

Bitterroot Quiet Use Coalition 2008 Monitoring Report

With the help of members and volunteers, the Bitterroot Quiet Use Coalition has been monitoring back country trails for years. Additionally, we often collect reports from hikers, recreational stock users, and others who happen to come across disturbing off-road vehicle (ORV) use. The BQUC monitoring program has three main goals: document illegal ORV activity, record evidence of damage from authorized use, and document trails that see little or no use. Whether due to high gas prices, or past high profile incidents, the level of use in 2008 seemed less than in past years.

BQUC Finds Quiet Trails

The Bitterroot National Forest has many trails currently open to ORVs. However, many of them see little use either due to location, terrain or because they are simply impassable. This is an important point since some ORV advocates claim they need every trail available to meet demand. In fact, many trails we monitor show little signs of motorized use. Volunteers typically look for tire tracks, trail clearing, vegetation trampling, signs of erosion and trail widening.

Alan Mt. Roadless Area

Motorized users frequently use some routes within this area, but since it is the largest IRA in the Bitterroot at over 102,000 acres many trails do not see much use. This season volunteers looked at Crazy Creek Tr. #103 and Tr. #178 off Rd. #728. Both are located in the upper northeast section of the IRA and volunteers found no evidence of use. According to the last Bitterroot National Forest proposal, trail #103 would be protected, while Tr. #178 would be open to motorcycles.

Sapphire Wilderness Study Area

Volunteers spent much of their time monitoring trails in this high priority area. While some routes historically see heavy use, we found others are less popular and see little activity.

BQUC members followed a portion of Tr. #87 that ultimately "T"s at Tr. #313 and Tr. #83, which leads to Kent Lake. Management direction here is poor as Tr. #313 is protected, but Tr. #83 is not and nothing would prevent a person from riding on the closed section. The trailhead sign states "no motorized use wider than trail permitted," and there is a sign with trail number on it that just shows a hiker. A single track path goes around a boulder and an ATV could as well if they wanted to; no tracks were found. The Bitterroot NF's proposed action would designate this trail for motorcycles.

We also hiked along Tr. #102 that leads to the closed section of Tr. #313. A hiker symbol with a trail number was the only sign and we found no evidence of motorized use at all. This is a lovely little trail for horses or hiking but there are many mosquitoes! The Bitterroot NF's proposal would keep this trail open for motorcycles, which makes no sense because it dead ends at a closed trail.

In the southern portion of the WSA, we looked at Sign Creek Tr. #40 and Moose Creek Tr. #168, both of which had small signs of old stock use and recent foot traffic, but overall they showed little use of any kind. These trails cut through the heart of the WSA and the Bitterroot NF proposes to keep these open for motorcycle use.

Other trails we monitored were #503 along Skalkaho Creek, Tr. #313 from Skalkaho Pass, Tr. #77 along Railroad Creek, and Tr. #156 along Weasel Creek. Again we found no evidence of motorized use, which is consistent with past findings, and supports the Bitterroot NF's proposal to protect these trails in the upcoming Travel Management Plan. It should be noted that even though we found no evidence of use on Tr. #77, we did find a user-created route linking this trail to the nearby road #62637, and if the Forest Service want to protect this trail, this route must be effectively blocked or removed.

Sleeping Child Roadless Area

From Rd. #75, we hiked around a mile down Tr. #105 until it started to climb. The trailhead sign just shows the hikers symbol and another one down about ¼ mile says it is a single track due to resource damage by ATVs; the trail is also blocked with boulders to the width of a single track. We saw terrible erosion from past use on a steep hill with ruts 3-4 feet deep. Past this point, as the trail starts to climb, it looks like the trail is starting to recover some and the Lodgepole pines are encroaching to help make it single track. We saw no evidence of use by anyone except deer and elk. According to the map, just north of Tr. #105 is Tr. #159 that supposedly begins off Rd. #75 as well. However, we saw no trailhead sign or evidence of the trail itself. The area experienced a severe burn here so maybe trail was obliterated. We stopped for a break at Divide Creek where there were lots of yellow jackets and mosquitos! The Bitterroot NF proposes keeping this trail open to motorcycles in their upcoming Travel Management Plan.

Stony Mt. Roadless Area

One dedicated volunteers hiked along many of the major trails in this area known for its great elk habitat and wild character. They include Gold Creek Tr. #311, Flat Rock Tr. #148, Bitterroot Bottom Tr. #321, and Eagle Point Tr. #147; all are single track trails popular for foot and stock use. There was no evidence of motorized use along these trails, which supports the Bitterroot NF's proposal to protect them from motorized impacts.

