



By Drew Hardin

The Case for Responsible Four-Wheeling

Is a New Approach Needed?



Four-wheeling is under attack. While the off-road segment of the aftermarket industry is enjoying new-found growth—thanks in no small part to the burgeoning interest in “extreme” dirt sports—government agencies and other advocacy groups are pushing to limit off-highway vehicle (OHV) access all across the country.

For example, it seems as if every one of the recent legislative reports published by SEMA's Washington D.C. office contains news that one state or another is trying to close lands that are currently open to OHV use, either by widening the boundaries of existing wilderness areas (vehicular traffic of any kind is prohibited in areas set aside as “wilderness”) or by going so far as to argue the definition of what a “road” is. Closure tactics vary from state to state; Texas enacted a law in early 2004 that prohibits motor-vehicle traffic in any “navigable river or

stream,” with very few exceptions.

Then again, sometimes environmentalists can't be blamed for wanting to protect the land, especially after stories emerge of wildlife killed, plants and trees destroyed and delicate ecosystems damaged. Mark A. Smith, who founded the famous Jeep Jamborees that traverse the Rubicon Trail in northern California (and other trails across the U.S.), told us recently about how a portion of the Rubicon looked like a “cotton field” after a particularly busy weekend because of all the human waste and toilet

■ The Rubicon Trail in Northern California's Sierra Nevada mountains is the focus of many land-use advocate groups. The popular trail risks being “loved to death” if not properly cared for, according to Mark Smith, founder of the Jeep Jamborees that annually traverse this trail.

paper left behind on the trail's granite surface. Smith was particularly frustrated because he had given a four-wheeling club a couple of portable toilets to install in the area, yet the club instead crushed the toilets by driving over them.

As a result of mounting abuse, the Spider Lake area of the Rubicon Trail has been closed to all camping activity (though that portion of the trail is still open to through traffic). Though the closure was supposed to be short-term, Smith is convinced that the lake area will be closed for a year or more while the land heals.

It's plain that an education process is needed on two fronts. Four-wheel-drive enthusiasts must be made aware that the damage they incur can lead to land closures, which would leave those enthusiasts with fewer and fewer places to enjoy their hobby. At the same time, the general public should be made aware that the vast majority of four wheelers are responsible land users who do treat their favorite trails, rock faces and dunes with respect. Responsible 'wheelers understand that respect keeps land open.

“In general, I think there's a misperception about who off-roaders are,” said Christian Flathman, public relations manager for BF Goodrich. “These are people who typically live in cities, may have families, and enjoy off-roading as a hobby. Off-road enthusiasts are people who enjoy the



■ Dramatic? Yes. Ethical from a land-use perspective? No. Therein lies the quandary: It can be difficult to promote off-roading as a fun and exciting sport while also showing vehicles adhering to low-impact driving techniques. But land-use advocates warn the media and companies advertising off-road accessories that they're not doing the industry any favors by glamorizing irresponsible 'wheeling. (Photo courtesy Tread Lightly!)

land and are not out to destroy it. It is the one or two people who don't follow the rules that impact the positive image of off-roading."

Russell Baer was more blunt. Baer, who runs BaerTrax, an off-road fabrication shop and specialty store in Dallas, blames the four-wheeler's image problem on the few "short-sighted guys who can't see beyond the bottom of a beer can." To Baer, it was those kinds of irresponsible 'wheelers who left enough trash in Texas rivers to prompt ranch owners to push for the state's new water-driving prohibition. Baer sees that as a direct A-to-B result, which made the responsible 4x4 enthusiasts in his area "more aware that we're losing property. The folks that I 'wheel with are cognizant of the fact that we have to leave the place as we found it or lose the ability to use it."

Educational efforts are being made. Several organizations, including the Blue Ribbon Coalition, Friends of the Rubicon and the Off-Road Business Association, see land-use issues as central to their major goals. For nearly two decades, Tread Lightly! has been undertaking a series of programs,

from educational seminars and trail restoration efforts to public service announcements (PSAs), all aimed at promoting ethical motor vehicle use. Hummer and Ford are among the corporations that currently support the non-profit organization; previous partners have included Honda, Jeep, Suzuki, Toyota and Warn Industries. Tread Lightly! recently introduced a new series of PSAs under the "Play Nice" theme, "to educate and inspire recreationists to minimize their impact on the outdoors while still having fun," said the organization.

