
OFF-ROAD VEHICLES DIMINISH TRADITIONAL HUNTING OPPORTUNITIES

The ever increasing number of dirt bikes, all-terrain vehicles (ATVs) and other off-road vehicles and their many impacts on National Forests and Bureau of Land Management lands have reached a critical level. Uncontrolled or otherwise unregulated off-road vehicle use damages the land, threatens wildlife and adversely affects millions of people who recreate on those lands, including hunting sportsmen.

Professional wildlife managers across the country are increasingly speaking out about the negative impacts of uncontrolled ATV use on big game and critical habitat. Many warn that unless common sense limits are applied, including keeping some critical habitat vehicle-free and restricting vehicles to designated routes, quality hunting opportunities are all but certain to continue to decline. At the same time, traditional hunters are losing hunting opportunities in areas they have hunted for years as ATVs push into the most remote corners of our public lands.

Off-Road Vehicles and Roads Impact Big Game Animals:

Decades of scientific research documents the many negative impacts of roads and vehicle use on wildlife, including most large mammals. Roads and vehicles fragment critical habitat, disrupt normal behavior and have been linked to increased animal mortality.

The negative impacts of roads on elk is well established. A former Forest Service ranger explains the consequences of burgeoning cross-country off-road vehicle use: "It's simple biology and common sense. If a wildlife population is weakened by land management decisions – in this case motorized access – you'll see higher losses from everything: winter mortality, predation, accidents and disease." (Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Bugle magazine, Mar/Apr 2002)

In northern Idaho, biologists monitored three areas of equal size with roughly the same terrain and cover for the presence and density of mature bull elk. One area was heavily roaded. Although the second had approximately an equal number of roads, they were closed during hunting season. Finally, the third had no roads. The scientists found:

- In the heavily roaded area, only five percent of all bulls lived to maturity (defined as 4.5 years old).

- In the second area, 16 percent of bulls lived to maturity and there were twice as many bulls per 100 cows (20 compared to 10) as in the first area.
- In the roadless habitat, 30 percent of bulls reached maturity and there were 35 bulls per 100 cows. (Bugle magazine, Nov/Dec 2000)

U.S. Forest Service scientists studied the impacts of ATV use, hiking, horseback riding and mountain biking on mule deer and elk in Oregon beginning in 2002. In general, they conclude that ATVs and mountain bikes have greater negative impacts on elk than horseback riding or hiking. (Wisdom et al, "Effects of Off-Road Recreation on Mule Deer and Elk," 2004)

Wildlife Managers Warn Hunting Opportunities Could Decline:

Professional wildlife managers are expressing growing concern that unlimited off-road vehicle use on public lands, especially ATV use, is adversely affecting big game populations and traditional hunting opportunities.

When talking about the impacts of ATV use, Jim Unsworth, Wildlife Division Chief for the Idaho Fish and Game Department said: "It really should be no surprise to anyone that if more and more people can easily get deeper into important wildlife areas, we're going to have to compensate with shorter seasons, reduced bag limits or controlled hunts." (Spokesman-Review, "Tipping the Balance," 12/1/02)

In response to growing evidence of negative impacts on big game and complaints from hunters, the Idaho Fish and Game Commission issued new regulations in 2003 that prohibit the use of vehicles as a method of take during hunting season off of roads open to “full-sized automobiles.” This policy was expanded in 2004 and applies throughout much of the southern part of the state.

In 2004, the 69th North American Wildlife Conference, which is one of the largest gatherings of wildlife professionals in the world, included a full panel discussion about off-road vehicle use and hunting. Professor Robert Holsman of the University of Wisconsin stressed that the impacts of off-road vehicles “...real and potential, deliberate or unintentional, can no longer be ignored. While a poached deer represents a temporary and singular loss of wildlife benefits, ORV disturbance and damage can be lasting and pervasive.” (“Management opportunities and obligations for mitigating off-road vehicle impacts to wildlife and their habitats.”)

Traditional Hunters Already Losing Opportunities:

A growing number of traditional hunters no longer hunt in areas they have visited for years as off-road vehicles, particularly ATVs, push into the most remote and rugged terrain on public lands.

“An influx of ATV use in hunting is helping to destroy the ethical and cultural values of hunting, bringing the factory into the field and diminishing the love and appreciation of wildlife and wild places that come from hard work and effort.” (Dave Stallings, former Conservation Editor, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation Bugle magazine)

“The erosion of hunting quality on public lands, caused in part by ATV use, is incredible. The machines are taking hunters into places in a couple of hours where it used to take a man a long time to hike. This means those of us who choose to hunt in the traditional way, with horses or on foot, are at a disadvantage for several reasons. First of all, the elk, for example, are either scared off or shot by the time we get to them on foot. In addition, elk avoid roads and the ATVs are essentially making roads out of trails. This [condition]

is making for less security for elk, altered feeding and calving grounds, and displacement onto private lands where hunting may be prohibited.” (Greg Munther, Montana hunter and retired U.S. Forest Service biologist/land manager)

Wildlife professionals are reaching similar conclusions about displacement. A survey of hunters in Idaho, sponsored by the State, U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management, found that hunters who do not use off-road vehicles would be more likely to hunt in different areas if vehicle use was limited during hunting season. A spokesperson for Idaho Department of Fish and Game stated that this response suggests that traditional hunters “may already be hunting in less-favored areas in an effort to avoid people riding ORVs.” (Spokesman-Review, “Hunters rely more on wheels,” 12/1/02)

When describing a portion of state game lands, a Pennsylvania Wildlife Conservation Officer said: “I have talked to several people who used to hunt down here, and they won’t hunt here now because of interference from the ATVs. That’s too bad because it’s an ideal place for hunters.” (Indiana Gazette, “You Have Been Warned,” 5/18/03)

Common Sense Off-Road Vehicle Management:

As the number of dirt bikes, ATVs and other off-road vehicles soar, their use on public lands is largely unregulated. Even when some limits exist, most state and federal land management agencies do not have the resources necessary to enforce them effectively. By adopting several common sense policies, we can begin to better protect the land, air and water quality, wildlife and recreational experiences for millions of Americans. These policies include:

- Limiting off-road vehicle use to roads and routes specifically designated as open for their use. Destructive cross-country travel would be prohibited.
- Authorizing off-road vehicle use on public land only when land managers have the resources necessary to effectively enforce the rules.
- Strengthening penalties for violating regulations.