

GUEST VIEW

Roads and wildlife

It is not unusual to hear people complaining bitterly about road closures on public lands. A certain amount of resentment is natural, when you encounter a gate or barrier blocking motorized access to what looks like a perfectly good road. What gives?



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Actually, road closures are not the result of a nefarious plot by evil people who want to take away our freedoms. The Kootenai Forest Stakeholders Collaborative (KFSC) wants the public to be aware that there

are some solid reasons why not all forest roads are open to motor vehicles.

Many years of research confirm that roads can be hard on wildlife, especially on a number of species that tend to avoid areas with open roads. This includes animals like mountain goats and bull elk, as well as grizzly bears and other rare predators like lynx and wolverines. Research shows that if we want to maintain healthy populations of these animals on our public lands, we need to maintain some areas with secure habitat, based on limiting motorized traffic in some areas.

Some road closures are seasonal, typically to protect seasonal use by wildlife. This includes uses like

big game summer or winter range, calving areas, etc. Some road closures during hunting season provide opportunities for a backcountry hunting experience, in areas that are mostly free from the noise and disturbance of motorized traffic. In this way, some road restrictions are designed to increase our freedoms, such as freedom to escape noise and traffic, freedom to experience and protect wildlife, and to help maintain wildlife populations that have disappeared from most of our state and nation.

Opinions may differ on how specific roads should be managed, but the idea that it is OK for some people to ride or drive wherever they want is actually a threat to important public multiple use values.

Today there is a special importance in preventing illegal motorized trespass on forest roads. Legal challenges have recently derailed a majority of forest projects on the Kootenai and other nearby National Forests. This is drastically impairing our ability to actively reduce fire risk, harvest timber, and improve forest stand conditions.

These successful lawsuits are often based on evidence and claims that ongoing illegal motorized access is preventing the forest from adequately managing secure habitat for grizzlies and other endangered species. In order to get the KNF's management projects back on track, we need to demonstrate

that motorized trespassing is not interfering with protections for grizzlies and other species.

The Kootenai National Forest currently has some 7,811 total miles of road. Of those, approximately 2,500 miles are undrivable and in storage. That leaves 2,734 miles which are open year-round, some 704 miles that are open seasonally and roughly 1,909 miles available for administrative use only.

Although we also hear complaints that more roads are being closed every year, in fact the miles and percentages of open and closed roads has not changed substantially for several decades. We ask all forest users to respect established rules and regulations which guide public use of our precious public lands.

The mission of the Kootenai Forest Stakeholders Collaborative (KFSC) is to help craft solutions for public lands management by representing diverse values and providing a venue for productive, inclusive conversations between the Forest Service and the community. Our collaborative is comprised of a diverse community of forest users, hunters, hikers, loggers, timber industry representatives, conservationists, business owners, local governments, educators, and citizens at large.

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