



**ATVs and other off-road vehicles are damaging our national forests, but staff and funding are too limited to adequately handle this problem. Dirt bikes created this crevice at Windy Pass in Washington's Wenatchee National Forest.**

projects also can pay financial dividends for local economies and save taxpayers money in the long run. However, the restoration activities' direct economic impact on local communities will be limited, because the value of the timber cut tends to be low, and local economies are more strongly influenced by national and international trends.

cited a report by Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER), which found that there were more than 5,400 law enforcement incidents in 2005 involving off-road vehicles on BLM lands compared to roughly 900 incidents involving drug violations. The Forest Service is developing plans to keep ORVs on routes designated for their use, but the agency needs to find the will and the money to enforce its policy.

To help compensate for shortages of money and staff, the agency has made extensive efforts to develop partnerships with groups, such as the Backcountry Horsemen and the Boy Scouts, that can provide volunteers for trail maintenance and other needs. The Forest Service estimates that in 2006 volunteers contributed \$45 million worth of effort, 80 percent of it focused on recreation, trails, and wilderness tasks. "Volunteers play an increasingly important role in taking care of the national forests," says Mike Anderson, a senior analyst with The Wilderness Society. "It's important to remember, though, that volunteers are generally not professionals, and they are only a partial solution to the problem. Washington needs to provide the money needed for our national forests to live up to their potential."

More and more conservationists are advocating greater emphasis on restoration. Decades of extensive logging and road building seriously damaged the national forests, so there is a real need to properly maintain or decommission some logging roads, restore streams, and thin areas where the suppression of natural fires has left heavy brush and other fuel for future fires. Such

"The reality is that we will have limited seed money for restoration—and declining funds for other forest priorities—if we don't solve the fire expense problem," said Jaelith Hall-Rivera, a budget analyst with The Wilderness Society. One option is to fight fewer fires in the backcountry that pose little threat to people and homes and instead manage them to help restore those landscapes. These fires will reduce the flammable material that has built up due to decades of suppression, so future fires will be smaller and less costly. The most expensive fires to fight are those near communities, and it is imperative that preventive steps be taken to reduce the risk to homes, Hall-Rivera said. Another option is to move the fighting of major wildfires out of the Forest Service budget, treating such fires the way we do floods and hurricanes.

The national forests make up eight percent of the country. "What a special inheritance!" said Jim Furnish, deputy chief of the Forest Service under President Clinton and now with Rangers for Responsible Recreation, a group of retired federal land managers. "But we are squandering it. Healthy fisheries, wildlife, world-class recreation, and watersheds that provide clean drinking water are in jeopardy. It's not too late to take a page from Theodore Roosevelt's book and protect these forests for future generations."

*Jim Robbins lives in Helena, Montana, and writes science and environmental stories for The New York Times, Conde Nast Traveler, and other publications.*