

GAINING GROUND

SUCCESS STORIES FROM THE COLORADO 600

Story By Chris Denison • Photos By Chris Denison and Dave Martin

POP QUIZ: HOW MUCH IS RIDING A MOTORCYCLE OFF ROAD WORTH TO YOU?

The above question is simple enough, but it's also tougher than an adamantium skid plate. Sure, most riders can put a price on the various elements of a riding program—\$100 for a tire, \$8,000 for a bike, \$25,000 for a pickup truck—but ask them to quantify the value of land access and the most you'll get is a blank stare. The sad fact is that public riding areas—both tracks and trails—are rapidly being taken away from responsible OHV users by highly funded, blindly supported environmental extremists, and yet the average off-road motorcycle rider is content to make a small annual donation and then leave the heavy lifting to the “hard-core trail guys.” This is a model that is doomed for failure, as there is a lot of work to do to protect the sport but not nearly enough people or resources to get it all done.

Fortunately, there are signs—faint signs but signs nonetheless—that the tide may be turning in our favor. An increased number of riders are waking up to the fact that if they don't take action now, there won't be any public riding areas left for them, their children, or their grandchildren to enjoy. Local communities and land managers are beginning to embrace off-road recreation for its economic value, and the general public is starting to see that we aren't just a bunch of lawless hooligans. Riders everywhere are mobilizing and fighting back against rampant land closures. Many of those closures are politically or financially motivated and are borderline unlawful. Positive changes are being made, and the bulk of the progress can be credited to the actions of our sport's most vehement supporters.

The sport's top advocates have long believed in an age-old conviction that what happens to the trails in the Rocky Mountains is what eventually happens in the rest of the country. Following this belief, one can regard Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, Colorado, Utah, and New Mexico as the front lines of the war for the future of our sport, with Colorado's trail-rich outdoor areas as some of the most critical ground to keep. It is here, in the hottest part of the action, that we find the Trails Preservation Alliance, a highly focused, nonprofit organization that works to educate riders, protect off-road areas, and support clubs and trail systems that are in need, as well as to fight off the attacks of the environmentalist groups who want to shut our sport down.

Those of you who have been reading *Dirt Rider* for a while have likely heard of the Trails Preservation Alliance (TPA) before; its leaders, Don Riggle and Stan Simpson, are well known for standing up to bullying environmental groups and rallying, educating, and empowering off-road riders. One of their most valuable means of accomplishing this is the Colorado 600, a weeklong trail symposium during which the sport's best and brightest advocates gather to work through current issues, share successful strategies, and enjoy some prime single-track riding before taking all this newfound information back to their respective local areas.

At the most recent running of this annual event much of the focus was on the numerous successes the off-road community has achieved as of late. This was evident before the event even began, as the mandatory tech inspection revealed



KTM's Pete Smith enjoys some throttle time with BRP's project bike.

some interesting results. “Several years ago, we were sound testing our riders’ bikes at 102 dBA, and we had a failure rate of over 40 percent,” explains Riggle, who limits the number of participants on the ride and personally reviews each application. “But thanks to consistently educating riders as to the benefits of the ