

The Silent Majority:

Public Attitudes Toward Trail Use on the Gallatin National Forest



Predator Project
April 1999

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The following people all contributed to the completion of this survey and report: Keith Stockmann and Chris Bitterauf conducted the survey, Keith Stockmann and David Havlick analyzed the data, and Shawn Regnerus, McCrystie Adams and Tom Skeeel prepared the report.

A special thanks to Stephen F. McCool for his assistance in developing the survey and Rodney L. Boyd from the University of Montana for helping analyze the results. Thanks also to Bob Ekey for his input on the report.

This survey and report were generously funded by
the Harder Foundation and the Cinnabar Foundation.

*cover: Backpackers examine tracks left by ATVs detouring from a hiking trail on the Gallatin National Forest.
Roads Scholar Project photo*

Introduction

Two years ago, the Gallatin National Forest closed two trailheads to four-wheeled motorized use in a popular roadless area north of Yellowstone National Park, sparking a heated controversy about off-road vehicles (ORVs) on backcountry trails. The Gallatin National Forest imposed the temporary ban in the Hyalite/ Porcupine/ Buffalo Horn Wilderness Study Area because the machines were destroying the trails and causing erosion and vegetation damage.

The Forest Service's closure, which was extended for another nine months during the summer of 1998, touched off a barrage of letters to local newspapers and the Forest Service, including one from Gov. Marc Racicot in 1998 endorsing a temporary extension of the ban. This growing controversy surrounding backcountry ORV use is not limited to the Gallatin National Forest; the U.S. Forest Service and the U.S. Bureau of Land Management started a public process in January 1999 to address motorized use throughout Montana and the Dakotas. As additional evidence of the increasing focus on ORVs, articles addressing the presence of ORVs on our national forest trails have appeared during the last year in every major newspaper in Montana, as well as *The Washington Post*.

The closures in the Porcupine/ Buffalo Horn area primarily addressed the vegetation damage and erosion

caused by four-wheeled all-terrain vehicles (ATVs), with little mention of the impact of the vehicles on the backcountry recreational experience of other trail users. In fact, there has been little systematic study of the habits of Gallatin National Forest trail users and their opinions about ATVs, motorcycles or snowmobiles (collectively known as ORVs) on trails. To address that need, Predator Project, with the assistance of University of Montana forestry professor Stephen F. McCool, designed a public attitude survey that was conducted during the summer of

1998 at four of the most popular trailheads on the Gallatin NF.

This survey was intended to measure how the public uses Forest Service trails, how well informed the public is about current management of trails and how the public feels about motorized use on public trails.

The survey results demonstrate that the majority of people using Gallatin National Forest trails want a non-motorized experience.

Predator Project designed the survey with the hope that it will help the Gallatin National Forest and the U.S. Forest Service nationwide determine if its current trail management and allocation of trail use corresponds to the actual trail use and attitudes of the public. The survey results demonstrate that the majority of people using Gallatin National Forest trails want a non-motorized experience. These opinions are in stark contrast to current reality, where 75% of all Gallatin trails and 91% of forest trails outside of designated Wilderness are open to some form of motorized use.

Survey Design and Execution

The survey was designed with the assistance of Stephen F. McCool, Professor and Coordinator, Recreation Management, School of Forestry, University of Montana. The survey questions were formulated by consulting accepted social science texts on survey design and method, as well as prior surveys done by the states of Montana and Idaho. After the survey form was designed it was reviewed and approved by both the Gallatin National Forest and the Forest Service regional headquarters in Missoula.

