

BREAKING POINT

Arizona ranchers are pitted against the massive crowds and big money of the outdoor recreation industry.

By Marjorie Haun

Historically, ranchers, hunters, explorers, campers and off-road vehicle enthusiasts have been political allies in their quest for fair access to state and federal public lands. But during the last few years, a tectonic shift has occurred in the emphasis on outdoor recreation and on one Arizona ranch, campers, vagrants and off-roaders are pushing the land to the breaking point.

Becki Ross is the wife of a third-generation rancher and mother of two young-adult sons, with Forest Service allotments that range from the high desert outside Sedona, Ariz., to the piney mountains near Flagstaff. Their Windmill Mountain Ranch is a cow/calf operation that runs 565 Brahma-Hereford cows and calves on permits totaling 120,000 acres. Having worked for decades to

unheard of. The Forest Service can't keep up."

Rules for Me, But Not for Them

Outdoor recreation is an American tradition and economic driver in much of the West. Traditional uses such as hunting are now dwarfed by the off-highway-vehicle phenomenon. Throughout the West, resource-based economies have shifted to tourism and a big chunk of that tourist industry is OHV rentals. The popularity of unregulated OHVs has created a two-tiered system on public lands. Ranchers, hunters and other permittees who pay to use the land and are subject to prosecution if they don't live up to the terms of their permits are being swamped by recreationists who pay nothing to access the land and are rarely subject to law enforcement.

permittees, we are required to follow strict rules to reduce impacts. We stay primarily on roads in our vehicles and don't drive in the desert to retrieve balloons. We employ tour guides to keep visitors on OHVs strictly on roads. We have paid for road improvements. We use horses to move cattle, and practice a rest-and-rotation program for grazing that helps reduce fire danger. We implement and fund restoration projects to areas impacted by overuse. We all invest in improving areas by installing culverts, gates, maintaining dirt water tanks and supply water to area wildlife through wells and waterline where natural water is not available. All these efforts are made by private businesses that also pay annual fees to operate in the national forest."

The letter continued: "Owners invest every year in property taxes to benefit local communities. We all have a stake in this area. In contrast, most campers are visitors, although there is a large population of homeless people [who] do not follow the rules prohibiting residential camping. Anyone camping in the forest now does not pay for the use at all. They do not help carry the costs of road maintenance. They do not fund any improvement projects, or help offset the cost of our enforcement officers' pay. There are no fees to help offset the costs of cleanup, trash and bits of toilet paper that dot the landscape. It's the people who live here [who] stop to pick up litter, cans, full trash bags and disgusting toilet paper."

The letter apparently went unheeded. According to Ross: "I really thought a letter with 80 signatures on it would make a difference, but we have seen absolutely no change. The exponential growth in recreation that came with COVID was mostly rental OHVs. We have gone from three to 12 OHV rental companies with about 300 units available for rent in Sedona, which is a town of less than 10,000 people."

In July 2021, the Ross ranch asked permission from the Forest Service to use a skid steer to clean up two ditches that feed livestock tanks near Coconino Forest Road 231. Although permission was granted, the Forest Service insisted they wait until September because they might disturb owls nesting near their tanks. "Do these types of restrictions only apply to ranching permittees and not to the general public?" Ross asks. "The 231 road is used heavily for recreational activities. There is a constant flow of campers using it. Hundreds of OHVs use the road at all speeds. Our skid steer would be limited to the existing road and ditches for less than an hour.

PHOTO COURTESY BECKI ROSS



Dispersed campers, vagrants and homeless squatters populate Ross' permits throughout the year. Many on OHV trips camp just for the weekend, but because there is no enforcement, others stay for years on end.

maintain their permits, bring water to cattle and wildlife, and secure the well-being of the animals, land and natural resources upon which they depend, the Ross family is witnessing the ruination of those things as outdoor recreationists overwhelm the ranch.

"We summer near Flagstaff and winter near Sedona," Ross says. "Wherever the cows are, the tourists are because we follow the best weather conditions. There have always been tourists in Sedona, but the levels now are

Where recreational use of public lands is surging, government agencies have failed to effectively create and enforce rules to protect permit holders.

