

TESTIMONY – State Trails Policy Committee – Friday, November 10th, Merrill City Hall

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There is a need greater than more ATV trails on public land.

“There is a need to preserve and enhance our natural resources: our air, land and water, our wildlife, fish and forests and the ecosystems that sustain all life.” Sound familiar? That is the Mission Statement of the WDNR.

Only public land stands in the way of continuous human development and degradation of the land. More than half of Vilas County is public land and so far Vilas is the only northwoods county without ATV trails.

Presently a Stakeholder group is trying to carve ATV trails into the Northern Highland-American Legion State Forest; the forest that protects the headwaters of three major rivers, The Wisconsin, the Manitowish and the Flambeau.

Vilas County has more natural lakes than any other county, 1300+; Oneida has 1100 lakes and ATV trails; Iron has 217 lakes and ATV trails; Forest has 824 lakes and ATV trails. With more lakes comes more rivers, creeks and sensitive wetlands, more aquatic species, all very vulnerable to motorized use.

I would like to call your attention to the people wearing green ribbons. They represent silent sport enthusiasts and nature lovers. They share many characteristics.

- 1.They are green
2. They are low impact, “leave no trace” users of public land
3. They believe in healthy, outdoor exercise
4. They love and respect the beauty and integrity of nature
5. They understand the urgency to preserve undisturbed land as habitat
6. Like the land, they can not co-exist with ATVs or other off highway vehicles in spring, summer and fall
7. They outnumber ATV trail users 4 to 1
8. They are a major economic force in the northwoods. They are the reason Vilas County leads all other northern counties in tourist revenue.

The Northern Highland American Legion State Forest hosts 2.2 million visitors a year. (Yellowstone with 10 times the acreage has only a million more visitors per year.) These northwoods visitors come in peace, without ATVs, to enjoy the wildflowers, the birds and the beauty of the undeveloped lakeshores on our public lands.

Today these people took their time to come and ask, that as you consider more trails, you save at least one county, Vilas, for the silent sport and nature lovers.

In all valid scientific experiments there must be a control. The control remains unchanged by the experimenter. The control becomes the norm by which to compare change. If you connect ATV trails across Vilas County, you will lose the opportunity to compare the Vilas control region, unchanged by ATV traffic, with all other regions undergoing ATV traffic change. There will be no way to measure the damage: soil erosion, loss of plants, loss of animals, diminished wetlands, loss of trees. Severe ATV damage, whether on trail or off trail, is often long term and can take 5, 10, 15 years to become apparent. Without a control, we will begin to accept the slow, degradation of our land as normal. Our ancestors will never know what they have lost.

Public lands are a commons. Everyone has the right to use them but no one has the right to harm them.

These people, the silent sport and nature lovers, represent the majority, who use public land in harmony with nature. As keepers of the land, they have earned, at minimum, one county where they don't have to encounter ATVs in their camps, along their riverbanks and on their trails. Keep Vilas county free of ATV trails.

As you consider where to place trails on our besieged public lands, please keep us in mind as the control for intact ecosystems.