Ozark National Scenic Riverways Roads & Trails Plan

The Sierra Club believes everyone deserves access to the outdoors. Nature is a human right but not at the cost of the health and safety of our land, water, animals, and other people. You can help us protect the Ozark National Scenic Riverways now and for future generations. Act today!

What is the ONSR? The Ozark National Scenic Riverways are nationally protected wild and scenic rivers and the first national park to protect a river system. At the ONSR clean water flows from more than 400 springs and provides 134 miles of some of the nation's best natural river recreation on the Current and Jacks Fork Rivers. These resources support an array of plants and animals - some of which can be found nowhere else in the world, as well as the opportunity for more than 1.5 million visitors each year to experience quiet solitude in nature.

What is a Roads & Trails Plan? The ONSR Roads & Trails Plan is part of the ONSR General Management Plan that determines how the National Park Service (NPS) will carry out their responsibilities to protect the park while providing safe access to visitors. The draft plan makes recommendations on unauthorized roads and trails and how to address these issues in the park. NPS's draft plan shows a fantastic commitment to a horse permitting system and the consideration of the natural and cultural resources within the park. However, the plan does not go far enough in protecting these resources that are globally significant and irreplaceable.

How is the ONSR at Risk? In 2011 American Rivers added ONSR to its list of "Most Endangered Rivers" in the nation, citing overuse and poor planning. Under-enforced regulations have led to a large number of undesignated roads and horse trails and rampant use of ATVs (all-terrain vehicles). The result is significant water quality issues, habitat fragmentation which can lead to extinction, and detrimental impacts on other park recreations. As a Scenic river, priority should be given to protecting the native and endangered species that live within the park.
Unmanaged ATVs, roads, and horse trails threaten the ONSR by contributing to species decline and loss of biodiversity, and impacting water quality from erosion, habitat disturbance and pollution from horse waste.

The draft Roads & Trails Plan does not adequately enforce ATV use. ATV use damages natural and cultural resources. This includes disturbance to wildlife, damage and removal of vegetation, disturbance to soils, damage to archeological resources, etc. ATV use at the ONSR is incompatible with activities already being enjoyed at ONSR (hunting, fishing, camping, hiking, canoeing, and more.) This is a slippery slope that will quickly cause further harm.

The draft Roads & Trails Plan does not adequately address unlawful horse crossings. Illegal horse crossings in the upper Current River are prevalent. Horse traffic causes erosion along the riverbanks and E.coli and other contaminants from horse manure impact water quality and sensitive species like the critically endangered Ozark hellbender.

The National Park Service’s proposed plan does not guarantee future protection of this cherished natural resource. Unless the National Park Service gives ONSR the strong protections afforded to the country’s other national parks, the area’s clean water and rare remote experience will be lost.

Suggested recommendations:

- Protect the on-river experience of floaters by reducing motorized access to the rivers.
- Create a section along the upper Current River that is not impacted by horse crossings. Do not build new trails or crossings before existing illegal trails are effectively closed and enforced.
- Implement fee-based a horse permitting system by 2024 that:
  - Includes limits for how many horses should be in the park at a time
  - Provides education and signage regarding which trails can be used
  - Closes, blocks and revegetates existing unauthorized horse trails to their natural conditions
  - Halts planning of a new horse staging area at Cedar Grove until there is stronger enforcement throughout the upper Current River area
- Remove and restore unauthorized horse river crossings and reduce the number of designated horse crossings which impair the floating experience and increase fecal pollution in the river.
- Keep horse trails at least 50 feet from the river and provide horse tie-ups so riders can proceed to the river on foot at designated access points.
- Do not open park service roads to ATVs. There are no enforcement mechanisms in place to ensure compliance with the proposed rule.

Submit comments by Sunday August 15, 2021 here.