

ATVs in Wisconsin:

An outline of issues regarding the use of ATVs in Wisconsin and their impacts

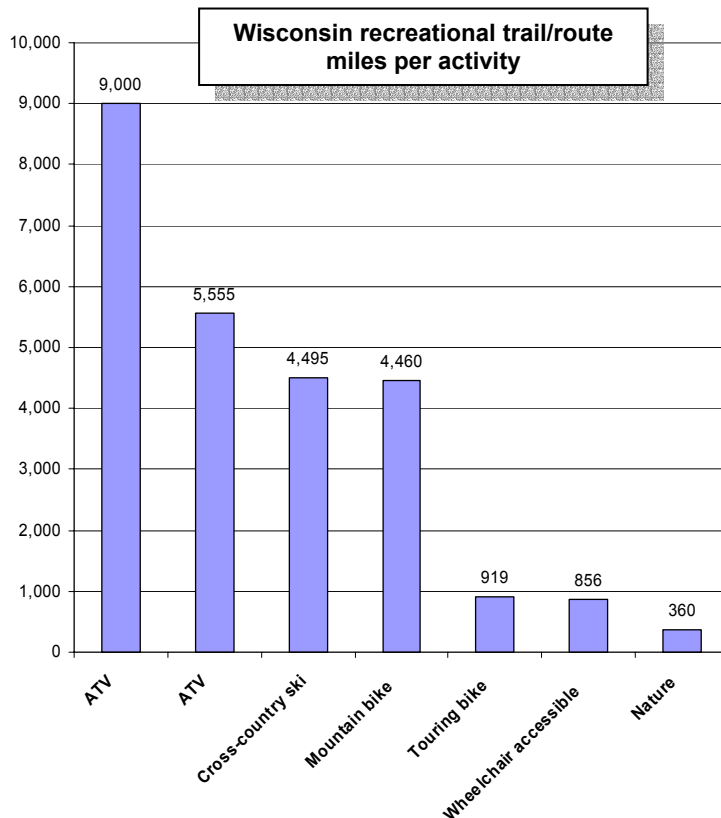
Presented to the Natural Resources Board at their June 2006 meeting where they considered whether to direct the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources to investigate the concept of creating an ATV/OHV recreation area to be known as a Motorized State Recreation Area.

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1. The supply of ATV trails appears adequate for the current and future demand

Currently there are between 6,000 and 10,000 miles of ATV routes/trails in Wisconsin (see the chart below and its associated text box for citations). For some perspective the distance from West Coast of the US to the East Coast of the US: 3,000 miles. According to the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WDNR) 5,555 miles of those trails are state funded.



