

Just a Few Bad Apples: Research Shows Many Off-Roaders Break the Law

Editor's Note: Bibliography Notes typically covers the ecological effects of roads or ORVs by reviewing scientific literature. However, assumptions about social behavior also influence the debate around the management of off-road vehicle use on public lands. This edition of Bibliography Notes explores one important social science issue that has been studied by researchers.

Introduction

The ecological impacts of off-road vehicles on water, air and land have been well documented. In the past five to ten years, however, these issues have taken on social dimensions, and social scientists have begun exploring the attitudes and behaviors of off-road vehicle drivers.

Countless newspaper articles are peppered with myths perpetuated by off-roaders, such as: “elite environmentalists are locking the public out of public lands;” “the old and infirm need vehicles to explore the forest;” “if you give folks a place to ride their ATVs, they won’t break the rules;” and “it’s just a few bad apples riding where they’re not supposed to and causing damage.”

This article examines important social science research that debunks the “few bad apples” myth. Analysis includes a review of three state-level surveys revealing that a majority of off-roaders break the law. These studies point to the failure of this myth and show a pronounced preference and practice among off-road vehicle recreationists to travel cross-country and ride off of legal routes.

Montana

In 2006, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks received survey responses from 446 owners of registered off-road vehicles. Among the full sample of respondents, 23% “always or sometimes” ride cross-country even though off-route riding is against the rules in Montana and has been since 2001. Over 28% “sometimes or never” avoid riparian areas and wetlands, in violation of rules for federal and state public lands in Montana.

Sixty-four percent of those surveyed have used an off-road vehicle while hunting. The majority of this hunting subset admits to riding cross-country — over 58% have traveled off of legal routes to retrieve downed game.

Colorado

A 2001 Colorado study cited the state of Montana’s off-road vehicle public education program as a model to emulate. According to the Colorado study, Montana’s “On the Right Trail” program “provided a list of key behavioral traits that define an ‘ethical hunter’ — with several of these related to proper OHV use.” However, as discussed above, the more recent Montana study revealed a significant disregard for the rules among many off-road vehicle riders, pointing to the ineffectiveness of the state’s education program. This supports the key conclusion of the Colorado study: “information and education per se – will not result in substantial behavioral change” (emphases in original).

Monaghan and Associates, a marketing research firm, conducted the 2001 study at the behest of the Colorado Coalition for Responsible OHV Riding, a coalition of off-road vehicle representatives, environmentalists and public officials. Researchers surveyed Colorado off-road vehicle riders through a series of three focus groups.

Monaghan and Associates found that the majority of off-roaders understand that staying on designated routes is “fundamental trail etiquette” and that going off trail is not “correct” off-road vehicle behavior. The survey revealed, however, that regardless of this knowledge “as many as two-thirds of adult users go off the trail occasionally.” A significant percentage of riders, 15-20%, admitted to frequently breaking the rules and riding off of legal routes often. Survey participants also stated that “others” ride off-route and cause most of the damage.

Utah

In a separate study, the Utah Division of Parks & Recreation commissioned Utah State University to survey riders to determine their “OHV uses and owner preferences.” The university conducted a telephone survey of 335 riders from a random sample of the 50,676 people who registered off-road vehicles with the state in 2000.

The Utah report reveals that a high percentage of riders prefer to ride “off established trails” and did so on their last outing. Of the ATV riders surveyed, 49.4% prefer to ride off established trails, while 39% did so on their most recent excursion. Of the dirt bike riders surveyed, 38.1% prefer to ride off established trails, while 50% rode off established trails on their most recent excursion.

When surveyed on issues affecting off-road vehicle use in Utah, survey respondents recognized the need for enforcement but not the need for protecting the natural resources where they ride. This questions the assumption that off-road vehicle riders will stay on-route if educated that cross-country travel is illegal or damaging. One-third of the respondents said there should be more law enforcement presence in OHV areas. Only 6% cited “resource management conservation” as the most important issue affecting off-road vehicle use in Utah.

Nevada

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service found a near universal disregard for motorized guidelines when the BLM experimented with a “voluntary off-road vehicle route system” in Nevada. The area in question serves as a refuge for the disappearing Sand Mountain Blue butterfly, a species proposed for listing under the Endangered Species Act. A 2006 monitoring report compiled over a three-year period found that “98 percent of all existing routes continued to be used and new routes were created, indicating an ongoing expansion of habitat degradation.” The study also found that half of the places where riders violated guidelines were near signs that discouraged them from proceeding into sensitive butterfly habitat. The cumulative impacts of such “noncompliance points” were four-fold as each discouraged route experienced multiple incursions.

Conclusion

One can assume that many folks will not tell the truth when asked if they participated in a behavior known to be illegal or generally perceived to be in conflict with social norms. This tendency is known as the “social desirability bias” and defined as under-reporting undesirable attributes and/or over-reporting desirable attributes due to the tendency to present oneself in a favorable light

(Groves et. al. 2004). Therefore, the percentage of off-roaders who violate the rules is likely even higher than revealed in the survey results discussed above.

Many public land managers assume that designating additional off-road vehicle routes will lead directly to greater compliance, less cross-country travel and, as a result, less resource damage and fewer conflicts among incompatible uses. Some believe that off-road vehicle riders will quit creating renegade routes once more routes are designated “open” and riders are educated as to where they are and are not allowed to ride.

In contrast, the research above shatters the myth that damage and conflicts are being caused by an insignificant percentage of off-road vehicle riders. The findings of these studies suggest that even if the “demand” for more off-road vehicle riding opportunities is met, riders will continue to fulfill their preferences by riding off legal routes. They also conclude or at least strongly suggest that education and information alone are not effective strategies for changing off-road behavior.

Instead, Monaghan and Associates offers the following recommendation: “In order to be successful and actually influence behavior, OHV users must be motivated to behave properly.”

While more social science research is needed to determine what will motivate users to behave properly, anecdotal research (Archie et al. 2007) argues most strongly for increasing enforcement, and especially increasing the consequences for breaking the law, through mechanisms like vehicle confiscations, increased fines, and closing areas to all motorized users when motorized trespass occurs.

References

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Nevada Fish and Wildlife Office, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2007. 12-Month Finding on a Petition to List the Sand Mountain Blue Butterfly (*Euphilotes pallescens* ssp. *arenamontana*) as Threatened or Endangered with Critical Habitat. Federal Register, Vol. 72, No. 84. See pages 24260-61. <http://www.wildlandscpr.org/denial-petition-list-sand-mountain-blue-butt...> [5].

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