

OFF-ROAD VEHICLES – A LOOK TOWARD THE FUTURE

Introduction

This is an outsider's paper. The organizers of the conference felt that in this penultimate session, my paper might provide an occasion for a second look at the work of the conference. A look to check that some wider but relevant social trends had not been overlooked. I have only had the papers of this conference to guide me as to the problems that off-road vehicles solve and of the ones they create. My own interests lie in trying to fathom what changes are taking place in society and how we are trying to manage them.

In order to stay near the subject I have kept in mind a classification of ORV activity which is like that used in some of the earlier papers:

- a) vehicle centered recreation
- b) environment oriented recreation (nature contact, nature study solitude).
- c) Commercialised 4 wheel drive safaris to 'wilderness' and scenic areas.
- d) Work centred (pastoral, forestry, mining, etc)

Before getting serious about the future of ORV's let us check whether they are anything more than a passing fad, something like hula hoops or the recent craze for cycling. This does not seem likely for ORV's as a class. Most of them represent a significant investment for an individual and the decision to buy would not be lightly taken. If we look at the various functions that ORV's serve then it is only in 'vehicle centred recreation' that they are to any significant degree replaceable.

Whatever temporary ups and downs we may see because of tariff changes and the like it seems that reliable ORV's are now within the financial reach of a civil population that has growing need of them. So, I do not think we will be wasting time if we look at some of the broader social trends that suggest growing use of ORV's and changing attitudes in their users. After that we can try to approach some of the more difficult problems that could the future of ORV's.

Social Futures

I think that there are three sets or clusters of change that must effect the future of recreation, and hence ORV activities (a), b), and c)), above.

First is the sheer availability of leisure time and the financial ability to take advantage of such opportunities. The old standard was the forty hour week, scattered public holidays and two week's annual leave. This is going by the board. Shorter working week, flexi-time, longer annual leave and long service leave are emerging as the new forms. With these trends we also find rising real incomes (particularly net household incomes), special pay loadings for holidays, better hire purchase conditions for holiday gear and even packaged holidays themselves, lessened need for retaining savings for retirement or for a rainy day. In toto these trends are greatly extending the time available for leisure and the ability of people to take advantage of this leisure time. It is a thing of the past when people afford only the half day trips on public transport to the local football grounds, the

local beaches or the local zoo; spend their annual leave between painting around the house and visiting the local pub. A recent study showed that that sort of routine is now true of only about 15 per cent of the Australian urban work force.

The second cluster of changes concerns the very rapid rise in the educational levels of the general population, the slower but steady increase in levels of responsibility experienced in daily work and a greater awareness of the man-nature relation (of conservation pollution and 'green-bans'). This is a relevant set of changes as it affects the attitudes that people bring to their choice of leisure activities and their sensitivity to how their pursuit of that leisure affects others and their own longer term interests.

The third cluster of changes concern recreation itself. They basically derive from the trends we have just considered but I single them out because they provide the immediate context for a lot of ORV activity. We are living with a relentless decline in the role of professionally organized mass urbanized recreation. Even the financial stimulation of commercial sponsorship and TV contracts is not stopping the drift. The drift is toward a great diversity of special interest leisure groups and individualized non spectator pursuits with a rural orientation. The list of voluntary recreation clubs for the ACT alone is mind-boggling. With this the organization of leisure is drifting back to the kitchen table administration by actual participants.

I have elsewhere expanded on these trends so let me hasten on to consideration of what the implications might be for ORV activities.

Implications for ORV activities

1. The 'letting off steam' phenomena that appears to motivate a fair amount of 'vehicle centred recreation' particularly trail bikes will probably decline. I am not suggesting for one moment that it will disappear; it would be a sorry state for society if it did. However, from the early days of our city 'larrikin pushes' the problem seems to have been exacerbated by producing grossly under-educated young men and putting them into donkey jobs without a future. We are not yet, as a society, quite done with that sort of evil but I think the trends of change are clear. I think it likely that we will get fewer and fewer groups of ORV users who would even consider man-handling a forest warden, or another ORV user; for pointing out mal-practices.
2. The 'hunting-fishing-shooting' syndrome is also likely to decline because of the general trend in social changes. What I have in mind is not the 'hunting-fishing-shooting' of the English county gentry; it is more what was depicted in the book and film called *Wake in Fright*. At the heart of our Australian syndrome is, in my experience, the skilled industrial worker. Long car-borne and with enough dignity left in him to be very seriously concerned with 'asserting his mainly dignity' (not just letting off steam) as often as he can and as far removed from the industrial-urban scene as possible. I am not talking only about the skilled industrial workers of industrial towns like Wollongong, Kembla, Whyalla, and Pirie. The pattern is prevalent amongst small business men, farmers and semi skilled workers who can afford it. It is just that the former seem to provide the numbers. As a group they

