



OFF-ROAD VEHICLES ROAR INTO OUR FORESTS

By Cosmo Garvin

John Timmer considers a six-foot-by-six-foot lump of maroon-colored steel, flattened into the dirt just off the trail. “You know what that used to be?” he asks. “It was a Jeep.” It was once a force to be reckoned with, ripping through the woods here near the south fork of the Yuba River in the Sierra Nevada’s Tahoe National Forest.

The Jeep is now so profoundly flat that it looks as though a Godzilla-sized foot squashed it the way a human foot crushes an aluminum can. One day, it appears, the Jeep died, and itself became an obstacle, a play surface, for other off-road vehicles (ORVs), like dirt bikes, four-wheeling all-terrain vehicles, and even other Jeeps. “So, you can see what they do to metal,” Timmer says, leading the way to see what ORVs can do to river banks, creek beds, and meadows.

Timmer is a former National Park Service law enforcement ranger who now volunteers with the South Yuba River Citizens League, a group that monitors the river’s health. Timmer has adopted a stretch of national forest land on the south side of the Yuba, just across from the Eagle Lakes off-road vehicle recreation area.

On the north side of the river, the Eagle Lakes area is designated by the U.S. Forest Service for motorbikes, all-terrain vehicles, and other ORVs. But Timmer says the off-roaders have been making steady, highly destructive incursions in places that are supposed to be off-limits. For example, along more than a mile of the south side of the Yuba, there are new cut banks, where ORVs have driven along the river bed during the low-water season and pounded up the river bank over and over, until a sort of muddy graded driveway has been formed. These driveways then become trails that weave in and out, forming a spaghetti-like network through the trees.

“Over the last seven years that I’ve been coming here I have seen this area deteriorate, as the trails have spread out like cancer,” Timmer explains. All the while, he says, the local Forest Service office has mostly looked the other way. Timmer points out a new cut bank in



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progress, a four- or five-foot steep grade that the vehicles haven't quite conquered yet. Great chunks have been torn out of the river bank, exposing tree roots almost to the base of several large cottonwoods. "Eventually we're going to lose all these trees here," he says.

A little ways on, another rutted short cut with some stagnant water collected in it boasts a miniature oil slick, shimmering in the afternoon sun. In a nearby meadow, a flat spot with a few wildflowers growing along its edge, are tire tracks like crop circles, the unmistakable marks of somebody spinning doughnuts.

Farther down the river, even more distant from the ORV recreation area, is the very frontier of off-road trail blazing. Here the forest floor is greener, the vegetation thicker. But even though this area is quite far away from the designated ORV area, new tracks have begun to metastasize.

Timmer crosses a small creek, where a ford has been made. Deep, muddy tire ruts have been blasted through the creek and the grass and other vegetation on the floor of the forest here. "This is really crossing the line," Timmer complains, adding that this damage all started within the last two years. "This all used to be impenetrable, but they've just worked on it and worked on it." Timmer stops to move a fallen log across the newly cut paths.

"Just to let them know we're out here," Timmer explains. "They hate to get off."

But riders may have to get off, once new rules being generated at both the state and federal level are in place. In May, a coalition of California environmental groups won a lawsuit in U.S. District Court, requiring the Forest Service in Tahoe and Eldorado National Forests to designate specific routes for ORVs. The ruling also requires the Forest Service to ticket those who try to cut new trails. About 700 miles of the most egregious trails in California's national forests will be closed for good, allowing for environmental restoration. Another 2,000 miles will remain open, pending environmental review. While many national forests have designated routes, most are not the product of environmental review.

The Tahoe and Eldorado are not the only national forests undergoing rulemaking. "What people started to realize was that virtually every forest in California had the same problem," says Karen Schambach of the Center for Sierra Nevada Conservation.

The growing damage to the land and wildlife—and the disturbance caused to non-motorized visitors—prompted the Forest Service to enter into an agreement with the State of California in 2003. In exchange for annual funding from the state, the Forest Service agreed to evaluate and designate routes for ATVs, dirt bikes, and four-wheel-drive trucks in

all 19 of California's national forests. After this work is complete, probably in 2008, off-road vehicle use will be authorized only on routes designated for their use.

The California process may serve as a test case for forests across the nation. The Forest Service is in the process of new rulemaking for all of its forests. The final rule is due this fall, though it will take years to implement.

Scott Kovarovics, director of the Natural Trails and Waters Coalition, says that, at a minimum, the new federal rule should require national forests to designate routes for ORVs after careful environmental review. "On top of all the damage that these vehicles do to forest land, they steal the peace and quiet that are so important to the growing number of campers, hikers, and cross-country skiers," he explains.

But with 155 national forests and 20 national grasslands trying to figure out how to implement the new rule, nothing is certain. While the rule could lead to some of the worst ORV trails being closed, Kovarovics says that there will be pressure from ORV groups to designate every track and worn path as an ORV route. "If the Forest Service just takes what's on the landscape today, that would be bad news," he says.

All the while, ORV groups will be pushing for greater access. Some have even asked for rules mandating that every national forest accommodate some ORV use. Don Amador, a spokesperson for the Blue Ribbon Coalition, an ORV trade and lobbying group, downplays the likelihood of conflict over the new rules, saying all sides agree that some trails need to be closed and that routes need to be designated and managed. "We're committed to this because in the long run we think it's better for the sport and for the environment," says Amador. "Certainly in

California, Oregon, and Washington, I don't think it's going to be a big adjustment." He thinks it will be tougher to implement route designation "in places like Nevada, where you've had wide open access for so long."

But not all California ORV fans are so sanguine about the new rules. Brent Ingram of Roseville and his family were on their way up to land they own inside Tahoe National Forest, not far from Eagle Lakes. Loaded onto the back of his pickup were two gleaming ATVs. He says he started with motorbikes when he was a kid, and then in the last two or three years has switched to ATVs. He knows about the rulemaking. "We're keeping our eyes on it. I worry about it a lot," Ingram remarks.

He fears that if the Forest Service clamps down too much, ORV dealers and other businesses in his hometown will suffer. Then again, Ingram says, "Basically, if they invoke any new laws, if they close any roads, it's not going to stop me."

Ironically, Schambach notes, there have been rules in place for more than 30 years directing the Forest Service to designate trails. President Nixon signed one such executive order in 1972, and it was strengthened in 1977 by President Carter's executive order stipulating that trails must be closed if ORV damage is demonstrated or anticipated. Yet over the past 30 years, the annual number of off-road vehicles in national forests has jumped by about 30 million. In 2000, the Forest Service estimated that five percent of all visitors came for off-road vehicle use. "Finally," says Schambach, "there is this belated recognition that off-road vehicle use is doing immense damage to the environment. It's kind of a watershed, but there's still a long way to go."

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