The survey was conducted during July, August and September of 1998 by Keith Stockmann and Chris Bitterauf, at the following trailheads: Grotto Falls #427,

Emerald Lake #434, Porcupine Creek #34, and Buffalo Horn #1. The Grotto Falls and Emerald Lake trails were open to use by motorcycles and four-wheeled ATVs, while the latter two trails were only open to motorcycles. Each trailhead was monitored for eight hours a day on eight separate days. During this time, every person over the age of 18 leaving the trailhead was asked to fill out a survey. More than 80% (837 people out of the 1011 who were asked) agreed to fill out a survey, significantly more than were expected. The results of the survey were then tabulated and calculated by Keith Stockman. For the general questions, which were answered by all respondents, the margin of error is plus or minus 3.5%.

Survey Highlights

- A majority of respondents felt that too many trails were open to summer motorized use. Thirty-three percent (33%) of the respondents felt that the amount of trails open to motorized use should be “much less” while an additional 24% felt that the amount of trails open to motorized use should be

“less.” Only 5% of respondents felt that “more” trails should be open to motorized use, while an additional 2% felt that the amount of trails open to motorized use should be “much more.” Nineteen percent (19%) of the respondents felt that there should be “no change” in the amount of trails open to motorized use.

- **Survey respondents**

underestimated the amount of trails on the Gallatin National Forest open to motorized use. Only 20% of respondents thought that more than half of Gallatin National Forest trails were open to summer motorized use and only 32% thought that more than half of Gallatin National Forest trails were open to winter motorized use. In actuality, according to U.S. Forest Service reports, 75% of all Gallatin National Forest trails, or 91% of the forest trails outside of Wilderness areas, are open to both summer and winter motorized use. (Some of these trails are restricted during the spring and fall.) Forty-nine percent (49%) of the respondents thought half or less of the trails were open to summer motorized use, and 31% answered they did not know.

- The amount of trails people believed should be open to motorized use was closely linked to the

amount of trails the respondents believed were already open. For example, of those who felt that there should be no change in the amount of trails open to motorized use, only 16% accurately perceived that most Gallatin National Forest trails are actually open to motorized use. Sixty-four percent (64%) of the respondents who supported the status quo thought that less than half of Gallatin National Forest trails were currently open to such use. It is important to note that even though 80% of the respondents either underestimated or did not know the amount of trails open to motorized use, a majority of them still felt too many trails were open to such use. Of the respondents who supported increasing the amount of trails open to motorized use, more than 70% mistakenly thought that only half or less of the trails were currently open to such use.

It is important to note that even though 80% of the respondents either underestimated or did not know the amount of trails open to motorized use, a majority of them still felt too many trails were open to such use.

photo courtesy U.S. Forest Service



Forest Service officials examine tracks left from ATV traffic on a public trail.



RSP photo

Red Canyon, Gallatin NF — A worker runs errands on an ATV on a freshly-built trail that will be open to seasonal motorized use in grizzly bear habitat.

Survey Highlights

- A vast majority (96%) of the trail users surveyed were enjoying some sort of non-motorized recreation, including hiking, horseback riding, mountain biking, backpacking and fishing. Only 3% of the respondents were engaged in motorized recreation. When asked to name their most frequent trail activity on Montana's national forests, again a vast majority (94%) of the respondents named some form of non-motorized use, while only 4% named a form of motorized use.

- Although motorized use made up only 4% of trail use, it accounted for a majority of trail conflicts. Nineteen percent (19%) of the respondents reported some sort of trail conflict in the past year and 7% reported experiencing a trail

conflict on the day they were surveyed. Seventy-three percent (73%) of the respondents who reported a trail conflict stated that some form of motorized use was involved in the conflict. The survey showed that 45 out of 837 trail users had conflicts with motorized users on the day they were surveyed. This is especially important given that only 18 out of 837 people surveyed were motorized trail users. This means that there was an average of 2.5 conflicts with other trail users for each day of motorized trail use during the survey. By comparison, conflicts with mountain bikers, the next most likely group to cause trail conflicts, occurred at a rate of only 1 conflict per 15 days of mountain bike trail use and conflicts caused by hikers occurred at a rate of only 1 per 255 days of hiker trail use.

