

Danger is part of the exhilaration of riding ATVs
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By Randy Lieberman, For the Post-Gazette



Mines and Meadows

Mines and Meadows is an ATV park located about 45 minutes from Pittsburgh.

The great outdoors can become one giant playground with all-terrain vehicles.

These muscle-packed machines easily take on steep hills of dirt with the simple tug of the throttle.

ATVs -- some call them "quads" or "four-wheelers" -- have the reputation and documentation of being dangerous when misused.

But the well-recorded crashes, injuries and deaths haven't deterred the ATV riders in Southwest Pennsylvania. In fact, these riders are finding even more places for riding their four-wheeled fun vehicles.

When used properly, ATVs can be useful tools for yard work, convenient vehicles for a weekend getaway and even an effective mental relaxation activity.

Bob Svihra, founder and owner of Mines and Meadows ATV riding resort in Wampum, Pa. in Lawrence County, said he's noticed people talking of ATV riding as a stress reliever.

"When you're out there on the trail riding an ATV, you're actually taking a vacation from your mind," Svihra said. "Whatever's on your mind, you automatically get rid of it because you have to focus on what you're doing."

Svihra compared ATV riding to flying an airplane. In an airplane, air patterns and traffic demand constant focus from a pilot. Similarly, the changing terrain with ATV riding demands a similar type of concentration from riders.

ATV riders are working to remove the unforgiving "dangerous" reputation of the vehicles. With ATV-specific resorts and specific trails popping up, there clearly isn't a lack of interest, and Svihra said safety concerns are paramount.

The Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources has designated many ATV trails in state forests all across Pennsylvania. According to DCNR, 11 State Forest Lands contain a total of roughly 230 miles of designated ATV trails.

Official ATV trails lack a presence in Allegheny County. The county's Forbes State Forest doesn't have any ATV trails on its land. According to Edward Callahan, the District Forester at Forbes State Forest, there are many snowmobile trails in the forest. But, none of which are suited for ATVs.

"The running surface and layout of the trails would not be able to handle heavy traffic by ATVs," Callahan said. "The erosion on the trails would be unacceptable."

There are plenty of snowmobile trails in Forbes State Forest, Callahan said, because they can be jointly used as roads with motorized traffic.

But various features on ATVs make it impossible for the roads to be deemed safe for ATV use. ATV trails cannot be reformed from other trails and usually follow a few guidelines.

"Studies indicate that the average ATV rider wants a trail that is at least 60 miles long, and trails with a variety of difficulty levels from scenic to challenging," Callahan said.

There is not enough room in the district, Callahan said, to create such a system of trails without interfering with numerous hiking trails and roads.

It is this type of controversy that limits the number of ATV trails available to riders. The lack of proper land is one of the reasons Svihra invested \$2 million, mostly his own money, to build his ATV-riding resort, Mines and Meadows.

Svihra, an avid ATV rider, bought 500 acres to start his business three years ago.

"I decided to buy the land and make it into an ATV-riding park because I saw it was needed," Svihra said.

Svihra built Mines and Meadows, which is a 45-minute drive from Downtown Pittsburgh, out of an old strip mine and kept some of the mine shafts to offer underground riding. (Learn more about Mines and Meadows at www.minesandmeadows.com.)

These types of lands, along with State Game Lands with trails designed for ATV riding, are what currently popularize the ATV-riding landscape.

Relative safety is one of the major reasons they're popular.

"Our job is to maintain safe trails for people to ride on," Svihra said. "When you're out there riding on somebody else's property or anything not maintained, the problem is the trails become very treacherous because they get worn out."

Trails owned and managed by someone are the safer route for ATV riders. It is illegal to ride ATVs on roads and highways, unless it is to cross over them. These places are often where ATV accidents occur.

But casual riding on forest land still causes a good share of accidents

"All power sports pose an inherent risk, and the risk is higher on ATVs," said David Huff, sales manager at Pittsburgh Cycle Center who sells ATVs. "If you are going to buy one, take advantage of rider safety courses that are available from all the manufactures, always ride with full protection and heed all warning labels."

Plenty of ATV riders in Southwest Pennsylvania are comfortable with the risks.

"It's becoming a passion for a bunch of people," said Emerson Williams, general manager, at Tom Clark Motorsports, "I've got a dozen of them in my family."

Among ATV enthusiasts, the belief that ATVs are dangerous is met with criticism and resentment.

"The young kids give us a bad name because they're always doing something stupid," said Ron Bohn, owner of Bohn Cycles on Saw Mill Run Boulevard.

"There are a lot of idiots out there [and] things can happen sometimes," said Wade Drummond, an ATV enthusiast who has been riding for the past 20 years. "The issue with most ATV wrecks is if they had been wearing a helmet, they probably could've survived."

Already this year, a 37-year-old Florida man died late New Year's Eve night after the ATV he was driving flipped, according to The Greenville News.

The report did not indicate if the man was an avid ATV rider. But the man was not wearing a helmet.

Helmet use along with general safety are the paramount concerns for parents looking to coach their children into proper ATV use. Drummond is confident that proper training of young riders is the key to securing their safety. He taught his 10-year old son the basics before he could ride the smallest ATV. Now, he said, his son is riding ATVs designed for 16 year olds.

"He's more advanced for someone his age," Drummond said, "The best way to teach him is to always tell him to watch what I'm doing and if he's doing something wrong to stop and correct it."

Bohn believes the responsibility of teaching technique as well as picking the proper ATV, falls squarely on the parent.

"Don't buy the kid what they want, buy them what they should have," Bohn said.

Manufacturers design ATVs to go only up to a certain speed for some age groups, Bohn added, but the problem happens when kids are immediately placed on adult models. This problem is simply avoided by researching the right ATV for the rider's age.

The vehicles can be relatively safe with the proper training, but many say ATVs still pose the problem of destroying land.

Jim Brown, a Perry County Wildlife Conservation Officer for the Pennsylvania Game Commission, has watched the destruction of a small wetland area on the top of Tuscarora Mountain in State Game Land 88.

"The pond," Brown said, "provided water for many species that lived in the area, as well as valuable habitat diversity in an otherwise dry area."

But all that changed over last year's Thanksgiving holiday. Vandals in a large four-wheeler drove back and forth through the water, destroying in minutes what it had taken nature years to create.

"The senseless act will affect wildlife for many years until some of the plant life can regenerate," Brown said.

Some of the riders' lack of common sense provides a lesson for others.

"As long as you ride along the edges of someone's land and you're not spinning donuts in the middle of it, the ATV won't tear anything up," Drummond said. "I can drive my quad straight through fields and not rip anything up. When there are guys on a racing quad that just want to go fast and tear everything up, that's when something like that happens."

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