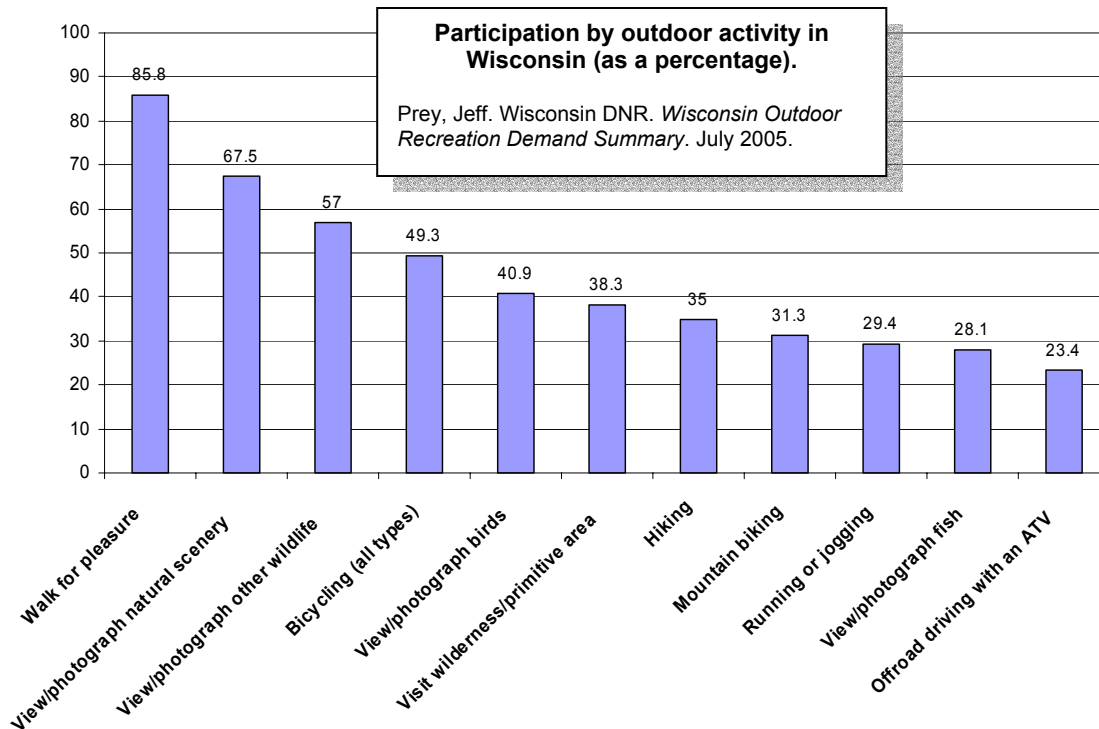
9,000 miles of ATV trails/routes according to US Trails Maps (USTM) and an interview with USTM staff in the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel on 7/16/05.

5,555 miles of ATV trails according to the Economic & Demographic Profile of Wisconsin's ATV Users 2004 by the Wisconsin Department of Transportation and Wisconsin ATV Association.

All other trail mileage is from Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources 2000-2005 Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan.

Although there are approximately 300,000 registered ATVs in the state and a recent state survey indicates that approximately one million Wisconsin residents participate in off-road ATV riding Polaris Industries, makers of ATVs, indicates that the number of recreational ATV riders is substantially lower. According to Polaris' President and CEO, Tom Tiller, the recreation market is only one-third of the ATV industry (Minnesota Public Radio interview, July 19, 2004).

Nevertheless, ATV riding is not nearly as popular as other outdoor recreation activities, especially those that may conflict with the speed, dust, noise and environmental damage associated with ATV riding.



2. A state ATV trail infrastructure should be planned instead of piecemealed together.

The WDNR's current method of designating trails for ATVs is as follows: (1) the State purchases land typically with Stewardship Funds as opposed to ATV funds; (2) assuming there is a planning process (which is not always the case) the local unit of government designates the use(s) and develops the trail. This method results in a fragmented and incongruous system of State Trails whereby trail use may change abruptly at county lines.

Adding ATV trails to the Statewide trail network in the aforementioned manner does not consider potential impacts of connecting ATV trails across the State. The cumulative impact (environmental, economic, social) of a regional, statewide or multi-state ATV trail infrastructure as proposed by the ATV lobby and by some WDNR staff has not been addressed in any plan or study. This plan demands an environmental assessment or environmental impact statement.

Many State Trails that are currently open to ATVs have no Trail Master Plans (contrary to Wisconsin Administrative Code, Chapter NR 44), have not undergone a trail planning process, and have no environmental assessment associated with it (as mandated by the Wisconsin Environmental Protection Act). This is another case where the impacts of ATVs has not been carefully considered.

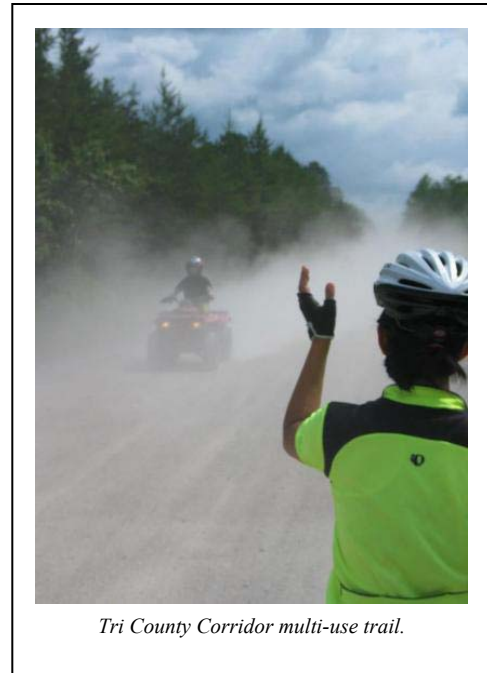
3. ATVs displace other trail users which is an economic and social cost.