In summer 2018, Ross organized a group of 80 stakeholders, including Sedona residents, other ranching permittees, a hot air balloon recreational permittee, and a guided OHV tour company. They formulated a letter which was delivered to the local Forest Service supervisor. The letter explains: "As various



Becki Ross (top) herds cows on winter range with ranch hands Yates Dixon (lower left) and Barry Brashears.

How is that any more impactful to the nesting owls than the unlimited traffic that uses 231?"

The lack of fairness in rules and enforcement leaves permittees, who must live by these rules, at a disadvantage to those who have no rules at all. "We feel like the bad guys," Ross adds. "We are the ones being pushed out by the bureaucracy and high recreational usage. There doesn't seem to be [a priority] for cattle at this time on the forest. I haven't met a person yet who doesn't see the damage and want change, but this land is the responsibility of the U.S. Forest Service to effectively manage."

Kevin Allard of Arizona Backroads, an OHV organization which fights for access to

Off-roaders are ignoring designated trails, scarring pastures, burning "donuts" and creating ruts.

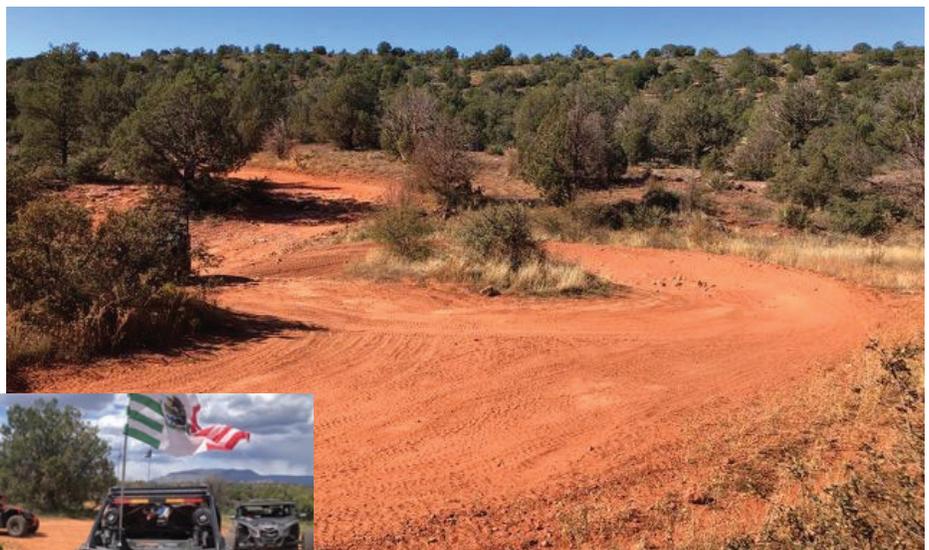
public lands, is equally disturbed by the lack of awareness or respect from recreational users. "It is more important than ever for leaders in the four-by-four and OHV communities to promote responsible use of state, public, and where we are privileged, private lands," he says. "We are ashamed to hear

about the difficulties that private landowners and ranchers deal with daily. These types of actions make the entire four-by-four and OHV community look bad and drive a wedge between a critical alliance of influential public land users."

Grazing Is All About the Grass

Ranchers with federal grazing permits have limited AUMs (animal unit months)—which can decrease due to drought or other adverse conditions—and they are required to pull

their livestock off allotments when a certain percentage of forage has been grazed off. Anywhere from 25 to 40 percent of vegetation must be left so it can recover for the following season. No rules protecting grass exist, however, for campers or OHVs that go off the trails. "Campers are smashing the grasslands that should be available for our cattle," Ross charges. "I understand that the public has a right to access federal lands, but do they have a right to come into a place of business and damage it with no repercussion? Are we



PHOTOS COURTESY BECKI ROSS



ABOVE: "Donuts" burned by OHVs leave permanent scars where grass and forage once grew. LEFT: In unprecedented numbers, unregulated OHV groups are overwhelming the Ross ranch, tearing up roads and denuding the range.

responsible to carry the financial burden of this recreational damage?”

