

Out of Control

The last thing Florida needs is an army of noisy, polluting, terrain-tearing recreational vehicles trashing the lands set aside to protect the state's diverse and delicate ecosystems.

But such is the state of siege on Florida's public lands as growing numbers of off-road vehicles (ORVs) — four-wheel-drive sport utility vehicles, monster trucks, swamp buggies, three- and four-wheeled all-terrain vehicles (ATVs) and dirt bikes — freely rampage through habitat that includes some of the most endangered ecosystems in America.





The nationwide abuse of our public lands that began when ORVs first arrived on the outdoor scene 30 years ago has intensified as ORVs have gained in popularity and power, ORV users have grown more daring, and the industry-backed ORV lobby has demanded more access to state and federal lands.

Here in Florida efforts to get ORVs under control on our public lands may be at a turning point.

Armed with a growing body of documented evidence of ORV damage and its ecosystem-wide repercussions, citizens are rallying to protest the assault of ORVs on the landscape, and state legislators and public land managers are acknowledging that managing ORVs is a conservation priority in Florida.

ORVS: HELL ON WHEELS

In pursuit of free-wheeling fun, irresponsible ORV users (ORVers) are breaking the rules and operating their vehicles in extremely damaging ways in some of Florida's most sensitive public lands. Leaving designated roads and trails to tackle new terrain, ORVers plow through fragile wetlands, pristine streams, sensitive sinkholes and vulnerable upland scrubs, take shortcuts through scientific study sites, endangered species recovery areas and habitat restoration projects, and zip around savannas and long-leaf pine forests — two of the most endangered ecosystems in the United States.

Beneath their wheels, ORVs crush vegetation, run over animals and their nests and burrows, erode and compact soils, destabilize slopes and banks and brand the landscape with deep ruts. They stir up bottom sediments in streams and ponds, including the isolated ponds where flatwoods salamanders, gopher frogs and other rare Florida amphibians breed.

Roaring ORV engines drown out the sounds of nature and pollute the air with emissions that in some models far exceed the levels allowed on America's highways. The intrusive presence of ORVers drives away hikers, birdwatchers, horseback riders and others who come to our public lands to enjoy the beauty and tranquility of the natural world.

ORVers also harass and displace wildlife. A few ORVs can turn remote, peaceful ponds into noisy mudholes, dispersing animals that use these ponds such as the herons, egrets, ibises, limpkins, Florida sandhill cranes and other wading birds that forage and breed around them. Passing ORVs can disturb nesting bald eagles, a threatened species, and breeding colonies of the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker. Stressed animals expend precious energy reserves escaping or avoiding ORV disturbances. Frequent ORV activity can lead to behavioral changes, reduced reproductive success and habitat abandonment.





AERIAL SURVEY OF OCALA NATIONAL FOREST/ LIGHTHAWK, MICHAEL COTTLEB

LAWLESS FRONTIER

How can ORVers get away with all this? Simply because consistently inadequate funding for public lands management and law enforcement have made it impossible to enforce existing ORV regulations, let alone monitor ORVs and improve the way they are managed.

For example, the law enforcement detail for the nearly 400,000-acre Ocala National Forest, one of the most popular ORV destinations in Florida, consists of two officers and one dog. Another ORV mecca, Big Cypress National Preserve, has only five rangers to patrol its 729,000 acres.

Unlike mining and logging and other damaging activities often allowed in concentrated areas on public lands, ORV use is scattered, widespread, unpredictable and difficult to manage without a sufficient number of trained law enforcement agents outfitted with suitable vehicles and equipment. Measures such as designating specific roads and trails for ORV use, installing fences and barriers and instituting fines for ORV violations are useless without adequate patrolling and enforcement behind them.

UNHAPPY TRAILS

By cutting corners, making wrong turns, detouring off existing routes and ignoring the rules and setting off cross-country, ORVers create miles and miles of new trails. These unofficial travelways have significantly increased road density on Florida's public lands with major consequences for wildlife and habitat.

Roads and ORV-created trails undermine ecosystem health and diversity by destroying and fragmenting habitat. ORV travelways divide land into smaller parcels bounded by edge habitat. Foxes, raccoons, opossums and other predators move into this habitat and thrive to the detriment of populations of edge-dwelling songbirds, reptiles and amphibians.

