

Comment:

It seems that barely a week goes by before some BRC member forwards us an “action alert” from various Wilderness advocacy groups encouraging their members and supporters to send comments to land managers regarding OHV management on federally managed lands. We certainly defend their right to do this; however, we have noted that they have increasingly encouraged their supporters to refer to Executive Orders (EO) and often give detailed instruction on how to and what to say regarding the “user conflict” issue.

This appears to be a growing trend with these organizations, so we can imagine the planning team may have already received comments referring to perceived conflicts between motorized and non-motorized visitors in the Moab office.

In order to amplify our concerns about manufactured conflict vs. real conflict, we often suggest planning teams carefully consider the following statement by Art Seaman. Art is an avid snowmobiler and regularly comments on summer and winter recreation plans throughout the West.

Art says:

Conflict is an integral part of the human condition. We first experience it when we leave the warm confines of our mother’s womb to be greeted with a stout slap on our behinds. From then on it is downhill—establishing ownership of toys other children covet with a loud “MINE!” Competing in school, sports and jobs to establish our position in society is as natural as breathing. When our space, possessions, status or security are challenged we bristle and defend, sometimes with words and sometimes with actions.

In managing outdoor recreation and responding to assertions of conflict, managers need to objectively determine the seriousness of the alleged conflicts, and allocate the existing recreation opportunity in a balanced and fair manner, in accordance with the land managing agency’s broad mandate under law.

There is real conflict and there is manufactured conflict. Land managers must learn to tell the difference. Comments demanding exclusive use because of alleged conflict are to be expected and must be objectively analyzed in the public land planning processes. Sadly, managers themselves sometimes jump on the conflict bandwagon, driven by their own biases or striving to be peacemakers.

Management decisions driven by the desire to alleviate someone’s perception of conflict often backfire. Those alleging conflict, or are simply intolerant of other users, most often are rewarded with exclusive use. Exclusive use necessitates regulation, creating a need for enforcement and thus creating real conflict. The land managers now find themselves with a legal obligation to arrest people who are engaged in an activity that was once legal and appropriate, and subject them to serious civil and criminal penalties.

Suggestions:

Alternatives should include:

- Educating the non-motorized visitors about when and where they may encounter vehicle traffic, as well as informing them of areas where they may avoid such encounters.
- Educating the vehicle assisted visitor of where the road or trail might be shared with non-motorized visitors, and encouraging slower speeds and a more courteous ethic in these areas.
- Re-routing either use so as to avoid sections of roads or trails that are extremely popular with both groups. For example, a hiking trail can be constructed to avoid a section of popular OHV route. Or an equestrian trail may be constructed to avoid a section of popular mountain bike route, etc.
- Dispersing all forms of recreational use so as to minimize conflict and create a more desirable experience.