Grasses and forbs near roads are also being damaged beyond recovery. Off-roaders are going off designated trails, scarring pastures, burning “donuts” and creating ruts. “The off-roading damage continues here, even in the heat of summer. I see new tracks daily in the dry, flammable grass around the ranch. Why is this accepted practice?” she asks. “If authorities knew of a location where drivers were constantly breaking the law, a focus would be drawn to that location. Why is this location any different?”

A startling percentage of the Ross ranch is no longer grazable because of recreational impacts. “There is about one-quarter of the ranch where tourists are most concentrated, using it for camping and off-roading. Cows will not graze in those places anymore. In

disconnected from agriculture and feels entitled to make a mess on our permits.”

The Roads

On Ross’ winter allotments near Sedona it’s nearly impossible for government to keep up with road maintenance, even with the county and Forest Service grading and repairing roads about four times a year. “We’re worried about the dust and what’s happening to roads,” says Ross. “The maintenance used to last for two or three months, but with the explosion in campers and OHV traffic, it only lasts a week or two and we are back to tearing up our vehicles just to go back and forth on the ranch.” In just five months, OHV traffic eroded a foot of soil and exposed a feeder water pipe. “To come back to the winter pastures and see this damage is alarming.”

Established forest roads provide critical channels for moving cattle, but a few years

the cows off the trail.”

Contrasting permitted users with pleasure recreationists, Ross says: “This annoyed the javelina hunter. He couldn’t believe people using a cow trail would act like that. He’s worried that recreational off-roaders tearing up trails in their souped-up side-by-sides are going to cause respectful users like himself to lose access rights to the forest altogether.”

Although dispersed camping has some regulations, they go unenforced on Ross’ forest permits. The roadsides are congested with RVs, tents, and derelict vehicles used by homeless people, who may be there for months at a time unchecked by law enforcement. “We haven’t seen any enforcement of rules for over 10 years. They don’t enforce the 14-day camping policies or the ‘30 feet off the road’ rule. The rangers working here are doing all they can but it’s not enough.”

Then there’s the danger factor. “When we get onto our allotments, it’s kind of the Wild West. I worry when my sons have friends come out to the ranch. The roads are not safe anymore.”

Echoing Ross, Allard says: “Like the Wild West, outlaws are looking for every chance to evade the consequences of their actions. They drive a wedge between us and become a nuisance while destroying the public perception of the four-by-four community. This negligible minority trespasses, vandalizes, and causes landowners to lock gates. Ultimately, these folks are disorderly because there is no law enforcement in the backcountry. Unfortunately, federal regulations make simple solutions difficult. Ultimately, county sheriffs have law-enforcement jurisdiction on public and state lands, and they only have a handful of deputies to do the job.”



“Campers are smashing and trashing the grasslands that should be available for our cattle.”



PHOTOS COURTESY BECKI ROSS

Visitors’ trash, including used toilet paper, is strewn across the Ross ranch. With no means of properly disposing human waste, campers use stock tanks as makeshift latrines. A five-gallon bucket full of feces was removed and disposed of by the ranchers. With no rules protecting vegetation from campers and OHVs, much of the ranch is no longer grazable.

those big pastures where the cows only hang out on the west side, they’re not using the pastures evenly.” Because parts of the allotments are becoming unusable for grazing, and permits must be used for grazing the majority of the time, this puts the Ross’ permits in peril.

Entitled attitudes, ignorance and social media are also creating schisms. “People are so out of touch with agriculture. The people we bump into who have some connection to agriculture are usually friendly, but there is a younger generation of tourists who get information about public lands from social media,” Ross claims. “That generation is most

ago, the Coconino National Forest inexplicably designated five forest roads as OHV trails. These days, moving cattle from one part of a permit to another inevitably leads to conflicts. “One Saturday we were on horses driving about 100 cows on a forest road. A bow hunter looking for javelinas came up behind us and the cows were blocking his way. The hunter was polite, didn’t try to push through and was happy to wait for the cows. At the same time, there was a group on rented OHVs coming the opposite direction and they met the leader cows first. They were revving their engines really loud and busting

Urban Problems

Vagrancy and illegal camping in public spaces are no longer exclusive to cities. Squatters, some of whom camp on grazing lands for years at a time, bedevil the Ross ranch. “We have a serious homeless problem,” Ross says, “especially during the months when tourism lets up. When the busy season starts up again, the homeless people will get overwhelmed by the campers. But you will have families come in and camp right next to someone who has set up a meth lab.”

