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GUEST COLUMNIST

**Off-roaders
are off base in
public parks**

Bowing to pressure from all-terrain vehicle (ATV) owners, the state director of parks and recreation recently decided to allow them to roam the back country of California's Anza-Borrego Desert State Park. Off-roaders defend this decision by invoking the "public" nature of the park, and their own "responsible" use of their ATVs. Let me offer here another "public," as well as a "personal," perspective.

It should be clear by now that national and state parks were created to serve a well-established public need for beautiful, quiet places to "get away from it all." Millions of people go to parks like Anza Borrego for respite from the noise and pressure of urban life. For them the values are to enjoy panoramic vistas, a quiet sunset, maybe even see a wild sheep or a bobcat. It is impossible to reconcile these values with the whine and exhaust of an ATV, especially when it is encountered unexpectedly on a quiet trail.

As regards the off-roader's responsibility, my view is colored by direct experiences, which, from my conversations with others, I know are not unique.

Once, upon returning after a two-year absence to some high-desert property I owned, I found that a lovely gully, formerly lined with junipers and wildflowers, was now several hundred feet of barren, flat-bottomed wash, with four-foot vertical walls.

Race track set up

Rain water, channelled in dirt-bike tire tracks, and increasing in destructive power with each downpour, was the cause. Many weekend races through my (and others') property, by waves of "responsible" off-road motorcyclists, had taken place. The "race course" was clearly marked by ribbons tied to the junipers. Nearby, a steep, and once beautiful, hillside visible from the cabin porch was deeply scarred by erosion patterns created by dirt bikers trying to overcome gravity.

The properties in the area are all posted, and a group of bikers I met that day, following a different trail of ribbons, solemnly assured me that, in the future, they would respect my request to stay off my property. "Sure, you will," I thought to myself.

Parks should be off limits for off-road vehicle users

More serious is some real danger involved. I recently took two separate drives on county dirt roads for the first time in several years. Each time I drove, slowly in my small two-wheel drive station wagon. Each time I narrowly missed a life-threatening collision with an ATV. One driver,

no older than 10, almost hit my car as he raced over a blind, curving crest on a three-wheel ATV. He was oblivious to the idea that there might be anyone else on the road but him. Luckily, we both swerved in time to avoid a collision. His behavior was clearly "normal," and I wondered whether his parents, who must have been among the hundreds of nearby off-roaders, would have blamed me if he had been hurt?

The other near-miss, again on a blind curve, was with a big four-wheel drive pickup, containing four young men having a great time after a day of mud-whomping. In their exuberance, they, too, had forgotten that there might be others on the road, quietly enjoying a day in the country.

In fact, "responsibility" is not the real issue here. Off-roaders mean well — don't we all? However, it is not clear that *any* guidelines can protect the wilderness and its inhabitants from many thousands of rambunctious adults and children in, or on, their knobby-tired toys. Even responsible behavior in the enjoyment of the ATV is inherently destructive. Moreover, the park services cannot, under any foreseeable circumstances, adequately enforce the vehicle code and park regulations against the more destructive — and inevitable — behavior of irresponsible off-roaders.

Years ago, my off-road motorcyclist friends told me, only half in jest, that I could always go further into the wilderness for my peace and quiet. I sensed then that the off-roader's appetite for unspoiled land to course over was insatiable. That conclusion has been confirmed by the explosion of off-road recreation, fueled by the ATV manufacturers' ("responsible?") TV ads showing four-wheel drive pickups blasting through desert streams, and now, the administrative repeal of protection for wilderness areas.

I do not want to see protected areas opened to off-road enthusiasts. I suggest instead that they pool their funds, as do Nature Conservancy members. Following the conservancy's lead, off-road associations can then purchase private land where members can enjoy the bouncing, the dust, the fumes, the noise and the danger that I, among others, prefer to avoid.

I am content to simply know that there are large tracts of unspoiled wilderness out there, difficult of access, the enjoyment of which I can earn through some honest sweat, or which I can appreciate through a well-made wilderness documentary film. We are learning that environmental destruction can have insidious and serious consequences, and that recovery may be impossible. (Witness the effect of our hair-spray propellants on the ozone layer). Better to continue protecting the wilderness than to regret its loss later.

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