

Off-trail: Destructive OHVs give sport black eye

BRETT FRENCH Off trail | Posted: Wednesday, May 28, 2008 11:00 pm

No matter which side of the off-highway-vehicle debate you fall on, recent photographs taken of modified four-wheel drives churning through the snow in the Pryor Mountains has given the sport a black eye.

The photos were taken by a hiker on May 3 while he and his wife were climbing Red Pryor Mountain. The photographer sent the photos and a letter describing the incident to the Custer National Forest.

The photos showed three four-wheel drives and at least four people standing in a mountaintop meadow. Other shots showed one 4x4 driving across a high-mountain snowfield, tracks through a muddy area and a churned up snowbank.

In a letter to Custer National Forest Supervisor Steve Williams, the photographer described the situation and provided copies of the photos. The photographer's name was taken off the copy of the letter provided to The Gazette. When asked for the man's name, the source of the document and photos said the man was fearful of stepping forward publicly, although his name was signed on the letter sent to Williams.

In the letter, the photographer said he saw four vehicles and described the 4x4s' route up and across the mountain. Although initially it appeared that the vehicles had confined most of their driving to existing roads, the photographer returned a week later to find more damage.

He wrote, "However, a return visit to Red Pryor yesterday (May 13) revealed many more tracks; a steep slope on the southeast side of Red Pryor Mountain had obviously been used for a hillclimb on a large snowdrift and in places the trucks had clearly been traveling off the snow and off the road."

The photographs couldn't come at a worse time for motorized users. The Beartooth Ranger District is in the middle of crafting its travel management plan for the Pryors and a portion of the Beartooth Front.

ATVs and OHVs are lobbying hard for access across the Pryors while groups like the Montana Wilderness Association and Friends of the Pryors are advocating for fewer roads and trails for just such a reason - claiming some motorized users are hard on the resource and disrespectful of the law.

Granted, every activity has its bad apples. But incidents such as this tend to paint all OHVs with the same broad brush.

Fellow motorized users, if they know who these off-roaders are, should step forward and finger the truck owners. A call to the Beartooth Ranger District office (446-2103) or the Custer National Forest supervisor's office (657-6200) with information would be helpful.

Forest investigators are attempting to track down the drivers, which will be somewhat easier thanks to the photos.

"The Forest Service does not condone resource damage like that on national forest lands," said Pete Moullet, patrol captain with the agency. "It's definitely under investigation."

The drivers could face a few federal charges with a maximum of six months in jail and up to a \$5,000 fine for damaging national forest property and violating area closures. They also could face state charges for not having their vehicles licensed.

Is this situation an example of Montana's not-too-distant future? Nevada, Utah and California already struggle with problems created by such OHV scofflaws. Are these state's problems migrating northward?

The ATV and auto industry isn't helping the situation any by running advertisements that depict four-wheelers and four-wheel drive vehicles blasting through streams and up muddy trails.

Is more enforcement the answer?

In a recent meeting of resource advisory councils, Bureau of Land Management ranger Jason Caffey said that seven rangers cover about 8 million acres in Montana and the Dakotas for the agency. Consequently, they rely on other officers such as sheriff's departments and game wardens to tell them when off-road violations occur.

Maybe education is the key.

"Education is the most important thing others can do to help," Caffey said. "Most people comply with the laws."

Motorized user Eric Hunt, a member of the Dakotas resource advisory council from Spearfish, S.D., said education of motorized users has been neglected.

"It comes from peer pressure that most people are going to follow the rules," he said.

Which brings up the question: Why not have a licensing program for ATV and other OHV users? Motorcyclists in Montana have to get an endorsement by passing a written and driving test. Archery and rifle hunters are also required to take tests before being allowed to purchase a hunting license. Why not require a written and driving test specifically for OHV users?

Certainly, education wouldn't stop all abuses like the ones mentioned here, but hopefully it would help some people value the resource more and make beginning riders more safety conscious, perhaps thereby reducing the number of accidents as well.

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