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Collision course

All-terrain vehicle use has mushroomed, and not all are happy about it

Joe Baird The Salt Lake Tribune

Rickie Bryan loves his ATV. The Payson retiree gets out on his four-wheel, all-terrain vehicle most weekends when the weather cooperates, occasionally even sneaking out for a midweek escape. As often as not, his children and grandchildren are riding alongside, whether he's tooling around in Utah's west desert or venturing up the Paiute Trail in the south central part of the state.

"It just opens up a world for people as they get older and can't do the things they used to do. You can get on one of these things, and life is still available to you," says Bryan, 63.

"Best of all," he adds, "I get to do it with my family."

Along with a whole lot of other off-highway vehicle (OHV) enthusiasts.

In a time when the popularity of other forms of motorized recreation -- such as boats and snowmobiles -- has essentially fallen flat, registrations in Utah for ATVs, dirt bikes, specialty four-wheel drive vehicles and new generation "rock crawlers" have skyrocketed in the past seven years and are now pushing the 200,000 mark.

The kicker? State officials and off-road organizations suspect that may represent just half of the total number of OHVs in the state.

And that's a problem. The sheer number of OHVs now venturing out onto Utah's backroads and trails is taking an environmental toll around the state -- the vast majority on federal land -- and in many instances has overwhelmed the ability of the budget-challenged Bureau of Land Management and U.S. Forest Service to regulate it.

"We're playing catch-up," acknowledges Sally Wisely, the state's BLM director. "With almost every current land-use plan we've got, almost everything is open to cross-country travel. Clearly, this is an issue we have to address."

The BLM already has closed about 500,000 acres in 16 locations so far in a bid to stave off additional OHV-related damage. The agency's new series of land-use plans also will eliminate or drastically reduce open areas in favor of designated route systems. Similarly, the Forest Service has adopted a new Forest Rule that prohibits cross-country travel altogether in favor of trail systems and designated open areas.

Environmental groups argue, however, that the agencies are not quick or bold enough to stop what they consider irreparable damage to sensitive areas. Locales such as southern Utah's Factory Butte have become the latest datelines in their long-running battle to protect the state's wildest places.

"In the long term, I think, motorized use is the biggest threat to the wilderness character of the land," says Lawson LeGate, southwest representative for the Utah chapter of the Sierra Club,

"Oil and gas tends to come in booms, and right now, we're in a feeding frenzy in Utah. But it's also likely to bust," he adds. "The OHV issue seems to have increased significantly in recent years. And unfortunately for the American people, the land managers have been way too accommodating to the off-road interests."

In sharp contrast, OHV organizations believe they have been singled out unfairly by environmentalists whom they suspect want all OHV use eliminated in the backcountry and federal agencies that are imposing what they consider draconian restrictions to their access of public lands.

"The overwhelming focus is on off-highway vehicle use when, in fact, all forms of outdoor recreation have increased by similar percentages," says Brian Hawthorne, public lands coordinator of the Pocatello-based Blue Ribbon Coalition, a nationwide OHV organization.

"The motorized community is generally supportive of the direction the agencies are going, with designated roads and trails," he continues. "The problem is, the current [trail] inventories are inadequate. You look at every current [land use] plan, and there's not one that expands the current trail system. The average user doesn't know if he'll be able to use his favorite trail next year, and there have been significant closures. It gets fatiguing after awhile."

The appeal of off-roading is pretty simple: With a \$5,000 machine and a \$7 tank of gas, OHV users can get to some of the most spectacular mountain and desert vistas Utah has to offer. Entire new economies -- just look at Marysvale, at the foot of the Paiute Trail -- have been built on the OHV boom.

"It's people who have more disposable income as they get into their older years," says Fred Hayes, OHV coordinator for the Utah Division of State Parks and Recreation. "The boomers have latched on to them. Folks on the Paiute Trail talk about the 'Grey Wave.'"

"People are also," he notes, "starting to catch on to the fact that it's a lot of fun."

There is also this undeniable fact: For children who are old enough, the elderly, the disabled and, yes, the overweight and out-of-shape, OHVs can deliver a wilderness-like experience they wouldn't otherwise have.

Springville resident Richard Beardall, who is paralyzed from the waist down, uses his ATV for fun and hunting. A member of the **Utah Shared Access Alliance**, the state's largest OHV organization, he fears new federal land-use plans will rob him of his favorite hunting spots.

"All we're asking for is reasonable and adequate access," he says. "There has got to be a happy medium" between motorized and non-motorized recreationalists. "We just don't know where it is."

