

POLICY DISASTER

Dexter's deadly ATV wreckage

Contributed | Posted: July 27, 2019, 4 a.m. | Updated: July 27, 2019, 7:50 a.m. | 5 Min Read



BRUCE MACKINNON

Backwoods free-for-all predictable after NDP ditched watchdog

RAYMOND PLOURDE

Re: your July 20 Letter of the Week, "Wild Western Shore: Rowdy ATVers run roughshod over residents, rules."

It was depressingly familiar to read about problems homeowners are experiencing in the Chester area as a result of illegal/inappropriate behaviour by some ATV drivers.

I say familiar because all of these problems and more were thoroughly reviewed and dealt with over a decade ago by the Voluntary Planning Off-Highway Vehicle Task Force (2003-04).

It conducted public consultations across the province and issued two detailed reports (https://novascotia.ca/natr/ohv/pdf/OHV_Final_Report.pdf) containing 39 recommendations to address the myriad problems arising from unrestricted ATV use, which it accurately characterized as “Out of Control.”

The members looked at it all: safety, age limits, social conflict, environmental damage and landowner rights. The government of the day, under then premier John Hamm and his successor, Rodney MacDonald, accepted the recommendations of the OHV Task Force, passed the Off-Highway Vehicles Act, released a detailed action plan (https://ecologyaction.ca/files/images-documents/file/Wilderness/OHV_Action_Plan.pdf), and struck a multi-stakeholder off-highway vehicle ministerial advisory committee (OHV MAC) to advise government on implementation of the action plan and related issues.

The OHV MAC was ably chaired by Laurie Cranton of Margaree, himself an ATV and snowmobile rider. It included representation from ATV, snowmobile and dirt bike organizations, but also from doctors, safety experts, private landowners, municipalities, etc.

I was the lone environmental rep on the committee and I can tell you that we took our job seriously, worked well together and provided good oversight and advice to government.

Critically important, the government also created a 12-person off-highway vehicle enforcement unit dedicated to policing the trails and back country and enforcing new and existing laws and regulations. With dedicated enforcement and regular trail patrols, the situation began to improve. There were fewer accidents, less drinking and driving, less environmental damage and less social conflict. A much needed culture change was underway.

But then came a change in government — and all the air was let out of the tires, so to speak. Darrell Dexter’s NDP government, despite pushing for better regulations for ATVs when in opposition, had no interest in the issue and dropped it like a hot potato.

In short order, the government disbanded the OHV MAC advisory group, quietly absorbed the dedicated OHV enforcement unit into general duties so it no longer exists and shut down Voluntary Planning, ending over a half century of excellent work engaging Nova Scotians on important policy issues of the day.

It was clear the government did not want independent expert advice on this or any other topic. As then deputy premier Frank Corbett said in a rare moment of political candour: “If it’s not in line with government thinking, why have it?” (Chronicle Herald, May 11, 2011) Why, indeed?

“Drinking and driving in the backwoods is common again. Deaths and severe injuries are back up — to the tune of about one dead or critically injured rider a month.”

The result is that the ATV situation has largely returned to the Wild West atmosphere that existed prior to the task force. Conflict in neighbourhoods and between riders and private landowners are occurring in rural and suburban communities across the province. Environmental damage is ongoing, widespread and virtually unpoliced.

For example, it’s illegal to drive an ATV through a watercourse or in a wetland. There are big fines for that. But with no enforcement, it happens all the time. Most riders probably don’t even know it’s illegal because all the rider education initiatives were dropped when the OHV MAC was told to go home.

Drinking and driving in the backwoods is common again. Deaths and severe injuries are back up — to the tune of about one dead or critically injured rider a month. Children in rural communities are regularly seen driving ATVs on the roads (illegal), often underage (the minimum is 13) and without helmets or proper training (also illegal). Two years ago, a five-year-old boy was killed when he rolled his kiddie-sized ATV near his home in Pictou County.

As the volunteer members of the OHV MAC were being shown the door by the Dexter government, we delivered a [final report to the minister](https://ecologyaction.ca/sites/default/files/images-documents/OHV%20MAC%20Final%20Report%20To%20Minister.pdf) (https://ecologyaction.ca/sites/default/files/images-documents/OHV MAC - Final Report To Minister.pdf) concluding that the work was far from over and that disbanding the advisory committee and the 12-person OHV enforcement unit were big mistakes:

“Despite some success, the MAC concludes its mandate with remaining concerns that without the integrated OHV enforcement unit and the continued attention of the MAC with respect to OHV issues, the use of OHVs within the province will see many of the previous problems return.”

And so it has come to pass.

To be clear, there are many good and decent, law-abiding ATV riders who want to do the right thing and try hard to bring others along. Groups like the All Terrain Vehicle Association of Nova Scotia have come a long way in promoting safety and responsible riding within their club network.

Unfortunately, the vast majority of riders don't belong to any ATV clubs and don't want to, so they don't get the peer education that comes with membership. Most just buy an ATV and use it to go wherever they want, whenever they want, and however they want — “Shall we stay on this trail or should we ride through that wetland beside it?” Hmmm...

And how they howl if anyone tries to restrict them from doing so.

Bullying and intimidation comes next for anyone who stands in the way of their (presumed) God-given right to ride their machines wherever they want.

I note that your letter writer had to ask to have his or her name withheld from publication for fear of retribution. It's all so depressingly familiar. And it could've been so much better. We were well on our way and now we're back where we started — out of control.

What can be done?

Well, a new government could revive the OHV MAC, but I'm not holding my breath. At the very least, the current government should reinstate the dedicated OHV enforcement unit to uphold existing laws and regulations. That would go a long way toward reducing deaths, damage and conflict in Nova Scotia.

As Laurie Cranton, the former chair of the OHV MAC, said in a CBC report last November: “Of all the recommendations, it was enforcement — that an enforcement group be set up specifically to manage off-highway vehicles. That was No. 1, and it was No. 1 for a reason.”

Raymond Plourde is wilderness co-ordinator for the Ecology Action Centre.

Raymond Plourde, Saltwire, & The Chronicle Herald. (2019, July 27). *Dexter's deadly ATV wreckage*. Saltwire. Retrieved February 19, 2022, from <https://www.saltwire.com/nova-scotia/opinion/opinion-ndp-to-blame-for-atv-wreckage-after-ditching-watchdog-336739/>