

Off-roaders Leaving Environmentalists in the Dust

It's a zero-sum game between conservationists and four-wheelers, according to a University of Idaho academic, and one that those who favor the pristine can never win.

By: Melinda Burns

Off-roaders may be winning the battle for access to public lands, and there's not much environmentalists can do about it, according to a new study from the University of Idaho.

Because of their traditions and built-in policies, the National Park Service, U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) are inherently predisposed to favor motorized recreation, said Patrick Wilson, an associate professor of natural resource policy in the university's department of conservation social sciences.

Historically, Wilson said, the managers of public lands have focused on such uses as timber, mining and grazing. Now, he said, they're trying to accommodate an explosion in recreational use, especially by off-roaders. The agencies seek compromises because that's how American democracy resolves conflicting claims.

And they find it easier, Wilson said, to set aside specific areas for off-



Snowmobile shares the road with a bison in Yellowstone.

Courtesy of Jim Peaco

roaders than to defend "a diffuse set of indirect ecological values.

"If the foes of motorized recreational interests think they're going to see them off, they're wrong," he said. "The American system of government doesn't produce the outcomes that conservationists are asking for. Motorized recreation is going to ebb and flow, but it's here to stay. If you're interested in

scaling back the use, it's going to be a lot harder than you think."

During the 1980s and 1990s, off-road driving of jeeps, cars, motorcycles, pickups and all-terrain vehicles (ATVs) became one of the fastest-growing outdoor sports in the United States, a February 2008 Forest Service report shows. Between 1995 and 2003, the sales of off-road vehicles tripled to more



ATV enthusiast at the Algodones Dunes in California.

Courtesy of Bureau of Land Management

than 1 million per year. Today, there are believed to be nearly 10 million such vehicles in the U.S. Nearly one in five Americans over the age of 16 has ridden one in the past year.

While off-road use on national forest lands has increased sevenfold during the past 30 years, Kathleen Mick, the program manager for motorized recreation in California's national forests, disputes Wilson's contention that off-roaders are getting the upper hand. The Forest Service, she said, now regards "unmanaged" recreation — such as off-roaders carving "doughnuts" in fragile meadows — as one of the four greatest threats to the health of the nation's forests and grasslands (along with fire, invasive species and the loss of open space).

Presently, 11 out of 18 forests in California allow off-roaders to travel cross-country, away from designated roads and trails. Under a federal order, though, most California forests have until late this year to draw up maps showing

off-roaders where they can and can't go. The rest of the nation's forests have until 2010 to finish the maps.

"There won't be vast open acres of the national forest where people can drive where they want," Mick said. "Motor vehicles will be allowed

on designated roads and trails. The federal agencies do a very delicate dance. Our mission has always boiled down to caring for the land and serving people, and we do our best to balance that."

But Wilson regards the forests' mapping effort as another win for off-roaders. He said it puts motorized recreation on a par with conservation, implicitly rejecting the premise that the primary goal should be to preserve the forest for future generations.

The story, Wilson said, is repeated at Yellowstone National Park in Wyoming, where the Park Service invested heavily during the 1950s in road expansion and winter lodging, paving the way for today's snowmobiles — and today's lawsuits.

After spending 10 years and \$10 million on environmental studies, the Park Service recently imposed a cap of 540 snowmobiles per day at Yellowstone, down from 720,



Motorcyclist stays on a designated trail in California's Mendocino National Forest

Courtesy of Bureau of Land Management



Off-roader takes his jeep off course in the Tahoe National Forest. The driver was cited for resource damage.
Courtesy of Bureau of Land Management

effective next November. The Wilderness Society, Sierra Club and other groups promptly filed suit, seeking to ban snowmobiles and allow only snowcoaches, a kind of tour bus on skis.

The International Snowmobile Manufacturers Association is trying to intervene in the case, and the State of Wyoming has sued, too, arguing that the reduced cap on snowmobiles is illegal.

“The ATV users have a lot of political clout,” Wilson said. “They make the argument that the public lands are not exclusively for ecological protection. It’s far easier for the ATVers to hold on to what they have than it is for the environmental community to overcome that.”

Jay Turner, an assistant professor of environmental studies at Wellesley College, said Wilson’s arguments are well-founded.

“He highlights for us the scale and scope and challenge that motorized

recreation interests pose,” Turner said.

“As larger-scale proposals for protecting the public land were broached by advocacy groups in the ‘80s and ‘90s and were actively considered by the Clinton administration, that made the motorized groups nervous. That’s in part why they have organized

as well and as effectively as they have.”

In 1994, President Bill Clinton signed the California Desert Protection Act, designating 71 new wilderness areas in the Mojave Desert. Wilderness areas are off-limits to motorized recreation, and some scholars point to the legislation as evidence that off-roaders may not be “winning.” Just this month, they noted, President Bush signed into law the Wild Sky Wilderness, protecting 106,000 acres in the Washington Cascades.

Peter Alagona, a Harvard Environmental Fellow and a historian of land management, and Kevin Marsh, an associate professor and a historian of public lands at Idaho State University, also said it’s an oversimplification to frame the debate in terms of off-roaders vs. environmentalists. They note that there are fishermen, hunters, mountain bikers, horse packers, hikers and backpackers who support resource protection on public lands.



A snowcoach in Yellowstone National Park.

Courtesy of Jim Peaco



Snowmobiles crowd Yellowstone's West Entrance on a Presidents Day weekend.

Courtesy of Jim Peaco

The crux of the problem with off-roaders, Marsh said, is that the agencies lack the courage and the support to enforce their own regulations.

"It's not that the rules are wrong," Marsh said. "Nobody is willing to put the resources into enforcing those rules."

The Park Service has done the best job in controlling off-roaders

because of — and not in spite of — its long tradition of managing recreation, Marsh said. "The Forest Service and the BLM are dealing with it way over their heads. The BLM has the smallest tradition of managing recreation and the biggest problem with off-road vehicles."

A case in point is the Algodones Dunes in Southern California, a spot visited by more than 100,000 off-roaders on holiday weekends.

The dunes are home to the desert tortoise and Peirson's milk-vetch, species designated by the federal government as threatened.

By order of former President Richard Nixon, 26,000 acres of the 160,000-acre dunes were closed to off-roaders in 1973. The closed area was designated as a wilderness in 1994 under the Desert Protection Act. The Center for Biological Diversity, an environmental advocacy group, sued for a larger closure, and the BLM recently banned off-roaders from an additional 49,000 acres. The ban is temporary, pending the completion of a new management plan. More than half the dune system remains open to off-roaders.

"We're predisposed to manage for multiple use," said Stephen Razo, a spokesman for the California desert district of the BLM. "We have been known to close routes. We have been known to open routes. Each side says we're always taking away.

"We feel like if everyone is mad at us, we're probably doing our job."