



Georgia ForestWatch ATV Documentation Project: Summary & Recommendations

The growing problem of illegal ATV use on the public lands of the National Forests in Georgia is out of the control of the government agency pledged to care for these same forests. The Forest Service is responsible for the management and protection of all the natural resources on the Chattahoochee and Oconee National Forest and should move rapidly in a direction that will stem the problem before it becomes worse and begin the restorative processes needed for the healing of the land and waters affected. Some of our most precious natural areas and trails such as the Rich Mtn. Wilderness, the Appalachian Trail, the Benton McKaye trail, the Chattooga Wild and Scenic River and GFW's Georgia Mtn. Treasures areas are also being negatively impacted by illegal ATV use. Hikers and backpackers, backwoods hunters and fisher folk, equestrians, birdwatchers, picnickers and a multitude of other citizens seeking the solace that only our National Forests and Parks can provide are increasingly being confronted by the damages wrought by this activity and sometimes even the direct exposure to the noise, smell and occasionally even threats to their personal safety caused by this illegal form of recreation. Considering the environmental impacts, which are many, and the social ramifications of the introduction of these machines on our public lands, it is clear something must be done! Many of the areas with the most glaring impacts should cause the FS great embarrassment and inspire them to action. This is not a simple or easy challenge, but it must be faced and it must be resolved in favor of the natural resources the FS has pledged to administer. Following are some ideas and suggestions offered in the spirit of cooperation and deep concern for the forests of the Chattahoochee and Oconee National Forests. We hope that they will be received in the same spirit and can in some small measure assist the FS in beginning the process of solving this problem.

The FS uses several techniques for closing roads which in the past were effective. Gates, berms, signs, and tank traps have all worked when the vehicles the structures were intended to stop were standard wheelbase cars, trucks, jeeps and other miscellaneous vehicles including 4 wheel drive equipped ones. With the introduction of small wheelbase, high clearance, high traction 4 wheel drive vehicles such as 3 and 4-wheeled ATVs, these road closure techniques became less effective. In many cases they have become part of the fun, a common example is a series of berms, in a row with dips in-between, which seems especially attractive to ATV users. Below see a short list of reasons for closure failures observed while on this project.

1. Berms too low: ATV's simply drive over them.
2. Berms poorly placed; ATV's go around one or both ends of berms. Berm placement, height and length are crucial for success. Berms should run the full width of the roadbed, be steep and whenever possible tie into a steep slope on the uphill side and extend to a steep drop off on the downhill side. This, of course, is an ideal and requires careful consideration in the field, but a little creative engineering may go a long way to greater closure success. Also berms placed going up steep slopes are more difficult to breach.
3. Berms in series placed too far apart, when berms are steep and close together they become much less fun for ATV users and more difficult to cross.
4. Gates too high; ATV's go under.
5. Gate does not extend full width of road and ATV's go around.

6. Gate placement is poor; see 2, above.
7. Guardrail use is similar to gates and placement is critical.
8. Signs; the small yellow signs placed at many closures, written in legal language obviously have little or no effect on most illegal ATV users intent on riding on public land. Probably no signage smaller than a billboard, placed in the middle of the road would be effective, but I believe the sign created on the Toccoa district is much clearer in it's message and should be considered for wider use.
9. Felled trees; the most effective closures have been areas with blow downs or pine stands with Southern Pine Beetle infestations. A fairly large tangle of well placed, down trees, can be a significant deterrent.

The list above is not intended as a short course in closure engineering as much as it is to point out the challenge for successful closure and an observed disconnect or lack of good planning and execution in the field. The FS can do better in designing closures that work, physical barriers are an important part of any successful closure program. Some closures where constructed it seems with little thought to nearby streams and springheads. Silt coming off these structures was noted to flow directly into riparian areas, creating the very situations that closures hope to stop. Also a technique, which seemed wasteful and counterproductive, is the plowing or disking of a road intended for closure and sowing grass on it as if it were a linear food plot. Old logging roads seldom have the soil characteristics or enough available sunlight to grow good stands of grass. They are usually too rocky and acidic plus the plowing itself increases erosion down the roadbed and potential sedimentation of nearby streams and springheads. We suggest that this closure technique be discontinued. Two other areas of concern pose a difficult challenge related to the ATV issue on FS lands. The impacts of ATV's and other legal ORV's in power line right-of-ways and on the legal ORV areas on FS lands is appalling and these areas can only be seen as national public land's sacrifice zones. Land managers need to address the degradation of these areas head on and decide the issue of appropriate use and end or mitigation of damages. This will require bold leadership and clarity in communication with the public, but I believe the majority of citizens desire healthy forests and watersheds and desire the FS to take the lead in protecting the lands they manage in trust for the citizenry.

Enforcement of the laws pertaining to illegal ATV use on the public forestlands under the administration of the USFS is a crucial part of any successful program. A lack of clarity concerning Georgia state laws governing these vehicles and the same lack on the part of FS policy concerning the use of ATV's on FS roads has been used as an explanation in the past for a lack of enforcement. Also, shortage of funding and FS enforcement personnel have been cited as reasons for the lack of control of this problem. And lastly, is concern over the reactions of local communities, politicians and user groups who enjoy motorized recreation. The FS is caught in a delicate balancing act, caught between proper resource management and the desires of recreational user groups, but it is abundantly clear that there must be an active change from business as usual in favor of the wonderful natural resources the FS is responsible for. Georgia ForestWatch stands ready to assist the FS where our interests and concerns are mutual. Assistance from the Georgia Department of Natural Resource's enforcement department is also necessary and should be used to help with this growing problem. It should be noted that other National Forests in Region 8 and even certain districts within the Chattahoochee and Oconee National Forest have had various levels of success and their experience should be taken into consideration. One more challenge for the FS is the controlling of illegal ATV activity originating on private land. Many of the most impacted areas of illegal ATV use are located adjacent to private land and can be traced from the FS lands virtually to the users front

door. This of course does not constitute proof of illegal activity but may assist in locating the source of a problem and in timing of observation which may lead to better control. An interesting phenomena noted during 12 weeks of on the ground surveying over much of the FS lands in north Georgia was that there appears to be no activity in these areas between Monday and Friday. The last area of concern for management and enforcement is the off trail degradation caused by legal vehicles in legal ORV use areas. Just because a form of recreation is popular does not mean it is appropriate for areas of high rainfall, with steep slopes and sensitive riparian zones. In attempting to please and accommodate the public, the FS errs in protecting the natural resource which is it's historical and original mandate.

The negative environmental impacts of roads and off road vehicle use has been well documented in the scientific literature and extends from siltation of streams and riparian areas to the interruption of wildlife breeding habits to forest fragmentation and the spread of exotic species. An excellent resource for scientific information concerning the impacts of roads is Wildlands CPR at www.wildlandsCPR.org and the Society of Conservation Biology at www.conbio.net/scb/. The enabling, underlying problem of illegal ATV use on the FS lands, when looked at from a landscape perspective, is the legacy of high road density from past logging and other human uses. This road system, in conjunction with the modern FS classified road system, creates abundant opportunity for illegal motorized recreation. This recreation is opening up and extending into areas that have for years been slowly returning to a more natural state. These damaging trends must be stopped if we are to have healthy ecosystem processes on our public lands providing the benefits we cherish for our descendants, ourselves, and the natural world we are dependent upon. We would ask that you live up to the high calling of protecting an irreplaceable resource; the mountain environments of Georgia, and we hope that this summary and it's recommendations will help inform and support the FS in dealing with this burgeoning situation.