Blue Joint Wilderness Study Area

Volunteers looked at a couple trails this season, following up on past years' efforts when use was higher than that in 2008. One was Deer Creek Tr. #139, which received maintenance in past years, but this season there was one log across it about a mile in that did not appear to have been passed by any motor vehicles. The trailhead sign off West Fork Road did not have any information relating to allowable uses, but there was a sign about ½ mile in that stated, "vehicles must fit tread." We did see some ATVs tracks that crossed the creek at the trailhead, but stopped less than ½ mile in this year. Another trail we monitored was Chicken Creek Tr. #138, which is in the 2000 burn area. One large tree about ½ mile in blocked the way, with no evidence of users going around. No signs of junction with Deer Creek Trail.

BQUC Documents ORV impacts

Unfortunately, BQUC members and volunteers found plenty evidence of ORV impacts in the form of both illegal and legal use. In the past, activities such as the establishment of user-created routes, riding on protected trails, mud-bogging and conflicts with quiet recreationists have received much of the attention among users and the media. However, these high-profile incidents do not represent the majority of ORV activity. Rather, it is the regular day-to-day authorized use of motorized vehicles that can have some of the largest impacts on the landscape.

Roadless & Wilderness Study Areas – Priorities for Protection

The Bitterroot NF continues to promote ORV use in violation of the Wilderness Study Area Act. Previously, the agency produced maps directing motorized users to the Chain of Lakes Tr. #39, and this year we found a user-created route about ½ mile south of Tr. #102 on Rd. #75 that the agency signed for ORV use. Keep in mind that the Wilderness Study Area Act directs land managers to only allow motorized use as it existed when the act was established in 1977. Near the southern portion of the WSA, volunteers documented use off the East Fk. Rd ½ mile from the Sign Creek Tr. #40. Here we found a route wide enough for a full size vehicle and we walked it for about a half mile. It looks like it may have originally been a short road to a campsite but because of the topography (flat and grassy through here) it has been pushed further and further into the WSA. Volunteers also found a user-created route leading from the gravel pit off Rd. #75 heading up along Hog Through Creek. It was unclear if the route made it past the WSA boundary, but the agency should remove or block the route to prevent future use.

Just north of the Sapphire WSA is the Stony Mt. Inventoried Roadless Area that the Bitterroot NF would like to propose for Recommended Wilderness. Here, one BQUC member found ATV use on the Cutoff Gulch Tr. #146, just past the Gold Creek campground.

In the Sleeping Child Inventoried Roadless Area, volunteers looked for Tr. #161, but could not find the trailhead sign off Rd. #75. What they did find was a parking area and a fire ring with many two track routes leading away; people can also access Tr. #510 from here. Guessing the trail's direction, volunteers followed the route for about a mile where it narrowed into a single track at which time they were on the actual trail as they followed it to Bald Top Mt.; here it disappeared into a heavily burned area that was gorgeous with blooming Lupine flowers. The Bitterroot NF plans to keep this trail open to motorcycles in their upcoming proposed Travel Plan, but given the trailhead is turning into a small motorized play area, and that Tr. #161 ends at Bald Top Mt., the agency should protect this trail in future proposals to prevent further resource damage.

Located north of Tr. #105 is a large parking area within the Roadless Area where a very clear double track route was heading away in a northwest direction. In fact it looked like an old road to start, and other double track routes were found linking up with this one. After about a ½ mile the path narrowed into a single track trail, but continued on. In order to protect the Roadless character and to prevent further spread of motorized use, these routes need to be blocked and removed from the ground.

Over the July 4th holiday (and some days after), a large group of people rented out the Bitterroot National Forest's East Fork Guard Station and caused an incident with forest officials. (see related story). During that time, a few motorcycle riders rode cross-country off the nearby Needle Creek Tr. #434 (the trail is in an official Roadless Area). Upon investigation, BQUC members found evidence of hill climbing and riding off trail in multiple places. It should be noted that much of the trail system intersects with user-created routes, and that half of the trail is not open to motorized vehicles. Unfortunately, it is impossible to know when the trail becomes protected since there are no markers. The Bitterroot NF issued citations to those responsible and required them to fix the damage. This is an example of law enforcement working and we applaud the agency's response.

