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Opinion: Rogue Riders Spoil Forest for Rest of Us

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When I got out of the military, I immediately returned home to New Mexico, near the Jemez Mountains, in the Santa Fe National Forest. But after a few restless months, I started traveling around the West, searching for a place to settle down.

I finally realized there was no better place than the Jemez area with its perfect weather, plentiful wildlife and breathtaking views. The natural beauty and sounds of the forest were incredible.

That was 25 years ago.

Today, the weather is still great, but the elk are gone. Meadows and hillsides are rutted from off-road vehicle use. And, from every mountaintop, you hear the roar of motors.

The old logging roads that had been filling in with grass now are taken over by dirt bikes and filled with tire ruts. When the old logging roads weren't enough for the off-road riders, outlaws carved illegal trails through meadows, valleys and creeks.

When that wasn't enough, off-road enthusiasts tore down private property signs, cut people's fences and extended their illegal trails from the national forest through adjoining private lands.

The once-beautiful area that I'd known as a haven for wildlife, hunters, hikers and campers has become a zone of destructive, often-illegal off-road vehicle use.

Today's forest is filled with constant conflict.

Horseback riders fear for their safety and the safety of their horses when they try to ride in the forest on the weekends — horses naturally fear the noisy, fast-moving machines. There have been several near misses between speeding dirt bikes and horses.

Hunters watch in frustration as off-road riders chase off game and ruin hunts they have been waiting for all year.

Hikers trip and stumble down trails torn up by off-road vehicles.

These conflicts run much deeper than the familiar problems of too many people playing in the forest.

While some off-roaders are respectful, many are not. Some have threatened landowners who try to keep off-roaders off their property. Gangs of dirt bikers have even harassed volunteer groups working on Forest Service trail projects.

Something needs to be done to protect our public and private land, watersheds and wildlife from the destructive behavior of off-roaders. New Mexicans have a new opportunity to take decisive action to protect the forest they love.

Right now, Forest Service officials are drafting a travel management plan for the Santa Fe National Forest. That plan will identify certain trails that off-road vehicles can use for years to come while protecting forest trails and areas where off-road vehicles don't belong.

The stakes are high — for New Mexicans and the Santa Fe National Forest.

The travel management plan is our best opportunity to protect our forest and its resources.

We are losing clean water, functioning watersheds, healthy native vegetation, wildlife and wildlife habitat, as a direct result of the 3 to 5 percent of the public who use off-road vehicles in the forest.

We also are losing the peaceful, quiet areas where we can go to recharge from the stress of hectic city life.

We shouldn't allow this to happen. All of us who enjoy our forests need to get involved.

Talk to your legislators and local Forest Service rangers and tell them you want our special areas protected. Tell them you want a working system in place with monitoring of trails and enforcement for law-breakers. Volunteer with a local conservation group and help repair damaged areas.

We're the stewards of public land, and we're responsible for keeping it in good shape. Unfortunately, we haven't been doing a very good job.

We're losing wild places. Many animals are losing their rightful place to live as a direct result of human activity. People have to think about tomorrow, not just today.

So get involved.

Otherwise, someday all you'll have are memories of what used to be.
