



## **AHS Motorized Recreation – ORV Use on Public Lands Position Statement**

### ***Background***

The increased popularity of off-road vehicles<sup>1</sup> (ORVs) in recent decades has coincided with technological advances enabling these machines to penetrate deeper into the backcountry than ever before. High-powered engines driving aggressive knobby tires can quickly remove vegetation cover and erode soils along trails, primitive roads, and unauthorized, visitor-created routes. Research has demonstrated these motorized uses to be substantially more impacting to natural resource conditions and the experiences of recreational visitors than other non-motorized forms of recreation. Increasingly these machines are being used in places once considered pristine and wild. Furthermore, their use on federal lands has grown substantially, though land managers have frequently been unable to address the resulting resource damage to soils, vegetation, wildlife, cultural resources. In addition, their use has been the source of escalating user conflicts.

Hikers visit our nation's parks, forests and deserts to escape the fast pace of modern society, connect with nature, observe flora and fauna, and experience solitude, fresh air, and natural sounds while exploring and enjoying the outdoors on foot. Unfortunately, these experiences are increasingly at risk in many areas due to the proliferation and uncontrolled use of ORVs on public lands. ORV use is displacing or negatively affecting the experiences of hikers in all regions of the country. Hiking and trail organizations indicate that the widespread increase in ORV uses adversely affect the land, environment, and wildlife that are important to hikers. Hiking clubs have reported numerous examples of severe ORV damage and incursions on hiking trails. The sight and sounds of ORVs alter the remote, wild character of parks and forests and deny other visitors the quiet, pristine, natural experiences they seek.

ORV use does more than damage the land and displace hikers: emergency trail/route repairs, mitigation and rehabilitation of critical or sensitive resources are expensive and a drain on limited agency funds. Volunteer trail maintainers increasingly find themselves spending time repairing damage to hiking trails caused primarily by ORVs.

### ***Policy***

American Hiking Society supports the principle of managing trails for the primary purposes for which they are designated. Other uses and types of travel should be evaluated for their impact on the primary use and purpose of the trail.

American Hiking Society views ORVs as incompatible with hiking trails, including national scenic trails and trails on which travel by foot is a primary pursuit. American Hiking opposes the use of ORVs in wilderness study areas, roadless areas, and remote portions of backcountry areas within National Park System units, National Forests, Wildlife Refuges and Bureau of Land Management Lands, or other areas where natural resource protection is the prime management objective.

Trail designations should be based upon the collective input of all stakeholders, which may include local users, American Hiking Society, and other national groups when dealing with federal lands, as well as any attendant resource concerns. In issues involving local and state trails, American Hiking may defer to the local hiking constituency.

When requested by a local hiking constituency, American Hiking Society may assist on behalf of hikers or intervene to assist in the mitigation of conflict. Particularly in matters pertaining to federal land, American Hiking may speak on behalf of hikers at large, particularly where the hiking constituency is not organized.

