

Land, Water and People

Tread Lightly This Summer

By Mike Blakeman

The public lands in and around the San Luis Valley attracts millions of visitors every year. Although most of the visitors come from less than 100 miles away, large numbers of people from out of state also come to enjoy the superb recreation opportunities available in the Upper Rio Grande.

Many of the summer and autumn visitors use the extensive trail and 4x4 road systems administered by the SLV Public Lands Center. Whereas some take to the trails on foot or horse, many others use mechanical or motorized means. These motorized and non-motorized uses create a whole host of resource and social impacts.

We are all aware of the social conflicts that arise between different types of trail users, but many folks are not aware that **all** types of users may cause resource damage. Even backpackers in Wilderness Areas create multiple trails through meadows, cut switchbacks, and compact soils in well used camping sites.

The use of all terrain vehicles (ATVs) has mushroomed over the last decade and has caused resource agencies to scramble to regulate their use on public lands. Scars from inappropriate use of ATVs look bad and add tons of sediment to our high quality trout fishing streams. The Rio Grande National Forest and the Bureau of Land Management's San Luis Resource Area have hundreds of miles of motorized trails open to ATV use. Proper use of these trails limits resource damage while providing for outstanding riding opportunities.

In 1985, the U.S. Forest Service launched the Tread Lightly! program to promote behaviors to lessen visitor impacts on public lands. In 1990, the program spread its wings and separated from the Forest Service to become the nonprofit organization Tread Lightly!, Inc. The organization's website (www.treadlightly.org) provides many useful tips to minimize impacts to the land and water resources, and to other people. Here are a few of the suggestions from their website:

- **Travel Responsibly** on designated roads and trails.
- **Respect the rights** of others including private property owners and all recreational trail users, campers and others to allow them to enjoy their recreational activities undisturbed.
- **Educate yourself** by obtaining travel maps and regulations from public agencies, planning for your trip, taking recreation skills classes, and knowing how to use and operate your equipment safely.
- **Avoid sensitive areas** such as meadows, lakeshores, wetlands and streams, unless on designated routes. This protects wildlife habitat and sensitive soils from damage.
- **Do your part** by leaving the area better than you found it, properly disposing of waste, minimizing the use of fire, avoiding the spread of invasive species, restoring degraded areas, and joining a local enthusiast organization.

If more people would follow the basic Tread Lightly principles, there would be fewer user conflicts and much less damage to our public lands. So, this summer when you head to the mountains, please remember to Tread Lightly!

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