“Multiple use often requires trails to be widened to accommodate the variety of uses and higher levels of traffic. Wider trails do not provide a high quality level of experience for many users, and use will often drop for hikers, bikers, bird watchers and walkers when trail systems are widened.” (Brigit Brown, WDNR State Parks and Recreation Specialist *Multiple Use Trails* April 10, 2004. Disseminated by Laurie Osterndorf, Administrator, WDNR Division of Land.)

“It is essential that the Wisconsin State Trails System provide a high quality trail experience to a variety of user groups, but no user group’s experience should be sacrificed to provide for another. It should also be the goal of the Department to design and maintain trails which can enjoyably and sustainably satisfy visitors with little or no managed impact on natural resources.” (Ibid.)

“Allowing multiple uses is not always the best or highest use of a trail, or of any land. And when given a limited area, such as a trail, in most cases it does not serve users most efficiently to place one user group on top of another.” (Ibid.)

“In my opinion and from my experience, if motorized recreation traffic is permitted on the trail then that usually becomes the ‘primary’ use. There is usually hiking, biking, equestrian activities on the trail but they tend to be more localized meaning near their residences and/or near centers of population. I believe the motorized use becomes the primary use because those users can travel farther and faster and want to. Also, I believe many of the non-motorized users usually don’t want to encounter motorized traffic. This will tend to separate the users...” (Timothy Miller, Supervisor for WDNR Northern Region Parks and Recreation Program, October 29, 2004 email correspondence.)



Tri County Corridor multi-use trail.



Tri County Corridor multi-use trail.

“...I have seen an email...by Tim Miller. Essentially I agree with Tim’s comments that a motorized use on a trail becomes in most cases the primary use...and sometimes the only use. We have no studies to back this up, but our experience shows this to be true.” (Peter Biermeier, Section Chief for Trails, Planning and External Relations, November 1, 2004 email.)

“Use of the [Gandy Dancer State T]rail by motorcycles, motorbikes, all terrain vehicles and four wheelers is not desirable because of incompatibility with the non-motorized summer uses.” (*Minnesota-Wisconsin Gandy Dancer Trail Master Plan, Polk County Segment.*)

“...ATVs travel at higher speeds and cause more erosion and more noise emissions than

other trail activities. Using trails established for other recreation activities, such as hiking, ATVs create a disproportionate impact on other resource users.” (*Wisconsin Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan 2000-2005.*)

“WDNR’s experience with ATVs on other highly used trails demonstrates that they are incompatible with bicyclists and hikers due to noise, speed, dust, trail damage and general safety considerations.” (*Madison-Freeport State Trail: Feasibility study and environmental analysis.*)

“[The City of Saint Croix Falls, WI] experience has been that off-road uses, such as three or four wheelers, tend to detract from [hiking and biking]. While it is nice to accommodate all demands, sometimes it proves difficult – and often at the detriment of your primary user [hikers and bicyclists]. Therefore, I hope that the County Board can have the Dresser to Amery Trail one primarily used for hiking, biking and snowmobiles. Uses beyond that should require more input and, perhaps, the implementation of additional safety measures.” (Ed Emerson, City Administrator for Saint Croix Falls, WI, January 3, 2005.)

“The surface of the Cheese Country Recreation Trail is adequate for bicycling, however, I would advise against it. The trail receives an extensive amount of ATV traffic, especially when the weather is nice on the weekends. If you planned to ride during the work week, then there is less ATV traffic on the trail and biking is a bit easier and safer.” (Mike Wentela, Executive Director, Lafayette Development Corporation, March 6, 2006, email correspondence.)