- tend to be older men who feel free to leave the family for short holidays. It is not that they do not love the bush and waterways, for what those facilities can offer them. It is the prevalent attitude that the countryside is theirs for what they need, and to hell with farmers, conservationists and the rest. The paper that discussed the shooters on the Coorynong Lake area gives a fair indication of how much pressure such intelligent, determined but short-sighted men can place on rural environment. The special and elitist position of these people in industry is being eroded. It might be too much to expect a change of mind on their part (although I would not be too sure about this). Maybe they just have to die out.
3. The 'environment oriented recreational use' of ORV's is likely to increase. I am not referring to any increased trend to escaping the mass urbanized environment. That 'escapist' trend seems paradoxically to be best met by TV viewing, escaping to organized leisure resorts and picnics alongside the freeways. The 'man-nature' relation gets more attention as the 'man-man' relation requires less attention because it seems less relevant to survival, or promotion. The industrial-bureaucratic epoch is a very brief and recent interlude in the life of man. In fact, the bureaucratic aspects only began to infuse Australian society in the World War II period. As this phase now passes individuals seem drawn to experiencing for themselves a relation with nature; this does not seem to be the same experience as that of tearing a viable dairy farm out of a rain forest or ploughing a living from the Mallee. The desire seems rather to immense oneself in nature, as it is.
 4. In addition we can expect a continued growth in ORV's associated with the growth of 'rural retreats'. ORV's will be seen as providing all-weather access to remote holdings without incurring the costs of building properly formed access roads. ORV's can also cope with a lot of the odd jobs associated with managing such rural retreats.
 5. Lastly, we may expect a growth in safari type tourism as the all terrain vehicles of the Goer type are adapted to civil use. (e.g. Lockheed's 'dragon' trucks). Naturally these safaris would want to penetrate to the wilderness areas. The very substantial growth of internal tourism looks like being a permanent feature of the pressure on our environment.

So the broader trends in our society suggest that the phenomena of the ORV's is not going to pass away like the hula hoop craze. If that is the case perhaps we should nip it in the bud before it gets out of hand? Crush it by imposing heavy import duties, sales taxes, registration and insurance fees and access permit fees.

I think not. Once upon a time our leisure and recreation requirements could be met by packing the multitudes into football stadiums, by taking the tram to Bondi or the train to the Dandenongs. This is past, and a good thing too. The ORV's are an indispensable part of the pursuit of individualized recreation away from the cities and towns.

The do put unprecedented pressure on our natural resources for leisure; our beaches, forests, alpine areas, etc.

In recent years we have something of a revolution in the way we think about these natural resources and our National Estate. We have not only become more conscious but have already made inroads on the problem (as witness the paper by R.D. Hall).

However, it is here that we have the most difficult problem for the future: how can we evolve a pattern and an ethic of ORV useage that serves the sort of leisure needs that Colin Dunn describes in his paper, and yet uses our knowledge of our environment to protect and conserve it?

The seriousness of the problem has been highlighted by the fact that two of the papers in this conference have quoted at length from Miss Dunn's elegant analysis of the dynamics of the problem as *the dismal cycle*.

I have no doubt that she could provide amply evidence for every phase of the dismal cycle. We in Australia have had plenty of experience of what happens when a public agency tries to police laws that prohibit behaviours that a section of the population enjoys and does not think immoral. We can be sure that any such agency will be starved for funds relative to the enforcement task it is given. To do any sort of a job the agency makes its informal accommodations with the people it is supposed to regulate. This gets abused, there is a public outcry, a crack-down and the process starts over again.

I am not going to question the notion that ORV users should bear some reasonable part of the costs of useage. I am going to question two assumptions that are implicit in her model.

- a. she assumes that there is only the bureaucratic, legalistic solution – the dynamics she so well describes is the dynamics of that bureaucratic solution with the 'them' and 'us' built in from scratch.
- b. She assumes a constant supply of 'bad apples' – that nothing of significance is happening to the education levels of our society, to community attitudes to conservation etc.

There is no point dwelling on her second assumption. Every minor instance of 'bikie gang' behaviour gets newspaper headlines but the hard facts of social change are something else. Perhaps we should also bear in mind Norman's conclusion to extensive study of the *Recreational priorities of Australian young people* (1975). "They do not relish confusion and they resent the destructive intrusions of louts and spoilers nearly as much as they resent adult distrust and surveillance." (p.viii).

The crux of the question is whether there is some other way of going about it other than the traditional bureaucratic way. Some way that starts from the assumption that we are all potential ORV users and all potential conservationists: some way that recognizes that we share basic values about quality of life and

about our National Estate: some way of recognizing that there is a good deal of room for sharing costs and benefits and room to allow for these to evolve in ways appropriate to different regions and different ORV useages. Anything but getting ourselves locked into a 'them – us, zero-sum game'.

It may be that the new forms of regional participative government, arising from the Australian Assistance Plan, provide an appropriate context for the concerned parties to this problem to come together. The regions are potentially close to the people and encompass both towns and their countryside. Regulations and agreements can be given wide publicity within the regions and at points where visitors enter the regions. If these regulations are seen to emerge from the sort of participative processes I have outlined I think there is a far better chance of them being seen as an educational instrument that as bureaucratic interference.

I think there is a good chance of finding a new way of doing these things provided we remember Miss Dunn's warning of what waits for us down the traditional track, and we have a little bit of faith in what the social changes of the past decade is doing for the quality of our people.

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February 1976