



Seniors and ATVs March 29, 2007

There have been recent requests by a few local senior citizens for access by ATV into areas currently designated non-motorized in the Bulkley Valley. The seniors say they are physically unable to hike into areas that they enjoyed hiking when they were younger. They propose to use ATVs as a "wheelchair" to access alpine areas on hard-packed roads.

It is easy to sympathize with the seniors' proposal. Travel to pristine alpine areas in the Bulkley Valley is a highly valued experience for many local residents and the thought of being unable to hike freely and easily because of physical disability or old age is disturbing.

Proposals by seniors for special-permit summer ATV access mention the Orange Trail, Cronin Road, Higgins Creek Road, and the cabin at Silverking Basin, all of which are part of the Babine Mountain Park system. Other areas proposed are the Starr Creek Basin and Hunter Basin, both designated non-motorized by the BC Ministry of Environment as part of the Telkwa Caribou Recovery Area.

While we can all sympathize with the seniors, the proposal for a special seniors ATV permit system would have negative effects on recreation use by other local residents and should not be implemented for the following reasons.

Define the Problem

This is not necessarily a problem for seniors. There are many local seniors in their 60s, 70s and 80s who hike regularly. The proposal should be instead be presented in the name of the disabled and residents lacking fitness or strength enough to hike. That includes some seniors, young children, pregnant women and people of all ages who lack the stamina or physical fitness to hike for medium to long distances. To confine the proposal to seniors may appear to be age discrimination.

Change of status

The total land area designated non-motorized is a small percentage of the total land area of the Bulkley Valley and is highly valued by many local residents of all ages who hike in those areas. If ATVs were permitted to use the roads and areas designated non-motorized, those roads and areas would cease to be non-motorized, and hikers would be forced to quit using the areas designated for their enjoyment. Motorized use is not compatible with non-motorized use. Non-motorized users value the quiet and peace of backcountry and the presence of motorized vehicles in an area designated non-motorized is viewed as unacceptable. There may be a couple hundred or more ATV users in the valley but the balance of the population, the thousands of residents who do not use ATVs, are by default non-motorized users. Areas designated non-motorized should be protected from any motorized traffic.

Followers

Experience has shown that once ATV tracks are visible on a road, other ATV drivers will follow. That creates an enforcement problem and given the low level of monitoring and enforcement of recreation use in the Bulkley Valley, any special permit ATV use by seniors would open the permit area to tracking and damage to sensitive terrain by other ATV drivers.

Consistency

Any special permit system that allows ATV use by a small select group is unfair to non-motorized users but also unfair to other motorized users as well, such as four-wheel drive truck owners who may feel justified in demanding their own special permit system that would alienate even more non-motorized lands. Or they may feel justified in disregarding any special permit system and using the permit-only use roads without authorization. Permit systems favouring small special interest groups can erode wide public support for community consensus agreements such as the RAMP. Without that public support, the RAMP has little chance of being effective.

It is far more equitable to keep recreation use designations clear and simple. Either an area is motorized or non-motorized. If a road is opened to summer motorized use by a request from seniors or by anyone else, it should be a decision of the community-based RAMP process and open to all summer motorized users at all times.

Solutions

Rather than creating a new permit system for ATV use in non-motorized areas, we suggest the following solutions that would benefit both seniors and the disabled:

Part of the solution is to publicize all the roads and trails open to motorized users. ATVs have access to hundreds of kilometers of old mining and forestry roads in the Bulkley Valley. Alpine areas and old mining roads suitable for summer motorized use on hard-packed roads and trails include the Microwave, Dome Mountain, Boulder Creek Road, Toboggan Creek Road, Sweeney Mountain Road, Coffin Lake Road, Rocky Ridge, Sibola Mountain Road, French Peak Road, Telkwa Pass, Babine Trail, Juniper Creek Road, etc. We suggest to the ILMB that a folding map showing all designated motorized areas in the valley would be an excellent supplement to the recent Recreation Access Report of May 2006.

Rather than set up a permit system that interferes with non-motorized use and creates new enforcement problems, it would be far better to work to develop an extensive trail system that would benefit not only seniors and but all other motorized users as well. The trail system would link the alpine areas designated summer motorized with forestry roads that are no longer active. The BV Quadriders have been working on such a plan but we have not yet seen the details.

An extensive trail system could include at least one new Off-Road Vehicle Extreme Use Area devoted to hill climbs, mud bogs and an extensive custom-built trail network that challenges man and machine. The entire trail system would be designated motorized and would not interfere with areas designated non-motorized.

Babine Provincial Park

The Babine Provincial Park Master Plan states on page 9 that the park "...was established to protect the alpine flora and fauna from unrestricted motor vehicle use...". On page 50 it states "The emphasis for use will focus in low-impact, non-motorized recreation opportunities, outside of the designated snowmobile area."

A permit system to allow ATV access into the park would be contrary to the intent and direction of the park Master Plan.

Roads at the boundaries of the Babine Mountain Park are a special case. BC Parks has ultimate control over road access near the park. There may be some agreement possible between BC Parks and the BV Quadriders regarding the Orange and Cronin Roads. Both roads are outside Babine Mountain Park boundaries and hard-packed but are controlled by BC Parks to limit motorized traffic near park boundaries. If such an agreement is put in place, the two roads should be opened to all summer motorized traffic rather than to only a small group of seniors using ATVs. That way, the problems of enforcement and fair use are tackled head on from the beginning of the negotiations and the problems associated with a permit system for a small group are avoided.

Conclusion

We can all sympathize with seniors, the disabled and anyone who is unable to hike. ATV access for seniors and the disabled is available to many local mountains and there are ample opportunities to expand access without implementing a special permit system that interferes with parks or non-motorized areas.

The BV Outdoor Recreation Society (formerly the Outdoor Recreation Alliance) is a citizens group made up of non-motorized and motorized users concerned with the conservation of alpine and sub-alpine terrain and the responsible use of off-road motorized vehicles in the Bulkley Valley of British Columbia, Canada. Visit our website at www.bcnorth.ca/atvdamage/