Even though 20% of the hunters responding to the survey use ORVs, compared to 4% of the general public, the hunters expressed generally unfavorable views toward ORV use.

- Forty-eight percent (48%) of the respondents noted a problem with trail conditions. The three most common problems noted were soil erosion, noise pollution and noxious weeds. Sixty-three percent (63%) of trail users who had been using Gallatin National Forest trails for more than two years had noticed trail widening in the last two years, while 50% had noticed trail degradation in the last two years.

- Eighty-five percent (85%) of hunters who expressed an opinion felt that ORVs affect their hunting experience. Even though 20% of the hunters responding to the survey use ORVs, compared to 4% of the general public, hunters expressed generally unfavorable views toward ORV use. Of those hunters who expressed an opinion (other than "neutral"), a sizable majority felt that ORVs scare away game (85%), decrease hunting success (79%), and contribute to overharvest in some areas (67%). The only statement in favor of ORV use supported by a majority of hunters expressing an opinion was that ORVs make game retrieval easier (65%).



photo courtesy Tim Stevens

According to U.S. Forest Service reports, 75% of all Gallatin National Forest trails, or 91% of the trails outside of Wilderness areas, are open to motorized use

Analysis

Predator Project's survey clearly demonstrates that from the perspective of trail users, there are too many trails open to motorized use on the Gallatin National Forest. Although motorized users comprise at most 4% of trail users, 75% of all Gallatin National Forest trails, and 91% of trails outside of Wilderness areas, are open to motorized use. Our survey results show that most people want fewer trails open to motorized use, even though they tended to underestimate the amount of trails currently open to motorized use. Based on these results, Predator Project believes that if more people were aware of the high percentage of trails open to motorized use, an even larger majority would support more trail restrictions on motorized use.

In addition, even hunters, who use ORVs at a greater rate than the general population, say the machines are negatively affecting their hunting experience. The vast majority of the hunters expressing an opinion (other than "neutral") said ORVs scare away game, decrease hunting success, and contribute to overharvest in some areas.

While motorized users may argue that there is no harm in allowing a small minority access to a majority of trails, the results of the survey suggest otherwise. Half of the trail users surveyed noticed significant trail damage, and motorized users are causing a disproportionate number of conflicts.

Many factors contribute to these results, including the noise and mechanical intrusion of motorized vehicles, which make conflict on trails unavoidable. ORVs destroy the solitude and quiet that draw people to Forest Service trails. In fact, a study conducted for the U.S. Department of the Interior found that the mere presence of motorized use drives away the hikers, horse packers, and skiers who traditionally use trails. (*Final Environmental Statement, Departmental Implementation of Executive Order 11644, prepared by Heritage Conservation and Recreation Services, Department of the Interior*). ORVs also damage the natural environment by disrupting wildlife and causing soil erosion, habitat fragmentation, stream siltation, noxious

weed dispersal, and noise, air and water pollution, many of which were noted by trail users completing the survey.

The results of our survey also closely reflect the results of a number of prior surveys of trail users in the region. A statewide survey conducted for the Montana Institute for Tourism and Recreation Research found that walking and day hiking were by far the most popular trail activities (70% of respondents) and that only a small percentage of respondents used ORVs on trails (11.8%). A survey conducted by an independent research company for the Gallatin National Forest found that a sizable majority of those using Forest Service lands enjoyed traditional, quiet recreation such as watching wildlife/

birds (84%), hiking (59%) or cross-country skiing (17%) and again only a small percentage used ORVs (8%). This survey also found that a majority (65%) of Gallatin National Forest users felt that the forest should be managed more for wilderness values.

Yet the Gallatin National Forest, like almost every national forest in the region, is managing most trails for motorized use to the detriment of a vast majority of trail users. Motorized users already have access to more than 1,300 miles of roads on the Gallatin National Forest. By allowing motorized vehicles on such a large portion of its trail system with so many roads already open, the Gallatin NF is permitting the small minority of trail users who use motorized vehicles to destroy the traditional appeal of trails for the "Silent Majority" of National Forest visitors, while also allowing the machines to harm the environment.