Working in conjunction with several of its off-road-industry members, SEMA is also considering a public service campaign about land-use issues, but one with something of a different thrust. While some PSAs have a finger-wagging element to them ("Don't drive too fast through streams"; "Don't drive over wet mudflats"), SEMA's notion is to portray off-rovers as concerned land users who have a vested interest in keeping their trails and recreational areas in good condition. The SEMA campaign would have a positive message that off-roading is a healthy family activity; it's an enjoyable adjunct to hunting and fishing; and that off-rovers actually care for and protect the environment.

"I think a change in approach would help," said Jim Jackson, president of ARB USA, the American arm of the Australian maker of locking differentials, bull bars and other off-road accessories. "We think it's more useful and more fruitful to be

positive." ARB, in both the U.S. and Australia, makes donations to land-use organizations and supports clubs that promote responsible 'wheeling, including the United Four Wheel Drive Association, the California Association of 4 Wheel Drive Clubs (Cal 4Wheel) and the Toyota Land Cruiser Association. "We help those who are responsive, in hopes they'll spread the word" about respectful land use, Jackson said.

To Jackson, some of the best avenues in spreading that word are articles in publications such as *In Gear*, the newsletter for Cal 4Wheel. "They regularly run stories about positive things—trail clean-ups, trail rides for the handicapped and family trail rides. That's a good thing." Jackson recognizes that the irresponsible four-wheelers who damage the environment may not be club members or readers of the newsletter, but if they become involved with a Cal 4Wheel club, "they'll be turned around" by the association's positive message, he believes.

In Jackson's statement is a key element in making any sort of responsible land-use campaign work. Several people interviewed for this story felt that, while PSAs could be effective in promoting a positive four-wheeling message, peer pressure at a personal level was really the way to turn offending off-rovers around.

"Land closures don't even get to the foolish OHVers who ruin it for the rest of us," said Clark Collins, founder of the Blue Ribbon Coalition, an organization of



■ The Tread Lightly! organization has launched a new public-service announcement campaign with the theme "Play Nice." The campaign was created to educate and inspire recreationists of all kinds, from four-wheelers to campers and mountain bikers, to minimize their impact on the outdoors while still having fun. Many land-use advocates believe a positive approach such as this will be more effective than a finger-wagging "don't do this, don't do that" approach.

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motorized recreationists who fight to preserve natural resources *for* the public instead of *from* the public. "They just have the attitude that they'll go where they damn well please. The only thing that will really ever get to them is peer pressure."

Russell Baer gave us this example: "Few things are more effective than handing a trash bag to a guy who just tossed a beer can on the trail—when there's 20 or so

people standing around. Or getting on the CB during a trail ride and asking someone to pick up the trash that 'accidentally' fell out of their Jeep. You don't make it sound like they threw it out, but they get the message."

The media can also be a good conduit for positive four-wheeling messages, provided those messages are the right ones. "Magazines are a unique resource that is

Look closely at the rear of this Jeep. See the green onion sack attached to the spare-tire carrier? That handy trash bag represents one of the most basic, effective and easy-to-follow tenets of responsible land use—the tried-and-true "pack it in, pack it out" approach. All off-roaders should have them when they hit the trail, to bring out not only their own trash but any other garbage they see.

not being used effectively," said John Stewart, environmental affairs officer for the United Four Wheel Drive Associations and natural resource consultant for Cal 4Wheel. "Many articles display photographs with questionable land-use ethics. Many advertising campaigns display vehicles in extreme situations to appeal to a target market segment for sales." According to Stewart, it will take "a change in perspective with magazines and advertising to get the message out."

Collins also noted that advertising and PSA campaigns "should target the general media and not just the OHV media, because the general media needs to help us distribute the responsible-use message." He feels the general media "should be targeted

with a ‘good wholesome family recreation’ PSA campaign to counter the negative information being sent to the media by our opponents.”

Collins and Stewart believe SEMA-member companies can be a big help with this kind of program. “The off-road market—SEMA and major manufacturers—need to be more visible in supporting access advocates,” Stewart said. “The message needs to be included in their advertising and through representatives at events. Every manufacturer, retailer or vendor involved with motorized recreation needs to embrace land use issues as critical to their business survival.”

“Way too many companies are just ignoring the issue until it hits them directly in the cash register,” Collins said. “Then it is often too little, too late. OHV advocacy groups need more financial support. The industry needs to step up while the market is good. If it waits until the ‘antis’ get so much land closed down that it will have a severe negative impact on their businesses, it may be too late.” SN ■

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