

ENVIRONMENT-U.S.:

Dunes at the Centre of All-Terrain Battle

Haider Rizvi * - Tierramérica

NEW YORK, Sep 15 (IPS) - Despite strong objections from environmental groups, the U.S. government wants to allow off-road vehicles in protected areas of sand dunes in the southern California desert.

The George W. Bush administration "is making decisions that are politically motivated," said Daniel Patterson, an ecologist at the Centre for Biological Diversity, an independent group based in the western state of California. "They don't care about science," but rather the interests of the all-terrain vehicle (ATV) lobby, he told Tierramérica.

According to the Centre, every year up to one million off-road vehicles, including dune buggies, motorcycles, jeeps, and monster trucks, cause great damage to the dune ecosystems and kill fragile plants and animals.

The U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) released a plan last year that considered removing the conservation areas, but it was struck down earlier this year by a federal judge in San Francisco.

The BLM is likely try to issue "a new plan to try the same thing that was already ruled illegal," says Patterson.

Currently, U.S. conservation laws cover about half of the Algodones dunes, in the California desert.

Stretching some 65 kilometres northwards from the U.S.-Mexican border, the Algodones dunes are also home to rare species, such as several types of scarab beetle, and the rare Peirson's milkvetch (*Astragalus magdalenae* var. *Peirsonii*), endemic to that desert ecosystem.

Due to extreme dryness and temperature swings, and their constantly shifting sands, these dunes represent a unique habitat type in the desert, according to ecologists who have studied the area's biodiversity.

During rains, the dunes act as a natural dam to block the flow of water, resulting in uniquely formed pools that support various habitats.

The BLM, which administers millions of hectares of public lands across the United States, acknowledges that it is bound to protect the Algonodes dunes. However, its officials indicate the area may be opened for recreation in the future.

"We are currently waiting for a decision based on a biological opinion from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service," Steven Razo, a spokesman for the BLM in California, told Tierramérica. If that happens, he said, the area will be reopened.

Razo said currently there is no limit on the number of ATVs allowed in the area, but if more dunes are opened up in the future, the Bureau might enact a limit, and that there would be continuous of monitoring of their effects on the environment.

Environmental groups have accused the officials of deliberate attempts to avoid a scientific approach in determining the conditions needed for the survival of rare species.

"The designation of critical habitat imposes burdensome requirements on federal agencies and landowners," Julie MacDonald, deputy assistant secretary for the Fish and Wildlife Service told a U.S. Senate hearing last month.

MacDonald said the government is committed to conservation with "all the means available to us," but added that continuous litigation by environmental groups is crippling the government's ability to put species on the endangered list.

Environmentalists have accused her of ignoring science and the public interest by removing "all balanced conservation

measures" at the dunes. "She is a Bush administration political appointee who has joined the off-road vehicle lobby-sponsored junket," Patterson told Tierramérica.

In addition to being a rich source of biodiversity, the Algodones dunes are considered sacred sites by the U.S. native Quenchan tribe, who have lived there for thousands of years and do not want the dunes to be used for recreation.

Environmental groups say ATVs are often equipped with special tires that cut deep into the sand, directly killing animals and destroying their habitat. Since 80 percent of desert fauna spend daytime hours underground, many animals are subsequently crushed or maimed by the vehicles.

Surveys comparing dunes where off-road vehicles are used with untouched areas indicate that the ATVs cause drastic reduction in beetle species and pose serious threats to the survival of many other rare species that depend on the plants for food.

Until 2000, ATVs were using 85 percent of the 65,000 hectares of the dunes, but now the activity is confined to some 20,000 hectares as a result of a lawsuit filed by the Centre and other environmental groups.

Some activists say that since the off-road lobby was never happy with the compromise reached between the government and environmental groups six years ago, it continues to put pressure on the federal authorities to open more dunes for recreation.

In July 2004, the Centre and other groups presented the federal authorities with a petition for the legal protection of 17 insect species living in the dune habitat. Experts say these insects are adapted to the hot, arid environment and often exhibit habitat specialisation, such as dependence on a particular host plant.

But the Fish and Wildlife service has so far recognised only five insects as potentially threatened by extinction.

Environmentalists fear that if these species are not protected now, they will soon be wiped out by the off-road recreation industry.

"Our petition presents good scientific evidence," said Patterson. "The Endangered Species Act works, and it's the law. But this administration won't follow up."

Describing the government's response as "irresponsible," activists say they will have no option but to take the authorities to the court again.

"The Bush administration has created a weird and awkward paradigm in which scientific decisions are made by politicians and the courts have to make decisions based on science," says Karen Schambach, director of Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility, an independent advocacy group.

*(*Haider Rizvi is an IPS correspondent. Originally published Sep. 9 by Latin American newspapers that are part of the Tierramérica network. Tierramérica is a specialised news service produced by IPS with the backing of the United Nations Development Programme and the United Nations Environment Programme.)*

(END/2006)