

Do you or your family use an all-terrain vehicle (ATV), also called an off-highway vehicle (OHV)—a dirtbike, “quad” or four-wheeler? They are great fun to ride, and they can get you into some beautiful, remote areas fast. But just like us automobile-drivers, you can only drive where you’re allowed, and for good reasons. Safety issues prohibit OHVs from public roads. But although their technology makes it possible to take these vehicles almost anywhere else, you can destroy a lot of life, and the natural structures that support it, in just one misplaced off-road joyride.

Santa Cruz County boasts dozens of rough-road opportunities for great OHV adventure (see below). But one place you especially shouldn’t and legally can’t drive is on the floodplain of the Santa Cruz River and its tributaries.

Floodplains support riparian ecosystems with streamflow, shallow groundwater levels, “spongy” water-absorbing soils, and natural flood cycles. These riparian ecosystems include a tremendous variety of plants and animals that often can live nowhere else; nearly 1/3 of all federally-endangered species only live in wetlands such as riparian systems. Riparian areas make up less than 2% of the land’s surface in Arizona, yet most of our wildlife depend on them at some point during their lifespan.

These areas are important to people too. The cool strip of green vegetation that lines the Santa Cruz River and Sonoita Creek are a special gift to both residents and visitors, providing eye candy in a usually-parched landscape as well as opportunities to hike, picnic, bird- and critter-watch, horseback ride, draw, take pictures, and just generally recreate. Riparian areas also play a major role in protecting us from destructive flooding and erosion, and in providing us with ever-essential clean water. Unfortunately, these crucial riparian areas, always scarce resources, are becoming even rarer. Researchers have estimated that up to 90% of riparian areas in the Southwest have been destroyed or significantly degraded within the past 150 years due to human activity. Uncontrolled OHV use contributes to this destruction.

How do OHVs damage riparian areas? Driving down and along banks or in washes increases erosion, which can expose roots and kill riparian trees, destabilize banks, and change flood drainage patterns. Driving in wet areas damages or kills plants and aquatic life that are already so scarce (see above). Exhaust and leaking oil and gas pollutes the water and soil, which can kill the living components of the ecosystem besides threatening the quality of our drinking water (the groundwater under and alongside the river is where most our public water supply comes from). In drier areas, OHVs can compact soil, cutting down on infiltration of rainfall and increasing flooding potential.

Noise from OHVs can disrupt wildlife. For example, nesting birds such as Black hawks have been known to abandon nests in areas of frequent unnatural noise. OHV noise disturbs people too, including other recreationists and nearby homeowners.

Besides being bad for our environment, OHV driving in riparian areas can be bad for your wallet. Almost all of the Santa Cruz River and its floodplain are private property; therefore driving on it without the owner’s permission is trespassing, and is illegal. According to [Arizona Revised Statute \(ARS\) 17-454](#), no person shall drive cross-country on public land where prohibited and private land (unless with owner permission). Another statute, ARS 28-1174 states that it is “unlawful for a person to drive an off-highway vehicle with reckless disregard for the safety of persons or property.” This includes such activities as speeding up the river or dry washes and whipping “donuts” in creek beds.

The river’s major tributary, Sonoita Creek, is also off-limits to OHVs and you can be criminally cited for riding in Sonoita Creek State Natural Area.

There are some great places to legally ride here in southeast Arizona, such as the south Patagonia Mountains and the Santa Rita Touring Area, which offer miles of scenic trails. You can find lots more exciting places to ride OHVs by checking out the Arizona State Parks Website (www.azparks.gov/partnerships/ohv/safety.html), which also gives information on trails managed by several other State and Federal agencies.

For the OHV users out there, remembering the principles of the **Tread Lightly! Program** will help you have a safe and enjoyable ride:

T: Travel only on designated routes.

R: Respect the rights of others.

E: Educate yourself.

A: Avoid sensitive areas and wildlife.

D: Drive responsibly.

[This column was contributed by Jennifer Parks, who is the Secretary of Friends of the Santa Cruz River. For more information on FOSCR, go to www.friendsofsantacruzriver.org]