise, speed and general disregard for other people by owners displace other non-motorized users of our public lands. Increasingly they threaten archeological treasures. How this be considered "responsible" use?

You hear a lot about "responsible" ORV use and "a few bad apples" from promoters themselves, as well as some government bureaucrats. But these are misleading terms to say the least. What is responsible about tearing up the land? It's like suggesting we ought to promote "responsible child abuse." There is no level of abuse that is acceptable.

Working with agencies to create designated routes or play areas is just helping to legalize public vandalism. There is no way to use these machines in a responsible manner except to leave them in a driveway.

It's ironic we would arrest someone for spray painting a Forest Service sign – a human-made artifact that is easily repaired – but we assume it is perfectly legal for someone to tear up miles of land for fun – land that may take decades to heal if at all – with no consequences?

Most people would never allow ATVs to run across their lawns. They would not tolerate such noise in their neighborhoods. They would accept being run off their sidewalks and pathways in their towns by motorized hoodlums. Would we allow thrillcraft to do wheelies in the Arlington National Cemetery? I think not. Why permit similar antics on public lands?

To those who think we have to accept ATV use because they are "traditional" activities, I remind them that the same arguments were once made about segregation, smoking in public places and many other cultural "traditions" once commonplace.

There is no right way to do the wrong thing. Running thrillcraft on our public lands is wrong. It's not good for the land. It's not good for the air and water. It's not good for wildlife. It's not good for other people. It's not even good for the people doing it. It's time to ban these machines, not legitimize the continued destruction of our sacred public commons.

George Wuerthner is the author/editor of 34 books, including "Thrillcraft: The Environmental Consequences of Motorized Recreation."

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