The Tolan Creek Roadless Area, located just north of the Continental Divide and southeast of the Sula Ranger Station, has just two trails. This year, BQUC members hiked along Tr. #78 from Reimel Creek Rd. #727. This is wild country as the trailhead sign showed evidence of bear scratches on the posts. The trail has historically been a single track path, but ATV's have been widening it and we documented evidence of flattened grass and deep ruts in the mud. The trail is steep and follows an intermittent stream much of the first mile before meeting with Tr. #203 right before the Roadless

boundary. The trail is badly eroded in sections and needs water bars; there are also signs that ATVs have been riding off trail in the adjacent wetlands. Volunteers found a single track route on a side hill that could have been user-created. Upon reaching the Roadless boundary, the trail peters out at about 1.4 miles in a high meadow, probably because of fire, downfall, tall grass and regrowth on the trail. There was no evidence of trail #203 at all. Unfortunately, the Bitterroot NF proposes to make this a double track ATV trail that would dead-end in the Roadless area.

More Monitoring

A place does not have to be in a Roadless area or a WSA to hold value for local Bitterrooters. A case in point is the Burnt Ridge area near Little Trapper Creek (also called the Trapper-Bunkhouse area). For several years motorized users have created a spider web linking user-created routes with the existing Forest Service road system adjacent to private property. The routes, some of which were originally mountain bike and hiking trails can accommodate ATVs and many are now wide enough to allow any sized vehicle. Erosion is evident in many places and routes are braided to avoid "bad spots." This network of poorly located routes funnel noise and dust right into neighboring houses, and past calls to close these user-created routes have been ignored.

Gash Creek Tr. #122 – In the early Spring a back country skier notified the BQUC of about ATV use on this once single track trail leading to the Wilderness boundary. Tracks were seen in the mud and snow for about ¼ mile where the trail turned back to a single track. Once notified, the Bitterroot NF law enforcement officer said they would post signs to notify users that the trail is closed to ATVs.

Roaring Lion Tr. #124 – This trail is rarely, if ever, used by ORVs. There was no sign here telling what type of use is allowed, but it is clearly a single track, narrow trail that winds its way up a couple of miles through huge Ponderosa Pines and a Cedar grove before it crosses the creek and continues for another four miles along the base of rugged cliffs frequented by mountain goats. Unfortunately, south of the trailhead is a large scar of 4wd tracks leading straight up the hill. Each year this scar goes a little further up the mountain, apparently, to access some large Ponderosas that are tempting for firewood.

Ward Mt trail #208- Historically, this trail has not really seen much use by ORVs. It is neither legal nor practical due to terrain to ride an ATV on this trail. However, volunteers found dirt bike tracks that had "spun out" near the trailhead and continued up the trail; there were no signs at the trailhead. The trail is a steep, narrow and a strenuous climb for 6.4 miles to the summit of Ward Mt., passing thru high meadows and a pretty little creek in a couple of areas. Unfortunately, it is proposed to be designated as open to motorcycles in the upcoming Travel Plan.

Persistence Pays Off

When we first started monitoring the Brennan Gulch area in 2003, it looked like a battlefield. This quiet little drainage, 8 miles east on the Skalkaho Pass road, is just close enough to town to attract ATV and dirt bike riders by the dozens who unload their trailers on FS Rd #714 and tear up and down the gulch, ripping thru the wetlands and creek bottom. They made hill climbs up the sides of the steep hills and had created routes that gouged their way from the bottom to the top of the ridge where they had made two large play areas in the high mountain meadows. After much complaining and even some local press attention, the Forest Service started efforts to repair the area. A few carcenite signs and re-seeding and rock blockages did little to change the situation in 2004 and 2005. Finally, after more monitoring and more letters and phone calls and public input the Forest Service got serious about the

situation in 2006. Log fences were built to block riders access into the play areas and across some of the drainages. Numerous large trees were dragged across the deeply rutted routes. Erosion control matting and seeding was placed in the most severely damaged wetland areas, and several signs were put up. And... the Forest Service started patrolling the area. At first, the fences were torn down and the signs shot full of bullet holes. Progress and healing was slow. When the area was monitored in 2007, it looked like- for the most part, riders were starting to respect the closures and rehab efforts.

This year we were pleasantly surprised. The trail into Brennan Gulch was still effectively blocked to single track riders, hikers, and horseback riders. The wooden fence barricades were intact and most importantly, the vegetation was coming back. The user created routes were almost completely obliterated by new growth in most areas, but there was still a lot of trash and shells from shooting in one area. Dead animal carcasses are still being dumped here. But, the OHV use appears to be minimal for now.

Conclusion

Overall, this season we monitored 47 trails and two areas documenting a range of uses. Many of our priority trails in Roadless and Wilderness Study Areas do not show evidence of use and some are even being naturally revegetated or are gone completely. In other places we saw trail widening and erosion, as well as user-created routes that need to be blocked or obliterated. It was common not to find signs that inform people about allowable motorized uses, and in some places the trailhead locations were unclear. Our findings support our position that much of the existing road system can accommodate motorized recreation, and there is no reason to allow such use in our Roadless lands or the WSAs.