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Upper Verde under OHV attack



Courtesy/Gary Beverly
People are illegally driving vehicles across the Upper Verde River, home to endangered fish.

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Post



[See related video: Upper Verde River, Beautiful and Beleaguered](#)

Children laugh and splash in the cool, clear waters of the Upper Verde River while their parents lounge nearby in the shade of the cottonwoods.

What could possibly be wrong with that?

Nearby are four full-sized vehicles that the parents drove through the river and lush riparian vegetation to reach this remote, idyllic spot.

Gary Beverly couldn't stop himself from pausing to talk to one of the men in the camping party after greeting him during a weekend hike.

"Are you having a good time?" Beverly asked the man, who replied in the affirmative.

"Great," Gary said. "But I gotta tell ya, it's illegal to drive down here."

The man replied, "Well, there's no sign up there on the road." He said he'd been coming down here for years and never has seen a sign. He wondered why it would be OK for people to drive right up to many portions of the Salt River but not here.

Beverly asked the man to do him a favor and please haul out the trash.

"We always do," the man replied. "We like it clean down here."

Starting east of Chino Valley, Beverly hiked 30 miles up the Upper Verde in May to document damage from off-road vehicles (ORVs) and trash he'd been seeing while volunteering with the Sierra Club Water Sentinels.

He made a short documentary about his trip called "The Upper Verde: Beautiful and Beleaguered," as well as a PowerPoint presentation he is showing to Forest Service officials.

"The movie is supposed to show people what a beautiful place the Upper Verde is, and motivate them to do something," Beverly said.

Against the law

Doug King, a seasonal forest protection officer on the [Prescott National Forest](#), hears stories similar to the one Beverly heard every weekend when he hikes into the Upper Verde River canyon and writes tickets that can cost people hundreds of dollars, depending on the landscape damage.

King just installed a new sign 10 days ago at top of the canyon rim that shows vehicles are prohibited on the trail these families used to drop into the canyon. Unknown vandals had destroyed the first sign, and then they hauled off the one he used to replace it.

King constantly replaces signs that ORV users tear up, burn up, shoot and steal. He picks up lots of trash and puts out abandoned campfires.

He has written 11 tickets over the last three weekends to people driving off-road along and in the river.

King writes the tickets whether people saw the "no motor vehicles" signs in this area or not.

While none of the signs describe the special river closure, signs at major entry points to the Prescott National Forest read "No cross country travel."

It's illegal to drive vehicles anywhere off authorized roads and trails on the Prescott National Forest, and it has been that way for a decade.

As part of the Prescott Forest plan amendment that prohibits cross-country travel, the Forest Service instituted a closure of most roads that access the Upper Verde River.

Proposed travel management plans could outlaw cross-country travel on other national forests, too.

Clarification of illegal activity through the travel management plans will help Yavapai County Sheriff's Office deputies enforce laws on the national forests, said Deputy Travis

Legler, who works on forest patrol.

"The government has very limited resources," he said.

Tony Guiles, a legislative liaison with the Arizona Game and Fish Department, agreed.

"Right now, we just don't have the resources," he said. "And you could talk to any other agency and they don't have the resources as well."

Numerous groups are supporting Senate Bill 1167 in the state legislature that would use a \$3 ORV license fee to provide money for seven new law enforcement officers, trail maintenance and education.

Despite the public support, a few senators including Ron Gould, R-Lake Havasu City, are holding the bill back.

Barricades don't stop ORVs

People find ways to circumvent or move blockades meant to prevent Upper Verde vehicular access, including huge boulders and concrete jersey barriers, District Ranger Linda Johnson said. They cut through regular fences as well as pipe fences.

"It seems whatever we try to do, they find a way around it," Jackson said. "I don't know what to do." She said she's open to frequent users providing her ideas.

She thought about providing a more developed river access, but then saw that didn't help the Arizona Game and Fish Department when it installed restrooms and picnic tables on its Upper Verde property.

"We've had the facilities trashed pretty badly," said Zen Mocariski, Region 3 information officer for the Arizona Game and Fish Department.

At one illegal access point, vandals destroyed a fence barrier, then a pipe rail, then found a way through tank traps, said Jeff Pebworth, a wildlife program manager and biologist for Game and Fish's Region 3 office. The agency's latest effort is a pipe rail fence with steel posts filled with concrete.

"We're putting together an action plan right now," Pebworth said. He noted that protection of natural resources is the agency's main goal at the site. It could end up blocking off vehicular access to its property past the top of the canyon.

The Nature Conservancy, which owns adjacent property, is working with Game and Fish on that plan.

ORV riders have driven straight through the river on The Nature Conservancy property too, said Dan Campbell, who runs its Verde program.