Roads and trails can inhibit wildlife movement and subdivide sensitive species such as tiger salamanders, flatwoods salamanders, Florida crowned snakes, mole skinks and sand skinks into small isolated populations.

ORV routes also increase the likelihood of an animal being killed or injured by a vehicle. Snakes drawn to open trails to bask and hunt the edges are especially vulnerable to ORV traffic.

ORV routes serve as corridors for the spread of exotic plants into even the most remote areas as ORVs carry and distribute the seeds of noxious weeds into previously roadless territory. Trail networks facilitate poaching and the illegal collection of rare plants, animals and other resources.





REGAINING CONTROL

Concerned scientists, conservationists, hikers, hunters and other caring citizens have banded together to become part of the solution to Florida's ORV problem. Together they are urging public land managers to:

- Limit ORVS to designated and fenced "scramble areas," places with limited conservation value such as phosphate-mined lands and borrow pits (sites excavated to provide landfill for construction projects), that can be easily patrolled and monitored.
- Develop detailed ORV access and management plans and monitoring programs that incorporate input from the public.
- Conduct thorough natural resource inventories and road and trail density analyses of public tracts to provide baseline data for identifying ecologically sensitive areas that must be protected from ORVs.
- Within designated trail systems close all travelways other than public roads and mapped and signed ORV trails to motorized recreational vehicles. Clearly mark these closures and provide adequate staff to enforce them.
- Restrict ORV operation to daylight hours even on designated trails.
- Obliterate all roads and trails created by ORVs in ecologically sensitive areas and restore them to functional habitat or allow them to recover naturally.
- Establish an ORV management program that includes such elements as ORV identification decals and a toll-free law enforcement hotline to make it easy for citizens to report violations.
- Create a volunteer ranger program to train responsible ORV users to patrol and monitor problem areas and to educate fellow ORVers.

A TURNING POINT?

With ORV users demanding more access to public lands, conservationists and nonmotorized recreationists decrying the obvious affronts of ORVs, and researchers finding overwhelming evidence confirming the damaging impacts of ORVs on Florida's wildlife, habitat and ecosystems, ORV management has become a central wildlife conservation issue in Florida. The land managing agencies are beginning to respond accordingly.

- The National Park Service is implementing an ORV plan for Big Cypress National Preserve that requires ORVers to have permits, cuts the number of ORV entrances from 70 to 15, and limits ORVs to several hundred miles of designated trails out of the 22,000 miles of travelways carved out by ORVS over the years.
- The Forest Service has closed 7,000 heavily damaged acres in the Ocala National Forest to ORVers as the agency continues a process of evaluating access points and trails for ORVs in restricted areas of all three Florida national forests and identifying those that can remain open.
- The Florida legislature has passed a law requiring that ORVs be registered and that a state system of managed trails be established to provide ORV access without damaging natural resources and sensitive habitat.

FLORIDA'S NATIONAL FORESTS: A CASE IN POINT

Easily accessible from several urban centers, Florida's three national forests, Ocala, Osceola and Apalachicola, are popular weekend playgrounds for ORVers and venues for their rallies, competitions and other organized events. These forests are also poster places for the ecological damage and trail proliferation that come with unregulated and unmonitored ORV use. Each bears the visible scars of ORV abuse and has an overall road density (miles of road per square mile) exceeding the one-mile-per-square-mile limit at which scientists believe quality wildlife habitat can be maintained. The intense ORV pressure on Florida national forests is especially alarming because they are the core reserves identified in a statewide plan for linking the ecosystems most critical to the long-term biodiversity of the entire state. The best hope for protecting these valuable core habitats is official national designation as wilderness areas. But nearly 50,000 acres proposed for wilderness designation in the three forests are no longer eligible because of ORV damage and trailblazing.

Apalachicola National Forest



APALACHICOLA ORV TRAILS/ MICHAEL COTTLE/LIGHTHAWK

The 575,489-acre Apalachicola National Forest lies in the Apalachicola Basin, a United Nations World Heritage Site. ORVs have damaged the sinkhole ponds that feed underground water systems in this globally significant area, carved deep ruts in sensitive savannas and churned up and muddied the edges of ponds critical to the life cycle of the rare flatwoods salamander and other amphibians. ORV incursions into the Apalachicola have also claimed a significant amount of habitat in a sensitive sandhill restoration area and contributed to a road density above the acceptable standard in 60 percent of the forest.

