

Guest Opinion: We should strike a better balance between quiet, ORV use in Pryors

BERNARD ROSE | Posted: Friday, October 5, 2007 11:00 pm

The Pryor Mountains, south of Billings and north of Wyoming, are part of Montana's great outdoors that make life here special. The Custer National Forest is now in the closing stages of actions that will affect everyone who enjoys the Pryors for many years to come.

There are many ways people use the Pryors: Some ride horseback, others hike; some go to watch birds, others hunt mule deer or blue grouse, others go to watch wild horses. Some walk on their own feet, others ride off-road vehicles.

The Pryors are remote, rugged and full of surprises, from rock art to ice caves. People have long gone there to enjoy nature and solitude.

But the nature of the Pryors is changing. Growing crowds aboard off-road vehicles are making themselves heard. I have seen firsthand the scars left behind by thoughtless riders on the arid and delicate land. It breaks my heart to find once beautiful, natural places trashed out by irresponsible riders on ORVs.

Certainly, these machines are popular with many people and have a place in the Pryors. The question before us is this: How do we strike a balance? How do we provide responsible access to the Pryors while leaving this remarkable mountain range intact for future generations to know it as we do today?

If we continue on a track of "anything goes," soon there will be very little of anything left.

The Beartooth District of the Custer National Forest is now writing a travel management plan covering the Pryors. This plan basically sets the future: where folks can drive and where we should leave our machines behind.

Nationwide, the Forest Service has called ORV abuse one of the greatest problems facing national forests. Arid, fragile and open, the Pryors are particularly susceptible to this kind of degradation.

Your neighbors are working together to keep the Pryors special. The Pryors Coalition, a loosely formed group consisting of the Yellowstone Valley Audubon Society, the Cloud Foundation, Our Montana, the Frontier Heritage alliance, the Back Country Horsemen of Montana and a number of its chapters and the Eastern Wildlands Chapter of Montana Wilderness Association, is working hard to preserve traditional Montana values for the Pryors.

We believe the Pryors are big enough for everyone, including quiet Montana traditions like hiking, hunting and horseback riding. Striking a balance means setting reasonable limits. Such a balance protects all of our freedoms.

Montana is changing. Experts warn us that Billings is on the cusp of growing into a much larger city. Now is the time to plan ahead.

The peace of the Pryor Mountains is valuable. The ability to leave the hustle and bustle of the city behind and to enjoy the relative quiet and solitude of the Pryors will grow more valuable as Montana develops.

Most people like to get away from the sounds of vehicles and enjoy themselves. That's what our vision calls for.

Your voice counts. Get involved and help protect the Pryors for this and future generations.

Please visit the coalition's Web site, www.pryormountains.org, where you can learn much more about the Pryor Mountains and efforts to conserve them for quiet recreation. After all, the Custer National Forest belongs to all of us.

Bernard Rose, professor emeritus of economics and business administration at Rocky Mountain College, is an avid hiker who has long enjoyed the Pryor Mountains.