

ATVs ... again / Unreasonable demands

Posted: Monday, July 27, 2009

The problems posed by all-terrain vehicles, or ATVs, are not new. Let's recap:

First, there are only a handful of places to ride ATVs legally in New Jersey. It is illegal to ride them on all state-owned land such as parks, refuges and wildlife areas. It is, of course, illegal to ride them on private land without permission.

Second, because there are so few places to legally ride ATVs - motorcycle-like vehicles designed for off-road use, often with three wheels - illegal riding is rampant.

Third, the rampant illegal riding has caused significant destruction in the Pine Barrens and other natural areas. The powerful vehicles destroy vegetation and habitat and tear up trail beds. In 2002, the state Department of Environmental Protection said 340,000 acres of public land had been affected by these vehicles; at one point, the department was spending approximately \$900,000 per year on enforcement and restoration work tied to ATV use.

Fourth, the Legislature has been diddling with this issue for years.

We have little sympathy for ATV enthusiasts. One bill currently in the Legislature - versions of it have been kicking around for years - would increase ATV registration fees and fines for illegal riding. Another bill would require the DEP to designate three areas around the state for legal ATV riding. ATV enthusiasts are apparently a powerful enough special interest - go figure - that lawmakers have agreed to link the bills and approve the bill increasing fees and fines only if the parks bill is approved.

But the DEP has been trying for years to find suitable sites for legal ATV riding. It's not easy. The Egg Harbor Township Police Athletic League operates one ATV area. Dale Freitas, head of the New Jersey Off Highway Vehicle Association, has been trying to get zoning approval for an ATV park in Little Egg Harbor Township that would get DEP funding.

ATV enthusiasts say the state has a responsibility to provide legal places to ride the machines if it is going to collect registration fees for them. We're not so sure of that. The registration crackdown is needed to help enforce the law against illegal riding.

State taxpayers have no obligation to subsidize this hobby. The fact that there is just about no place to ride an ATV legally in New Jersey always seemed to us to be a darn good argument for not buying an ATV in the first place.

If you want to buy one and tear up your own backyard, have a ball. But the rest of us don't want our natural areas destroyed by illegal ATV riding and don't understand why we have any obligation to provide legal places to ride a machine that you knew had very limited use when you bought it.