Predator Project believes the survey results are a strong signal that the Gallatin National Forest and other national forests in the region should close their trails to motorized use, restoring them to their original purpose as foot and horse trails. Doing so would help preserve the traditional use of trails, enhance recreational opportunities and protect our remaining wild lands. Only in this way can the incredible natural resources of the Gallatin be shared between users, while still being preserved for future generations. Only in this way can the Gallatin and other forests fulfill the needs of the majority of recreationists.

Based on these results, Predator Project believes that if more people were aware of the high percentage of trails open to motorized use, an even larger majority would support more trail restrictions on motorized use.

Recommendations

For the Hyalite/Porcupine/Buffalo Horn Wilderness Study Area:

Predator Project recommends the following changes to restore the recreational balance of the Gallatin National Forest and protect the natural and recreational resources of the only large roadless area remaining in the Gallatin Range. These recommendations address the concerns of the trail users surveyed about types of trail use, conflicts between users, and trail degradation, and would enhance the public's backcountry experience. With these changes the Forest Service would help protect the forest, while allowing hikers, bikers and horseback riders to use traditional trails without fear of motorized intrusion:

- Permanently close the trails in the Buffalo Horn/ Porcupine area which are currently subject to the temporary closure. This first step in an abused area would restore critical wildlife habitat while following the mandate of the majority of people who use these trails.
- Permanently close the Hyalite/Porcupine/Buffalo Horn Wilderness Study Area to all motorized use. Allowing motorized vehicles into roadless areas violates the spirit, if not the intent, of protecting roadless areas. ORVs quickly change hiking trails into "troads," extremely wide trails that have the same impact as roads in the environment.

For National Forests Region-wide:

Predator Project believes the opinions gathered on the Gallatin National Forest apply to all National Forests in the Northern Rockies. Forty percent (40%) of the survey respondents were from out of state, and demonstrated a similar level of intolerance for off-road vehicles as Montanans.

The opportunities for quiet, traditional trail use are becoming increasingly scarce while the opportunities for motorized use of our national forests have increased dramatically. In 1945, there were 23,000 miles of trails and 8,600 miles of roads in National Forests in Montana. Currently there are less than 13,500 miles of trails, 57% of which are open to motorized use, and 32,900 miles of system roads in National Forests in Montana. Restricting all motorized vehicles to system roads would provide motorized recreationists with more than adequate access to public lands. Predator Project believes that in order to

restore recreational balance and protect wildlife habitat in the National Forests, the U.S. Forest Service should preserve all trails for the quiet, non-motorized uses preferred by a vast majority of trail users.

Predator Project realizes that motorized recreationists will resist any attempts to restrict motorized recreation and that the U.S. Forest Service views off-road motorized recreation as an acceptable use of public lands. However, the U. S. Forest Service must still ensure that motorized recreation is managed so that it does not cause ecological harm or impair the enjoyment of public lands by traditional, non-motorized means. If motorized recreation is to continue on any trails then the U. S. Forest Service should, at the very least, implement the following recommendations:

- Permanently close all trails in roadless areas and Wilderness Study Areas to motorized use. For example, many trails in the West Big Hole and West Pioneer Wilderness Study Areas on the Beaverhead National Forest in southwest Montana are currently open to motorized use and have suffered damage from ORV use.
- Reinstate the "40-inch rule." Four-wheeled ATVs account for a large and growing percentage of motorized trail use and the corresponding user conflict and trail damage. Prior to 1990, these machines were effectively prohibited from using trails by the "40-inch rule" which restricted trail use to vehicles under 40 inches wide. With the repeal of the 40-inch rule, the U.S. Forest Service has allowed machines access to a trail system that was never designed or intended for such use, without analyzing the impacts of these new larger, more powerful machines.
- Close all trails on regional National Forests to motorized use until the Forest Service shows, on a site specific basis, that there will be no significant harm caused by motorized use.
- Halt all motorized trail construction, widening, and maintenance until the Forest Service shows, on a site specific basis, that there will be no significant harm caused by the corresponding changes in motorized use.
- Include all trails open to motorized use in the calculation of open road densities. The effects on wildlife as well as the recreational experiences provided by trails open to motorized vehicles such as ATVs more closely resemble roads than they do traditional foot and pack trails.