The lack of rules for dispersed camping entices vagrants onto her ranch. Ross says: “It could be homeless squatters, addicts or drifters who are homeless by choice. We had a mandatory fire evacuation recently and there were two RVs that had been parked illegally

The roadsides are congested with RVs, tents, and derelict vehicles used by homeless people, who may be there for months at a time.



PHOTOS COURTESY BECKI ROSS

ABOVE: In five months' time, OHV traffic eroded a foot of road base, exposing a feeder pipe.
RIGHT: Visitors camp on forest roads, impeding traffic and creating havoc with cattle drives.



on state land for years and those people would not leave.”

Campers and vagrants who leave human waste in and around stock tanks are exposing the ranchers to health hazards. “There was a five-gallon bucket of human waste that was left in a trough near the 525C Road. I don’t even know how to explain how all the ranch owners and employees feel about having to clean up after these illegal campers,” says Ross. “This is not the first time we’ve picked up after campers, but this is ridiculous. We are completely disgusted but we are forced to remove it, haul it away in our vehicles, bring it to our home to dispose of it, then clean the trough so our cattle can drink. This is just one camp. On any given day there are literally hundreds of car and tent campers and resident homeless campers every day who have no way to properly dispose their waste.”

Ranchers are also left to do the jobs of law enforcement, including helping those involved in wrecks or stranded on the ranch. The Ross ranch foreman, Ethan Crockett, once transported a man who broke his arm in a dirt bike accident to the hospital. “We ran

into a 20-something homeless gal living out of her SUV,” Ross says. “She needed a jump start, so we helped her.”

In one instance exemplifying countless others, an unleashed dog belonging to a squatter camping on a closed forest road chased Ross’ cows as they were being moved, separating momma cows from calves. The squatter didn’t leave but started hiding in bushes following the incident.

Breaking Point

The land, the ranchers and the animals are at the breaking point. Recreation in the American tradition is about getting away from the constraints of life in cities and suburbs. It is about letting go, taking some calculated risks, and experiencing the outdoors, none of which is harmful in theory. But recreation itself brings nothing to land and resources and creates a net negative when you consider harm to vegetation, erosion, damage to roads,

litter, and the impacts on ranching and hunting that come when tens of thousands of humans overwhelm lands inhabited by livestock and wildlife.

Allard explains: “We, as motorized users, must realize that we are scavengers. We enjoy traveling roads that were built by ranchers, miners, loggers, and private landowners. Although many of our backroads are open to all, it’s these real property owners who have the legal right to access patented properties, water rights, and grazing rights.”

Becki Ross’ Windmill Mountain Ranch is one of a thousand ranches in the West with public lands permits bearing the burdens of exploding tourist traffic. As Kevin Allard says: “Yavapai County, for example, only has three deputies to patrol all public lands within its jurisdiction. [That’s 8,128 square miles.] While nearly 95 percent of the county is federal land, sheriff’s deputies are overwhelmed with search-and-rescue efforts. Simply put, these counties don’t have enough money. To create the change we all desire, we must look to our representatives in the Legislature.”

Private stakeholders are being left to clean up, protect, police and bear the costs of unremitting destruction, and they are breaking under that burden. The onus of protecting these permitted users ultimately lies with those government agencies reaping the revenues from land usage. ■

Marjorie Haun is a freelance journalist specializing in natural resources and agriculture news. As a native of southeastern Utah, she has seen production industry supplanted by big tourism and its ensuing changes, for good and for ill.



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Three generations of the Ross family include (left to right): Wyatt Ross, Nate Ross, Becki Ross, Dustin Ross, Justin Stewart, Dawnie Stewart, Tammy Ross, Denton Ross, Ty Ross, Jacey Ross and Hadley Ross.