He noted that ORV drivers also are driving all over the fragile uplands above the canyon on state and federal lands.

"We haven't been able to stay on top of it," said Mike Leonard, the Prescott Forest's top staff officer for wildlife, fish, rare plants and planning. "We don't have enough people. It's just bigger than we can handle right now."

The Prescott National Forest used to have three law enforcement officers and now has only two. One is retiring this month.

"We don't have a lot of law enforcement presence," Prescott National Forest Supervisor Alan Quan said.

Regional Forester Corbin Newman said he is recommending replacing the retiring officer, but the Forest Service office in Washington, D.C., has the final decision.

Leonard cited one example of people off-loading numerous all-terrain vehicles and setting up an obstacle course in a lush meadow along the Upper Verde.

"So we've got an education problem, for one thing," he said. "You wouldn't believe where people drive out there."Quan agreed.

"Part of it is educating these people that there are areas that are very fragile and that's why they're closed," Quan said.

Public outcry

Cody Lundin, who has been hiking through the untamed portions of the Upper Verde for three decades, feels like the problem of ORVs on the Upper Verde River is escalating.

Besides new tire tracks in once-pristine areas, he's seen trash consisting of everything from the remains of a complete oil change to a refrigerator.

"What put me over the edge is when I saw quads out there with an 8-year-old kid in the back," said Lundin, who teaches wilderness skills. He has spoken to numerous Prescott National Forest officials about his concerns.

"We pick up trash every month at the same place," said Tom Slaback of the Sierra Club, which is monitoring Upper Verde River water quality.

He sees numerous signs that people have ripped up or burned.

"It seems like a really growing problem there, and another situation where the Forest Service is not giving it the attention it needs, just like Fossil Creek," said Michelle Harrington of the Center for Biological Diversity. "I think it needs some priority."

The Center for Biological Diversity recently sent the Forest Service a notice of intent to sue over its alleged lack of recreation management at Fossil Creek southwest of Camp Verde.

State budget cuts

The spectacular scenery and cool waters of the Upper Verde make it a magnet for an ever-increasing number of illegal ORV users who are destroying signs and then carving roads along its banks.

Arizona Game and Fish Department estimates Arizona has experienced a 347 percent increase in ORV users in the last decade. Some have a huge attraction to driving through the water, evidenced by some of the illegal activities they post on Internet sites such as You Tube.

The U.S. Senate Natural Resource Committee conducted a hearing this week about off-road vehicle issues.

Despite all the increasing problems, the Legislature raided the remaining four months worth of money (\$395,000) in the Game and Fish 2007-08 budget for ORV law enforcement and education. It also swept the Arizona State Parks fund for ORV education and grant money.

And it's highly likely this will happen again for the entire budget year that begins July 1, said Sen. Tom O'Halleran of Sedona, who opposes such budget raids.

The Prescott National Forest used one of the State Parks grants recently to replace vandalized signs in the Upper Verde area.

The State Parks Ambassador Program is another victim of the budget cuts, said Jeff Gursh of the Arizona Off-Highway Vehicle Coalition. It trains ORV volunteers to monitor trails including one on the Prescott National Forest below Crown King.

State Parks also provides educational brochures to ATV dealers out of the cut funds.

Rare oasis

The Upper Verde River is a rare oasis in the high desert country, home to endangered species and eligible to be a federal Wild and Scenic River.

The Upper Verde also has been the subject of intense public scrutiny in recent years, especially since American Rivers designated it as one of the top 10 endangered rivers in the country a few years ago.

Although the Forest Service hasn't yet followed up with a suitability analysis to make a Wild and Scenic designation a reality, the agency still manages the river as if it were Wild and Scenic, Quan said.

The Forest Service applied many years ago for reserved water rights but the state hasn't processed the application. Sandy Fabritz-Whitney at the Arizona Department of Water Resources didn't respond to requests for an update on that process.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service designated the river "critical habitat" for the threatened spikedace minnow, and it is home to many other native fish. Federal and state officials hope to restore native fish populations.

The residents along its riparian corridor include the threatened desert bald eagle, endangered Southwestern willow flycatcher, beaver, otter, deer, belted kingfisher and yellow-billed cuckoo.

The families that Beverly saw enjoying their day in the sun last weekend could have driven over the eggs of the spikedace, said Mary Richardson, a supervisory biologist for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. While the agency hasn't seen any of these tiny fish in nine years, they've gone longer than that in the past before spotting them again.

King has found dead great blue herons and ravens that people shot down from the sky.

Driving off-road near and through the river can cause bank erosion, loss of vegetation and water quality problems, noted John Nysted of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

"We're mandated to do what we can to protect and increase the numbers of endangered species," Jackson said. "We're doing what we can with the resources we have, but we're going to have to find other ways to improve the situation."

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