Appendix: Survey Results

A. QUESTIONS FOR ALL TRAIL USERS

1. Is this your first visit to Gallatin National Forest (GNF) trails ?

Yes	30%
No	70%

Of the 70% who said "No:"

2. On how many days in the last year did you use trails in the GNF?

Average = 25.30 days [n=579; 4%]*

3. Have you visited any other national forest trails in Montana in the last twelve months?

Yes	79%
No	21%

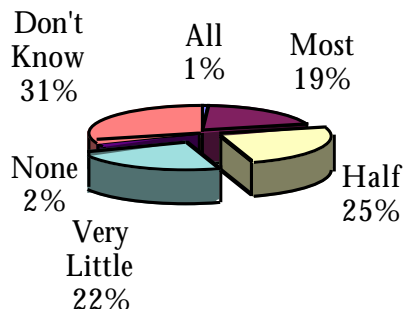
Of the 79% who said "Yes:"

4. On how many days in the last year did you use trails in Montana's other national forests?

Average = 14.94 [n=584; 4%]*

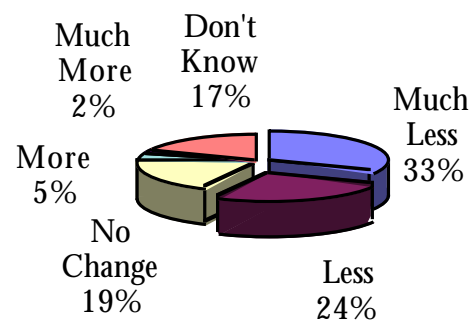
5. What amount of GNF trails do you think are currently open to motorized use during the *summer*?

All	1%
Most	19%
Half	25%
Very Little	22%
None	2%
Don't Know	31%



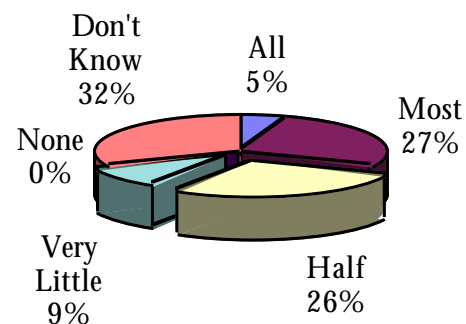
6. Compared to the present situation, what amount of GNF trails do you think should be open to motorized use during the *summer*?

Much Less	33%
Less	24%
No Change	19%
More	5%
Much More	2%
Don't Know	17%



7. What amount of GNF trails do you think are currently open to *winter* snow machine use?

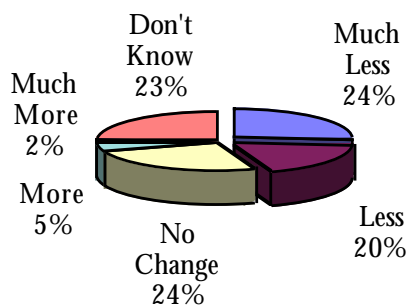
All	5%
Most	27%
Half	26%
Very Little	9%
None	0%
Don't Know	32%



