

ATVs and Land Usage

Since its introduction to the public in the 1960's, the All-Terrain Vehicle (ATV) has encountered many controversies. Some of these have dealt with the issue of safety, as original 3-wheel ATVs proved to be too dangerous for riders. Even improved 4-wheel ATVs still represent certain risks. Another controversy has been the age limits for the riders of ATVs. Many states have prohibited minors under the age of 16 from driving an ATV. One of the most predominant controversies regarding ATVs, however, has been the defining of the areas in which they are permitted. Where and when these vehicles are driven has continually popped up as an issue, as many drivers irresponsibly disregard laws that prohibit the use of ATVs in certain areas.

The issues surrounding ATVs and land usage are many. A major problem is that many riders intentionally cross over into privately owned property. They also have made a habit of crossing into public and private properties where they are obviously not intended to be. Often, the use of an ATV is strictly limited to trails, but riders still feel the need to leave these trails and venture on to other property.

Environmentalists are some of the biggest opponents of ATVs. They believe that riders who use ATVs for sporting purposes are inconsiderate of the environment. For example, they claim that the vehicle is used excessively in areas that are largely considered biologically sensitive, such as wetlands and sand dunes. Environmentalists claim that the deep treads on some ATV tires are capable of digging channels that drain boggy areas. They also claim that these tires damage the careful grooming of most snowmobile trails and increase the levels of sedimentation in streams. Proponents of ATVs, however, argue that the deep-treaded tires are necessary for the safe navigation of muddy and often rocky terrains. They also point to a number of findings that attribute the erosion and decay of sensitive habitats to out-of-control housing planning and industries that extract goods and materials from these highly sensitive areas.

ATV advocacy groups have organized to address these issues. Some of these groups have even gone so far as to purchase land for ATV riders to use. They have taken additional steps, such as building and maintaining appropriate trails for ATVs and obtaining permission directly from landowners to use their land for riding ATVs. Most importantly, many of these advocacy groups have committed themselves to educating ATV riders as to the best ways in which they can safely and responsibly use ATVs.

Unfortunately, those who do not follow the rules often negatively affect the image of the great majority of responsible riders. Those who see fit to ride off designated trails, on private land without permission, and under the influence

of alcohol or drugs create a great number of problems for those who play by the rules. In addition, self-regulation is particularly difficult since the main public complaint against ATVs is that they create excessive noise. Although the majority of ATVs comply with noise regulations, there are those whose intentional violation of these rules can disturb the activities of other recreational users for miles across open landscapes.

Recreationists who are upset about irresponsible ATV use include snowmobilers who feel as though their trails are misused. Hunters have also complained about ATVs, as the loud noise of the engine often disrupts their attempt to catch game. These are but some of the major complaints lodged against ATVs and the problems they bring in regard to land usage and the environment. Groups that support ATV riders have tried a number of methods to lessen the negative effects of these vehicles. In addition to providing designated areas for riders to enjoy, certain advocacy groups have made an effort to educate all those who own ATVs on the safest and most responsible ways in which they can operate their vehicles.

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