4. ATVs are not snowmobiles.

- Snowmobilers have established a trail network that includes substantial numbers of private properties. ATVs, because of their propensity to damage property and disturb residents in the warmer months, are not often welcomed by private property owners. Therefore, the ATV lobby is putting considerable pressure on the government to open public lands and subsidize a trail system for these machines.

- ATVs are used year round. Noise, dust, and encounters with riders are more prevalent in the warmer months because people are outside more often and windows are open.
- Snowmobiles operate on top of the snow when the ground is frozen, plants are dormant, and animals are less active. The potential for environmental disturbance is thus minimized. ATVs are operated year round and during times when the ground is susceptible to damage.
- Snowmobiles are almost always used for recreation while ATVs are most often used as a work vehicle.



5. Recreational ATV riding requires an investment in law enforcement.

Despite the presence of ATV Trail Ambassadors and designated Recreational Patrol Officers in some counties irresponsible ATV use is out of control in some portions of the State resulting in damage to Township Roads, trails, public land and private property. Noise, speeding, dust and other issues that have not been adequately addressed to date.

"I have no personal opinion as to whether an ATV trail system or corridor should be developed in Vilas County, however, having observed other forms of recreational vehicle use (dirt bikes, snowmobiles, and water craft) in Vilas County in the past, I think your committee should be aware of enforcement concerns. Enclosed along with this letter please find statistics from the last three years involving snowmobile, water craft, and ATV complaints. Typically these complaints involve such matters as accidents, trespass, damage to property, speed, noise, littering, road right-of-way violations, underage operators, unregistered

vehicles, and intoxicated operators to name a few...The point of this letter is to allow everyone involved with the ATV discussions to consider enforcement obligations and subsequent funding concerns...If the need arises for increased patrol because of serious or ongoing violations, some type of funding will be needed to address that additional workload." (Sheriff John A. Neibuhr, Vilas County Sheriff, excerpt from a letter addressed to county board member Doyen, May 2, 2003.)

"[Burnett County Sheriff Dean Roland] made it clear to [the Burnett County Board] if his department doesn't have the manpower to properly police county-owned ATV trails with a Forestry officer, his solution is simple, 'If that position is eliminated, my suggestion will be to close the trails. We simply don't have the people to patrol them.'" ('Sheriff says without deputies to patrol them, no ATV trails at all'. *Burnett County Sentinel*. October 15, 2003.)

"[ATV riders] come up here and think they can just go anywhere they want and do anything they want to do. If we don't curtail it now, I don't know how we'll ever curtail it. The northern tier of counties in Wisconsin are really getting hammered." (Steve Chistner, Burnett County Recreation Officer, quoted in *Burnett County Sentinel*, July 14, 2004.)

"[Douglas County Recreation Officer, Steve Olson] described the Namekagon Barrens region of northeast Burnett County as a 'zoo,' saying ATV drivers are tearing up the terrain in that area." ('County needs woods patrol', *Burnett County Sentinel*, July 14, 2004.)

"The growth has just exploded on ATVs and there's no enforcement," Meyers said. "That has just reinforced their idea – basically they know – that whatever they do, they can act with impunity." (Roberta Scruggs, *Landowner Relations*, Presented by the Sportsman's Alliance of Main with financial support from The Maine Outdoor Heritage Fund, Date unknown.)