QUESTIONS FOR ALL TRAIL USERS, CONTINUED

8. Compared to the current situation what amount of GNF trails should be open to *winter* snow machine use?

Much Less	24%
Less	20%
No Change	24%
More	5%
Much More	2%
Don't Know	23%

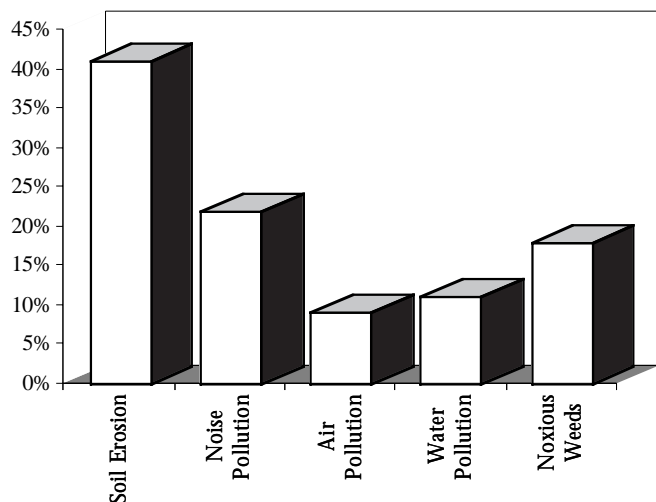


9. Do you think that there is a problem with trail conditions in the GNF?

Yes	48%
No	52%

If Yes, check all that apply:

Soil Erosion	41%
Noise Pollution	22%
Air Pollution	9%
Water Pollution	11%
Noxious Weeds	18%



10. Have you been using this trail for more than two years?

Yes	44%
No	56%

Of the 44% who said "Yes:"

11. Do you perceive either of the following changes in trail conditions over the last two years?

A. Trail Degradation

Yes	50%
No	45%
No Answer	5% [n=348; 5%]*

B. Trail Widening

Yes	63%
No	32%
No Answer	5% [n=348; 5%]*

12. Have you experienced any conflicts with other trail users on trails in Montana national forests this year?

Yes	19%
No	81%

152 surveys indicated a conflict. 111 of those surveys (73%) mentioned an ATV, motorbike and/or snowmobile in relation to the conflict.

13. Did you experience any conflicts with other trail users on this trip?

Yes	7%
No	93%

75% of the respondents indicating a conflict mentioned an ATV or motorcycle in relation to the conflict.

14. Do you think motorized use is legal on the trail you are visiting today?

Yes	42%
No	42%
Don't Know	16%

Motorized use was legal on all of the trails at the time the survey was conducted.

B. QUESTIONS FOR HUNTERS

15. Do you hunt in Montana?

Yes 23%
No 77%

16. Do you use off-road vehicles (ORVs) to hunt in Montana?

Yes 20%
No 80% [n=194; 7.5%]*

17. Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of the following statements that can be made about how ORVs affect your hunting experiences. [n=170; 7.5%]*

[** "Hunters expressing an opinion:" In the boxes below questions 17A-17F, we have calculated percentages by excluding those who marked "neutral" or had no answer. We combined those who "strongly agree" or "agree" into one category and those who "strongly disagree" or "disagree" into another. We then considered each of these two categories as a percentage of hunters expressing an opinion.]

A. ORVs give me easy access for my hunting.

Strongly Agree 10%
Agree 19%
Neutral 28%
Disagree 12%
Strongly Disagree 20%
No Answer 11%

** Strongly Agree/Agree = 48%
Strongly Disagree/Disagree = 52%

B. ORVs scare away potential game.

Strongly Agree 33%
Agree 33%
Neutral 13%
Disagree 6%
Strongly Disagree 6%
No Answer 9%

** Strongly Agree/Agree = 85 %
Strongly Disagree/Disagree = 15%

C. ORVs help me remove my kills.

Strongly Agree 19%
Agree 21%
Neutral 25%
Disagree 12%
Strongly Disagree 10%
No Answer 12%

** Strongly Agree/Agree = 65%
Strongly Disagree/Disagree = 35%

D. ORVs do not affect my hunting experiences.

Strongly Agree 5%
Agree 5%
Neutral 23%
Disagree 28%
Strongly Disagree 28%
No Answer 11%