### *Recommendations for Land Managers*

- Determine Where Motorized Use is Appropriate or Not
  - Land management agencies should designate ORV roads and routes through a site-specific and public process under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) due to ORVs' more substantial impact to natural and cultural resources. This includes all routes opened to ORVs without appropriate environmental review. Evaluations to determine the suitability of ORV use should consider environmental sensitivity, trail design, construction, substrates, maintenance, and potential and existing conflicts with other recreational uses
  - One of most significant challenges with ORV's (primarily ATV's) is their frequent trespass onto non-motorized formal trails, and their off-trail use, which creates extensive networks of unauthorized, informal trails that remove vegetation and soils, threaten wildlife or cultural resources, and conflict with other outdoor visitors. These user-created networks are not sustainably designed and their impacts are often very substantial (peer-reviewed research supports this assertion). Confining ORV use to the designated sustainable trails open to them has been nearly impossible in most every area where their use is prevalent. Land management agencies are quite simply overwhelmed by this use and lack the staffing (and political will) to enforce their management policies and regulations.
  - ORVs should be prohibited from wilderness study areas, roadless or wildland areas, and remote portions of backcountry areas within National Park System units, National Forests, Wildlife Refuges and Bureau of Land Management Lands. Ecologically sensitive lands, including those containing rare flora or fauna, important wildlife habitat, or fragile natural or cultural resources should also be made off-limits to ORV use. Even if restricted to authorized trails, ORV use in these areas can result in permanent or irreparable damage to vegetation, soils, and water or wildlife resources.
  - ORV use is incompatible with most non-motorized visitor activities, for which the sight and sound of an ORV, or its associated resource impacts, can result in degraded recreational experiences or the displacement of non-motorized visitors from "shared" areas. Agencies must protect traditional foot trails from trespass by ORVs. The incompatibility of ORV use and non-motorized forms of recreation is exacerbated by concerns over public safety given the high speed at which ORVs can travel.
  - In designating ORV roads and routes, land managers should use objective criteria employing quantifiable conditions to evaluate potentially sustainable ORV routes. Evaluations should consider construction, engineering, and maintenance attributes relative to their ability to contain traffic to a narrow tread and shed water to prevent soil erosion or muddiness. Objective, standardized criteria should consider site-specific attributes, such as a maximum road/trail grade (e.g., <15%), route orientation to the prevailing landform slope (e.g., no alignments within 25°s of the fall line), and percent rock in substrates (e.g., >50%). Routes not

meeting professionally established standards should not be considered for ORV use unless rerouted or hardened with surface material such as gravel.

- Given the substantial negative impacts that can occur from a minimal amount of ORV use, an evaluation of agency road and trail maintenance capacity based on existing staff and funding levels should be made to determine the number of road and trail miles that can be opened to sustained ORV use. The increased costs and impacts of road/trail construction and maintenance practices, such as the transportation of off-site materials for bridges and hardened surfaces, needed to make ORV use sustainable should also be considered.
- Authorize Use Only on Roads and Routes Designated as Open
  - American Hiking urges all agencies to adhere strictly to the Presidential Executive Orders 11644 and 11989 requiring that off-road vehicle areas and trails shall be located only where the agency has demonstrated that such use will minimize resource damage and user conflicts.
  - Land management agencies should prohibit all off-road travel and restrict ORV use to roads and trails specifically designated, mapped, and posted as open to ORV use. Confining ORV use to designated routes is critical to avoid excessive environmental degradation and prevent user conflicts. Failure to accomplish this can quickly lead to long-term or irreversible resource damage.
- Establish, Monitor, and Enforce Standards of Quality
  - The Executive Orders mandate that agencies must monitor ORV use and its impacts and immediately close routes where use is causing or will cause considerable adverse effects on resources until a determination that such adverse effects have been eliminated and that measures have been implemented to prevent future recurrence.
  - Land management agencies should implement planning and decision frameworks for managing ORV use on roads and trails, such as the Limits of Acceptable Change (LAC) or Visitor Experience and Resource Protection (VERP) guidelines. These frameworks, developed through collaboration between the federal land management agencies and scientists, represent the best available practices for objectively managing the resource and social impacts associated with recreational visitation. They also employ indicators of resource or social conditions for which quantifiable standards of quality are established and monitored to prevent unacceptable levels of impact. For example, standards should be established for trail width, muddiness, soil erosion along ORV roads or trails, and wildlife habitat fragmentation with periodic monitoring to permit comparison of actual conditions to standards. If standards are exceeded the agency must implement corrective actions to bring conditions into compliance. Corrective actions could include improved road/trail design, construction, or maintenance, visitor education, regulations governing which routes are open to use, seasonal restrictions, reduction of use, or increased enforcement of existing regulations. The LAC/VERP frameworks, if fully applied, are adaptive management decision processes that would give the agencies the ability to curtail ORV use in a defensible manner (which could not happen in their absence given the politicized nature of those decisions).

1 - Off-road vehicles include motorcycles, all-terrain vehicles (ATVs), swamp buggies, dune buggies, air boats, snowmobiles, and all other four-wheel drive vehicles when used off-road or on primitive roads requiring high clearance and four-wheel drive. All-terrain vehicles (ATVs) are a subset of ORVs.

*Adopted by American Hiking Society's Board of Directors: April 13, 2013*