



ROUGH CUT: ATV RIDERS EXPLOIT LAX ENFORCEMENT TO CREATE UNAUTHORIZED TRAILS, LIKE THIS TRACK IN MONTANA'S LEWIS AND CLARK NATIONAL FOREST.

Road Warriors

Hikers and ATV riders hit the ground in a new battle over trail access. *By Kristin Bjornsen*

AT FIRST GLANCE, THE ROAD IN MT. HOOD NATIONAL Forest resembled a dinosaur mosh pit: Swampy ditches, five feet deep and as long as basketball courts, scarred the ground. But T-Rexes haven't been here for 65 million years. The culprit? Big rubber tires. "We call this place Mud City," said Amy Harwood, program director of Bark, a forest advocacy nonprofit based in Portland, Oregon. Pointing to ATV tracks that spider-webbed out from both sides of the

road and continued into the forest, she added, "None of these trails are authorized—and none are on the map."

Harwood and a dozen volunteers from Bark and local hiking clubs were on a reconnaissance mission that chilly October day. Their goal: gather enough data to convince the U.S. Forest Service to close these unofficial trails to off-highway vehicles (OHVs) like ATVs and dirt bikes. Their work in Oregon is part of a coast-to-coast effort by the Forest

Service to survey all 155 national forests and 20 national grasslands by December 2009 to determine how OHV access is impacting roads and trails. Why the rush? The agency is charged with developing new rules and maps for motorized activity by 2010. And as the deadline approaches, both conservationists and off-roaders are scrambling to provide evidence that favors their interests.

Gathering this evidence requires “groundtruthing,” a military term that means dirtying your boots to determine if map information about an area is accurate. In this case, the goal is simple: survey all official and unofficial trails and roads in every national forest where OHV riders are present. At Mt. Hood, the groundtruthing effort is being organized by Harwood, 28, a former political field organizer with a chestnut-brown braid dangling to her waist. Leaning over a large map spread on the hood of her car, she dispensed scouting assignments to the volunteers, giving each team a map, a GPS, and survey forms for recording details like a road’s slope, stream crossings, and even roadkill. Under her direction, scores of volunteers have already surveyed 300 official roads—133 of which are shuttered to vehicles—on Mt. Hood since May 2007. They’ll give all their findings, including details on illegal tracks, to regional managers, who are required to factor user input into their final decisions. “We’ve found that the best way to get the Forest Service to listen to you is to get the hard data

yourself,” Harwood says.

Of course, off-roading groups are groundtruthing, too. “Almost all of the groups we represent are out there identifying favorite areas and GPS-ing trails,” says Greg Mumm, executive director of the Blue Ribbon Coalition, a motorized recreation advocate. The goal for OHV riders, Mumm explains, is to get user-submitted routes included on any new maps. “Otherwise, if there’s a great ATV track that’s not on the inventory, we might lose it.” Although Mumm recognizes that some areas may be inappropriate for motorized access, he sees hypocrisy in opposing all vehicles. “Unless you hiked from your house to the trailhead, we’re all motorized at some point,” he says. “It’s just a question of where you park your rig.”

Unfortunately, some OHV owners park illegally: While surveying Mt. Hood, Harwood’s team noted that a third of roads closed to vehicles showed signs of motorized use. Such willful damage often leads to ugly confrontations between hikers and OHV riders. But collaboration is still possible, insists Harwood. While hiking recently on Mt. Hood, she met a dirt biker whom she recognized from a Forest Service meeting. “He helped me understand that not all of them are looking to disobey the law,” Harwood says. “After talking to him, I was more convinced we could reach a solution—especially since we weren’t in an office, but out there in the forest.”

DANGER SIGNS | BEAR COUNTRY



Hiking where bears are present (that’s more than 40 states) always requires precautions, like hanging food. But these three signals demand extra vigilance.

>> Campsite signs Scratch marks in a fire pit, garbage at the site, or nearby scat mean the area’s bears might have learned to associate campers with food. Avoid problem bears by pitching your tent elsewhere.

>> Forage In late summer and early fall, bears are out gorging on berries and nuts during the day. Avoid surprising them by clapping or singing near dense thickets, especially if you’re downwind.

>> Scat Runny, hairy, and smelly droppings indicate a bear is eating meat, which might mean a carcass (which a bear would defend) lies nearby. Leave the area.