** Strongly Agree/Agree = 15%
Strongly Disagree/Disagree = 85%

E. ORVs contribute to overharvesting in certain areas.

Strongly Agree 15%
Agree 28%
Neutral 28%
Disagree 11%
Strongly Disagree 8%
No Answer 9%

** Strongly Agree/Agree = 69%
Strongly Disagree/Disagree = 31%

F. ORVs have improved my hunting success.

Strongly Agree 4%
Agree 8%
Neutral 32%
Disagree 19%
Strongly Disagree 25%
No Answer 12%

** Strongly Agree/Agree = 21%
Strongly Disagree/Disagree = 79%

C. THE SURVEY PARTICIPANTS

18. Do you belong to any organized group or club?

Yes	11%
No	89%

19. How close to the trailhead do you live?

< 50 miles	59%
50-200 miles	6%
>200 miles	32%
No answer	3%

20. Visitors' home state/country

Montana	61%
Out of State	39%

21. What trail activity(ies) have you been engaged in today? (Circle all that apply)

Hiking	61%
Horseback Riding	7%
Biking	8%
Hunting/Scouting	0%
4x4 Driving	0%
Snowmobiling	0%
All-Terrain Vehicle	0%
Motorcycling	1%
Jogging/Running	1%
Backpacking	2%
Other	1%

- Multiple activities, all non-motorized 16%
- Multiple activities, one or more motorized 2%
- No Answer 1%

22. What is your most frequent activity on trails in Montana's National Forests?

Hiking	56%
Horseback Riding	5%
Biking	8%
Hunting/Scouting	1%
4x4 Driving	0%
Snowmobiling	0%
All-Terrain Vehicle	2%
Motorcycling	1%
Jogging/Running	1%
Backpacking	4%
Other	2%

- Multiple activities, all non-motorized 17%
- Multiple activities, one or more motorized 1%
- No Answer 3%

23. Gender Distribution

Male	54%
Female	44%
Unknown	2%

24. Mean Trail User Age = 35.83

Surveys by trailhead

Buffalo Horn	9%
Porcupine	16%
Grotto Falls	52%
Emerald Lake	23%

** The margin of error for the survey varies from question to question, depending on the sample size of each individual question. For the general survey questions, which were answered by all respondents, the margin of error is plus or minus 3.5%. For the filtered questions, which were answered by a smaller group of respondents, the margin of error varies from plus or minus 4.5% to plus or minus 7.5%. For example, question 11, which was only answered by those who had been using the trail for more than two years, has a margin of error of plus or minus 5%. The sample size and margin of error for these questions is noted in parentheses. The margin of error for all questions was calculated using the standard confidence level of 95%.*



photo courtesy Keith Hammer

Motor vehicles on national forest trails damage the natural environment by disrupting wildlife and causing soil erosion, habitat fragmentation, stream siltation, noxious weed dispersal, and noise, air and water pollution, many of which were noted by trail users completing Predator Project's 1998 survey.

Through our Roads Scholar Project, Predator Project works to reduce the negative impacts of roads and motorized access on wildlife and habitat security on our National Forests in the northern Rockies region. Specifically, we conduct our own field-based inventories to identify and quantify problems with uninventoried roads, ineffective road closures, excessive road miles, illegal motorized trails, and trail damage from off-road-vehicles. We then use this information to work with citizen volunteers and the U.S. Forest Service to effectively close or obliterate inappropriate roads or motorized access trails. Please consider supporting our efforts with a tax-deductible contribution, and/or by joining us in our field monitoring and habitat restoration projects.

Predator Project, since 1991, has been dedicated to saving a place for America's predators. We work to conserve and restore ecosystem integrity by protecting predators and their habitats.

Predator Project • P.O. Box 6733 • Bozeman, MT 59771 • 406-587-3389 • Fax: 406-587-3178
predproj@avicom.net • www.wildrockies.org/predproj