

DEMOLITION DERBY: NEVADA IS HOME TO SOME OF THE WORLD'S BIGGEST OFF-ROAD RACES -- WHICH RUN RIGHT OVER SOME OF ITS SMALLEST ANIMAL POPULATIONS

by AMY KINGSLEY

The road used to be a small dirt track in the middle of nowhere. Last year, something changed: A horde of off-road racers tore it open, churning loose a yellow ribbon of sand and tire tracks tearing off in the direction of Death Valley. And like any bad gash, it turned into a scar -- a 100 foot-wide rut sunk some 18 inches into the desert floor. Kicking up dust, Laura Cunningham trudged toward a plant in the center. The shrub appeared to be flourishing in its rocky home. Was it a sign of renewal?

"This is Russian Thistle. Tumble weed. It's an invasive species that colonizes disturbed land," Cunningham said.

Guess not. Cunningham and Kevin Emmerich have lived in Beatty for seven years. During that time, they've documented the environmental damage inflicted by the Vegas to Reno off-road race. They claim the race does more than dig a proverbial planting bed for invasive species. It endangers desert tortoises, Amargosa toads, bighorn sheep and wild burros.

None of that was evident during a post-race inspection of the desert, aside from the disturbed, widened road. Most of the roads used in this year's race have



The Vegas to Reno race brings hundreds of vehicles -- and lots of dust -- to Beatty. (Photos courtesy of Laura Cunningham).

already been graded -- a week-and-a-half after the last vehicle crossed the finish line 534 miles down the road in Dayton. Life seemed to be returning to normal, especially for the dozen burros hanging out 200 feet away.

"We've seen disturbance areas that were 250 feet in the widest parts," Emmerich said. "It'll recover, but it'll take a lot of time."

This year's Vegas to Reno race featured 238 cars, trucks, motorcycles and the souped-up dune buggies known as utility terrain vehicles competing to complete the 534-mile course in the shortest possible time. They started in Beatty on Aug. 20 and ended in Dayton the next day.

The cars raced through territory managed by the Bureau of Land Management and owned by the taxpayers. It also happens to be home to several protected species. Rob Mrowka, a conservation advocate for the Center for Biological Diversity, would like the agency to reconsider its support for off-road races such as Vegas to Reno and the Mint 400.

"Arguably, you could say it's a miniscule percentage of the land that's affected by these races," Mrowka said. "But I don't think it's an appropriate use for lands that belong to the American public and have a conservation use. We don't want to completely get rid

of these vehicles. Regular off-road vehicle use is a legitimate use of the land. But racing is a whole different mentality. They're there to test their skills and ability with a thrill sport, not to enjoy the land."

Most desert roads measure about 14 feet across -- just wide enough for one car. The volume of traffic, and passing-by racers, can widen them drastically, tearing up old-growth desert. Outside Beatty, vestiges of once-healthy sagebrush stood in the center of what looks like brand new desert highway.

Mrowka said he's also concerned about the impact on animals. The race course has been adjusted several times for desert tortoise and Amargosa toad. But Emmerich and Cunningham still have their criticisms. One particularly hairy stretch of course skirted a cattle ranch and several shallow ponds on the northern edge of toad territory. Dust from the race could disrupt the chemical balance, and make the wetlands uninhabitable for toads, Mrowka said.

Tom Seley, Bureau of Land Management field office manager for Tonopah, said the agency has biologists conduct pre- and post-race assessments on desert tortoise. They have never come across a single dead tortoise after the race. He admitted previous races cut through an area inhabited by Amargosa toads, but said changes in the last three years removed the race from sensitive areas.

"It started right at the edge of Amargosa toad habitat," Seley said. "And the race starts far enough away in August so the toads are pretty well staying in their wet riparian areas."

Although the race cuts through big horn and burro country, it's unlikely to imperil any of the larger animals. The noise scares them off, Emmerich said. For two or three days after the event,

they avoid their usual food and watering spots.

Casey Folks, director of Best in the Desert Racing, said his organization is serious about having racers stick to existing roads. Every driver must equip his vehicle with a GPS tracking unit and a satellite phone. An alarm sounds at race headquarters if they drift more than 40 meters off course, and someone calls to check up on the vehicle.

"Shortcuts are history, and they have been for years," Folks said. "This is not helter skelter. It's very controlled."

Folks, who has been organizing Vegas to Reno for 14 years, runs a very professional race, Seley said. The off-road enthusiast thinks the Center for Biological Diversity has another reason for lodging its environmental complaints.

"Their argument is, 'Don't do anything with it because it's public domain,'" Folks said. "But we're public citizens, and we have a right to the land, too. If I took you to the course right now, you would say, 'Where's the course?' It looks like a graded road. Best in the Desert has the best environmental record around."

Stacey Antilla left her job as a recreation planner for the BLM office in Tonopah earlier this year. After she left, she filed a complaint with Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility about poor race oversight. She objected to the agency's plan to use the same environmental assessment for five years, arguing that it needed to happen every year. Race organizers didn't do enough to restore the desert after the event, she said.

"There are places on the race course that they've never reclaimed," she said. "There are dry lake

beds where the course is so wide, you could park several semis next to each other. I'm worried about the areas that have been continuously hammered year after year and never reclaimed."

Folks said his race brings \$12 million to the state. Racers from around the world travel to Nevada for the event. The race requires 40 different permits from counties, federal agencies and the state. The BLM alone requires him to clean up all signs and trash immediately after the race. Drivers and crew members who leave tires in the desert receive harsh time penalties, Seley said. The only evidence that remains is the widened roads and dust on the sagebrush.

"Why would the complainers want to get this race banned?" Folks asked. "Ranchers and mining have the right to use this land -- why don't we have the right to use it? Why should we be stopped?"

Mrowka said he doesn't have a problem with recreational off-road vehicles, but thinks the racers, who can go as fast as 120 mph, don't belong in the public's desert. And he's trying to convince the Southern Nevada office of the BLM, which is reworking its recreation plan. But like a racer in the rugged terrain of the Mojave Desert, he's got an uphill battle ahead of him.

"The environmentalists are definitely outnumbered by the [off-road vehicle] enthusiasts," he said.

