

ATV trails not needed?

Study says riders, economics may be overstated

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Vilas County News-Review, August 15, 2007

There may be fewer reasons than previously believed to support expansion of all-terrain vehicle (ATV) trails on public lands, a new study shows. Bob Smail, a graduate student at UW-Stevens Point, conducted a study for his thesis by randomly surveying 519 ATV owners last fall. The results are likely to be challenged by ATV clubs and tourism officials - especially Smail's conclusion that "the economic impacts and political representation of ATV riders may be overstated."

The study found that only about 5.5% of Wisconsin's total population of 4.09 million people over age 16 (according to the 2000 census) are public land ATV riders.

"This is far less than the often-cited percentages exceeding 20%," said Smail.

Completion of the thesis research comes as the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) is proposing to develop a 60-mile trail in the Northern Highland American Legion (NHAL) State Forest. The controversial trail would stretch from Lake Tomahawk in Oneida County to Star Lake in Vilas County, passing near lakes such as Hasbrook, Gilmore, Sweeney, Buffalo, Little Arbor Vitae, Bittersweet, Plum and Star.

Development of the trail has the support of the Landover ATV Club in Vilas County, which is pushing for trail-riding opportunities in the wake of declining winter tourism. "ATV registrations surpassed snowmobile registrations in Wisconsin already last year," said Roger Flaherty of Conover, club president. "With the way the winters have been and the loss of snowmobiling revenue, a lot of businesses are hanging on by a thread. The economic impact of ATV trails would be incredible. Look how much longer the season is than snowmobiling."

Flaherty said it matters not what percentages the latest study came up with, but that more than 173,000 ATV owners utilize public forest trails. "Of all the trails and ATV routes in the state, ours would be among the most scenic," he said. "The real question is, if we had the trails, how many would the number of public land ATV riders be in this area?"

The study acknowledges that among contemporary conservation issues, managing ATVs on public land "is perhaps without equal in illustrating the challenges faced by public resource agencies that supply opportunities for recreation." There are currently more than 1,800 miles of public trails/routes available in Wisconsin for ATV users. None of those trails are located in Vilas County, where residents overwhelmingly passed a referendum against locating trails on county-owned land or rights of way. Oneida County has a limited trail system on the county forest.

Striking a balance

Smail said the management of ATVs exemplifies the public land agency responsibility to balance the provision of goods and services with long-term stewardship. He said the study was undertaken to expand the scientific understanding of public land ATV users and to provide

specific information useable to those engaged in public land ATV management. Wisconsin has four different ATV registrations: public land, municipal, agricultural and private land. Of the four, Smail said only public land registrants should be considered public land ATV stakeholders, comprising 78% of the total.

“Furthermore, this study revealed that only 70% of the respondents ride public land at all. The result is 173,167 ATV riders, or only 55% of all Wisconsin ATV registrations, use public land,” he said. The study shows Wisconsin ATV registrations more than quadrupled from 56,000 in 1993 to more than 230,000 in 2006. By 2005, ATVs accounted for more than 70% of all off-highway vehicle use. From the study, Smail also concluded that only 15% to 20% of Wisconsinites with registered ATVs believe that where they ride now is too congested or inadequate.

He said the figures suggests that ATV-user satisfaction with current opportunities is quite high, as is private-land usage at 76%. He said just 8% reported being reliant on public land for their riding. “The vast majority of respondents use their ATV on private land with only a small number relying exclusively on public land for their ATV recreation,” he said. Of those who do ride ATVs on public land, about 37% ride trails, 26% use their machines for work, 20% use them to hunt and 15% identified themselves as thrill riders. “The latter group is likely responsible for a disproportionate amount of ecological damage and conflict with nonmotorized users,” concluded Smail.

Off-trail preference

Joel Patenaude, editor of Silent Sports magazine in Waupaca, said the more worrisome message is that 65% of all trail-riding ATVers said they prefer to ride off of maintained trails designed especially for them. “While this does not indicate that (the majority of ATV) users will disobey trail rules, it does suggest that by staying on-trail, users will be suppressing a preference for riding off-trail,” Smail warned.

Flaherty said ATV enthusiasts would be happy with the designation of some existing forest roads as ATV routes. By not building new trails designed specifically for ATVs, he said there would be fewer environmental impacts.

To develop the survey, Smail mailed out an eight-page survey to 1,000 people who had registered an ATV for public land use. In total, 519 surveys were returned with at least 60% of the survey completed. Subtracting the 82 surveys that were returned with undeliverable addresses, the final response rate was 57%.

Other results of the study include:

- 92.6% of the ATV owners agreed with the statement that riding is a privilege, not a right.

- respondents had a mean age of 46.5 years old, 85% live in an area with less than 20,000 people, 19.6% have completed a Wisconsin DNR safety course, and only 8.7% belong to an ATV club.
- trail users are the largest group of ATV users who use public land, comprising 37.5% of all riders. Hunters and anglers were the second- largest group at 20.7%. Thrill riders came in at 15.7%.
- thrill riders expressed the most opposition to regulations, especially limitations on speed and noise.
- ATV owners use their machines to escape society, be sociable while often riding with large groups, and as a safe, timesaving means of transportation into backcountry areas.
- while fewer than 10% of ATV owners belong to a club, these groups have been immensely helpful in promoting responsible riding and maintaining trails.

Smail concluded that public land managers must assess all costs and benefits associated with the incorporation of new activities into limited public land resources. “Simply because an activity can be facilitated by public land does not mean that it should,” said Smail.

Smail said it is key that land managers first determine if an activity provides a net benefit to the current population and if it is sustainable over the long term.

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