Cattle ranchers Curtis and Keri Rosmond are also searching for that elusive middle ground. They run their cows on 1,400 acres, plus surrounding BLM grazing lands along the Green River, about 20 miles west of Moab. The problem: Their ranch lies adjacent to White Wash, an open area that, with the BLM's blessing, is now a popular OHV destination.

A recent post-Easter visit to White Wash found a dozen OHV camping parties -- each with 3 to 4 ATVs or dirt bikes in tow -- already settled in on a Friday morning, the early wave of what has now become a regular weekend crush. There were no trash cans. No portable or pit toilets. And nary a BLM officer in sight.

"These people come out, they leave their poop and garbage, and nothing happens," says Curtis Rosmond. "The desert's a very fragile environment. And I'm seeing new roads and trails every month. The BLM has admitted they funnel them down here, but they don't send anybody to enforce the regulations."

In fact, the Rosmonds say they are at their wits' end after months of watching OHV users pull up their fence posts for firewood and harass their cattle by chasing them with their machines. The family used to give guided horseback rides to visitors and tourists. No longer.

"We try to be as good stewards of the land as we can, but we've been overrun," says Keri Rosmond. "It's a different culture. There's no respect for the environment. No respect for private property."

Hearing these kinds of tales makes OHV organizers cringe. They know a few rogue riders can sully things for all of them, much more so than renegade mountain bikers or hikers.

"It's a significant issue," says Hawthorne of the Blue Ribbon Coalition. "The vast majority of our community is behaving correctly. You're talking about a small percentage that is doing these bad things. Having said that, the backcountry ethic has to take hold in our community. The time is long past where we, the larger group, can tolerate the crappy 9 percent."

It's going to have to happen internally, because agency officials say they will never have the money or the muscle to adequately enforce closures, trail restrictions and etiquette issues.

Utah is somewhat ahead of that game. The BLM, Forest Service and State Parks and Recreation have coordinated their education efforts, trail systems and maps to an extent not yet seen in other states, says BLM director Wisely. In theory, the more information the public has, the more responsive it will be to the agencies' new rules, and an overall ethos will take hold.

"We will never have enough people to rely on enforcement. That's why education is so vital," says Jack Troyer, regional forester for the Forest Service's Intermountain Region and leader of a national OHV policy team. "I think the vast majority of OHV users are responsible and want to do the right thing. The key is to build the right system."

And that is the rub. Whose definition of "right" will ultimately prevail?

"It's not like you can make OHVs go away," says Liz Thomas, an attorney with the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance. "It's a question of where they are appropriate and where they are not. It's about where they can do the least amount of damage and still provide a fun experience for users."

Payson ATV enthusiast Bryan doesn't necessarily disagree with that -- he just wants a little consideration.

"I know we need to protect the environment," he says. "But the land is also there for us to use. And as long as it's used wisely, what does it hurt?"

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Tribune reporter Brett Prettyman contributed to this story.

Utah OHV registrations are skyrocketing

Since 1998, the number of OHVs licensed in the United States has nearly tripled. The boom is a boon in areas where wilderness is an asset, but opponents are leery of the damage they may be causing to the environment. Registration numbers above are in thousands. Source: The ATV Safety Institute

The boom

Off-highway vehicle registrations in Utah have tripled in the past decade.

The problem

Growth in OHV use has outpaced the ability of agencies to manage it.

Users say

Closures and restrictions are denying them access to their favorite areas.

Opponents say

Unregulated use is creating long-term damage to sensitive ecosystems.

Wheels vs. Wilderness: A dirt-rider dad leads a group of youngsters out for some four-wheeling in Little Sahara Recreation Area. They are among thousands of riders in Utah.; Ryan Galbraith/The Salt Lake Tribune A BLM sign advises off-roaders to stick to legal routes in the San Rafael Reef in Emery County, but not everybody does.; Jump Page A8: Roger Tuttle Tyson Tolman from West Jordan catches some rays. He came out with his family and has been down to Emery County every year

for the last four or five years.; Ryan Galbraith/The Salt Lake Tribune Tire tracks skip by a road-closed marker posted by the BLM on Back of the Reef Road on the San Rafael Reef. Enthusiasts say scofflaws are a tiny minority of riders.; Boys fool around by dragging in the sand at the Sand Mountain campground,above. Young riders are a high percentage of ATV users. At left, Mike Swenson, executive director of USA-All, rides the Back of the Reef Road on the San Rafael Reef in Emery County. Roger Tuttle

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