6. ATVs spread exotic and invasive plants.

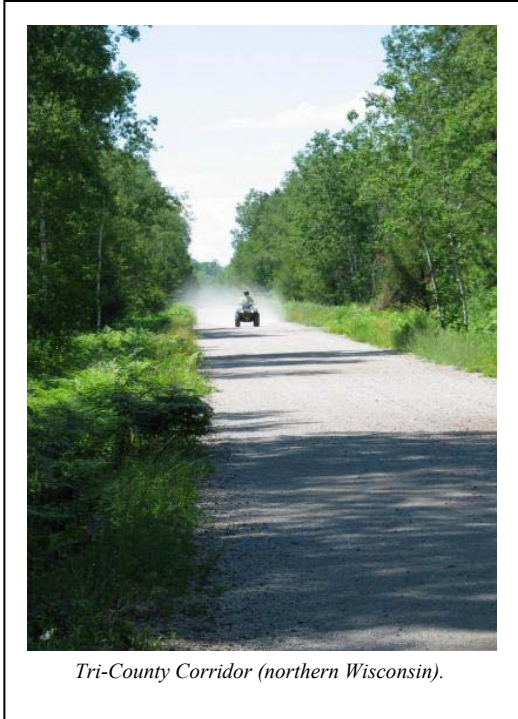
ATV trails, more so than any other recreational trail, enhance the spread of exotic species. This happens in two ways: by carrying seeds of exotic species on machines, and by changing habitats and soil conditions in ways that favor invasion of exotic species.

"People and their motorized vehicles are a major cause of knapweed spread in Montana. Vehicles driven several feet through a knapweed site can acquire up to 2000 seeds, 200 of which may still be attached after 10 miles of driving." (Duncan, C., J. Story, and R. Sheley. 2002. *Montana Knapweeds: Identification, Biology, and Management*. Montana State University Extension Service, Circular 311.)

"...off-trail use that results in bare soil or vegetation destruction, creates conditions that favor the invasion of exotic species." Minnesota Department of Natural Resources. *Assessing the ecological impacts of ATV trail construction and use on public lands: factors to consider and a review of the literature*. Environmental Review Program. Ecological Services Division. October 3, 2002.)

"With respect to measures to reduce ecological damages from exotic species spread from ATVs, measures could include...Closing ATV trails where purple loosestrife is present." (Ibid.)





Tri-County Corridor (northern Wisconsin).

7. ATVs use on abandoned railroad beds appears to be a health threat to other trail users and residents who live near such a trail.

Pollution on rail beds is well documented [see *Best Management Practices for Controlling Exposure to Soil during the Development of Rail Trails* (Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 2004) and *Understanding Environmental Contaminants* (Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, 2004)]. What is not well documented in Wisconsin is the propensity for ATVs to kick up clouds of this dust thereby mobilizing the pollutants and threatening the health of those who live near such a trail.

Exposure to rail bed dust is an indeterminate health hazard according to the Wisconsin Department of Health. This statement indicates that further testing of the potential health impacts of exposure to dust and/or other contaminants, especially those made airborne by ATV traffic, demands further testing because the available data indicates that a health risk is possible and/or probable.

Exhaust fumes from ATVs and snowmobiles are known to “hang” in the air long after the vehicles have passed. These fumes are known environmental and public health

hazards posing the biggest risk to those who reside near the proposed trail but also slower-moving trail users who are unable to quickly move out of exhaust fumes. Although the ATV lobby indicates that recreational off-road vehicles are subject to more stringent emission standards these machines are still easily modified and older machines will be in service for decades.

8. The economic impact of ATV riding in Wisconsin has not factored the opportunity costs of displacing other users or the costs of repairing the damage caused by ATVs.

The Wisconsin Department of Tourism in conjunction with the Wisconsin ATV Association conducted a survey and analysis of the economic impact of ATV riding in Wisconsin titled *Economic & Demographic Profile of Wisconsin’s ATV Users*, March 2004. This study was funded by the Wisconsin Department of Tourism (\$30,000) and WATVA members conducted the face-to-face surveys.

The report indicated that even though only 14% of the ATVers came from out of state the annual total spending by all ATV users in Wisconsin was \$295 million. By comparison the economic impact of snowmobiling in Wisconsin (2000-01) was \$250 million and the economic impact of wildlife watching in Wisconsin (2001) was \$1.3 billion.

But the economic impact report on ATV riding did not take into account the true cost of law enforcement, environmental damage, nuisance and other undesirable aspects. When balanced with these costs it is doubtful that the economic impact of ATV riding in Wisconsin is a net gain.

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