

Off-Road Use of Motorized Vehicles

Use in officially designated wilderness: The Sierra Club reaffirms its support for the Wilderness Act's prohibition of "mechanized modes of transport," including non-motorized vehicles, from entry into designated wilderness.

Use of vehicles on other public lands:

1. Trails and areas on public lands should be closed to all vehicles unless it is determined to be appropriate for their use through completion of an analysis, review, and implementation process, and officially posted with signs as being open.
2. The process must include application of objective criteria to assess whether or not environmental quality can be effectively maintained, and whether the safety and enjoyment of all users can be protected; a public review and comment procedure involving all interested parties; and promulgation of effective implementing regulations where impacts are sufficiently low that vehicle use is appropriate.
3. Trails and areas designated for vehicular use must be monitored periodically to detect environmental damage or user interference inconsistent with the above criteria. Where this occurs, the trail or area must be closed to vehicles unless effective corrective regulations are enforced.
4. This policy covers off-road use of any vehicle, including non-motorized vehicles, and vehicles powered by internal combustion, electric or other motors.

Adopted by the Board of Directors, May 7, 1988 [replaced policy adopted in February 1972, as modified in May 1985 and March 1986]

Revised by the Board of Directors, May 21, 2022

Background

Off-road use of vehicles can present serious and special problems of impact on the environment and incompatibility with other users of the land. Experience has shown that off-road use of vehicles may result in one or more of the following effects:

All vehicles:

1. Physical soil damage, often readily visible, resulting in:
 - a. Erosion, causing soil loss and damage to stream banks, streams, and fish habitat;
 - b. Soil compaction and serious adverse impact on flora and its regeneration; and
 - c. Degradation of trails, including rutting and breakdown of trail edges.
2. Disruption of wildlife breeding and nesting habitats, especially of vulnerable species, resulting in loss of young;
3. Disturbance of wildlife, leading to weakened physical condition, death, and possible extinction of some species;
4. Damage to archaeological, scientific, historical and other significant sites, and damage to natural features, sometimes with irreversible effects, especially on rare features of interest for scientific study;
5. Facilitation of illegal hunting fishing and the taking of game and non-game wildlife;
6. Danger to the safety of other land users because of vehicle speed, steep terrain, sharp curves, slippery or unstable trail surfaces, and/or limited visibility; and
7. Competition with other land users: vehicle operators, with their increased mobility, generally use a greater quantity of scarce land per recreational user.

Motorized vehicles:

1. Introduction of air and water pollution to areas presently removed from any such sources;
2. Excessive noise, which, in close proximity, may result in physiological effects on animals and humans, or may induce anxiety, altering animal behavior patterns, and which, in most circumstances, seriously degrades the solitude of wild areas for other users;
3. Litter: by virtue of mechanization, operators of vehicles carry more gear, with potential to leave more litter;
4. Vandalism: motorized ease of access is often coupled with increase of acts of vandalism on public and private property; and
5. Fire: illegally or improperly operated vehicles can often create a fire hazard on public or private lands.

Guidelines for Implementation

The following guidelines were developed by the Club's Public Lands Committee to help interpret and implement the policy.

All vehicles:

1. Vehicles should be excluded from areas of fragile, rare, relict, or vanishing vegetation; areas where erosion or other soil or resource damage will occur with their use; wildlife sanctuaries and sensitive areas; areas of fragile natural features or scientific interest; areas of archeological interest; and areas where speed would adversely affect other users of natural areas.
2. If areas or routes are not found unsuitable for vehicle use because of environmental impact or user interference reasons, two additional tests should be made:
3. (a) Are the area or route boundaries self-enforcing? Areas and routes from which it would be difficult for irresponsible vehicle users to stray are preferable to those that would require high management activity levels to enforce.
4. (b) Is the vehicle use area or route appropriate for the overall area? Regions where less intense use is desirable should have lower densities of vehicle activity than more disturbed regions. Many routes used by vehicles for access would be inappropriate for intensive vehicle play, for example. Also, all but one of several closely parallel routes should often be closed.
5. Educational programs should be initiated to instruct vehicle operators on safety, consideration for others, environmental impact, and on places legal to operate.
6. When using private land, all vehicle operators must have in their possession written permission from the landowner.
7. Trail construction and maintenance workers and trail users should report vehicular trail damage to land managers for possible trail closure or other remedial action.
8. For most effective implementation of policy, local regulations that exceed state and federal standards for control of vehicle use off-road should be encouraged.
9. State, county, and local law enforcement officers should have authority and resources to enforce vehicle and public resource laws on all public land.
10. The Sierra Club does not consider wheelchairs, when used as necessary medical devices, to be vehicles.

Motorized vehicles:

1. Motorized vehicle operators should be tested and licensed on their ability to operate the vehicles and knowledge of all laws relating to vehicle operation off-road.
2. All motorized vehicles used off-road should be licensed and clearly identified for off-road use. The license fee should be placed in a fund designated for the repair of environmental damage caused by vehicles; for personnel and equipment for patrol and law enforcement; for educational services; for financing of continuing studies of the effects of vehicles on wildlife, vegetation and other elements of the environment disturbed by their use; and for ensuring the safety, peace and

enjoyment of the environment by other users.

3. Mufflers and spark-arrestors should be made mandatory on all motorized vehicles used off-road, with provision for periodic inspection.
4. All motorized vehicles used off-road should be equipped with air pollution control devices that meet the same standards set for automobiles.

Electric vehicles:

1. The above sections on Background and Implementation were written with internal combustion (gas-powered) motors in mind. Electric motorized bicycles (a.k.a. "e-bikes") may not have testing or licensing requirements for operators and/or vehicles. Electric cars, trucks and other electric vehicles may not have the same type of noise mufflers, spark arrestors or air pollution control devices as internal combustion (gas-powered) cars and trucks.
 2. and trucks.
 3. The Sierra Club supports transportation policy and systems that minimize impacts, minimize resource consumption, reduce pollutant and noise emissions, and provide everyone with adequate access to jobs, shopping, services and recreation. We support the use of e-bikes to meet these goals. We encourage agencies to set policies that enable transition from internal combustion motorized vehicles to electric-powered and human-powered vehicles.
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Bottom of Form

Bicycles:

Policy related to human-powered bicycles is set forth in Sierra Club's policy on Off-Road Use of Bicycles.