Ocala National Forest

Extensive ORV-inflicted damage is obvious throughout the 383,362-acre Ocala, the most urbanized and ORV-impacted of the Florida national forests. The forest's isolated wetlands look hardest hit, but biologists believe even more harm has been done to the wiregrass groundcover integral to the forest's longleaf pine community, a last vestige of an endangered ecosystem. ORVs have also disturbed endangered scrub jays and red cockaded woodpeckers and nesting eagles, Florida sandhill cranes and ospreys, ripped up critical striped newt and gopher frog breeding sites and fragmented the forest habitat of the threatened Florida black bear. Only seven percent of the Ocala has road densities below the ecologically acceptable threshold. Road densities on much of the rest of the forest even exceed those on the surrounding private lands.



OCALA SANDHILL AND SINKHOLE DAMAGE/ CHRISTINE SMALL

Osceola National Forest



OSCEOLA WETLANDS DAMAGE/ JUDY HANCOCK

Trucks with over-sized tires and other ORVs have left behind deep ruts and damaged vegetation on wetlands in many parts of Osceola National Forest. The forest's 194,732 acres are also fragmented by a dense network of roads, many illegally created by ORVs. Eighty-seven percent of the Osceola (not including the recently acquired Pinhook roadless area) exceeds the acceptable road density standard of one mile per square mile or less. The resulting fragmentation of habitat has been cited as an indirect factor in the failure of a recent attempt to reintroduce endangered Florida panthers in the forest.

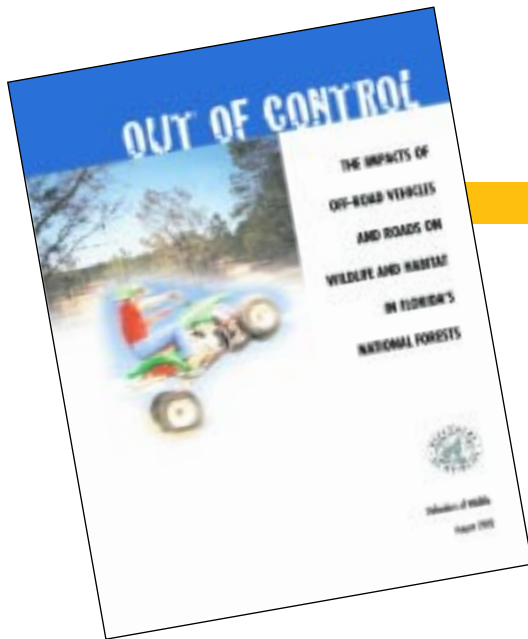
YOU CAN HELP

Keeping the pressure on state and federal land-managing agencies to address the out-of-control ORV situation in Florida is critical at this point. You can help by contacting public land managers, especially those with the state Division of Forestry and the U.S.D.A. Forest Service, and your legislators. Remind them that more money has gone into acquiring land for conservation in Florida than in any other state and that ORV use is not compatible with the purpose for which many of these lands were purchased. Let them know that any area where the managing agency cannot meet its mandate to protect natural resources by developing ORV management and monitoring programs with adequate funding for implementation and enforcement should be completely off limits to ORVs.

For legislators and agency supervisor addresses and tips on getting involved, visit www.defenders.org/habitat/florvs, or contact Defenders of Wildlife Florida staff members Christine Small at 863-467-6343 or pcsmall@prodigy.net, or Laurie Macdonald at 727-823-3888 or lmacdonald@defenders.org.

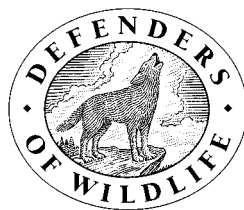


THE FLORIDA TRAIL NEAR GRASSY POND/ MARCIE CLUTTER



For more information...

Out of Control: The Impacts of Off-Road Vehicles and Roads on Wildlife and Habitat in Florida's National Forests, a special Defenders of Wildlife report, details the ecological impacts of ORVs and offers science-based recommendations for managing them in the forests. To skim, download or read this 121-page report, go to www.defenders.org/habitat/florvs.



Defenders of Wildlife • Florida Program Office

446 Second Street North • St. Petersburg, Florida 33701 • 727-823-3888 (phone) • 727-823-3873 (fax)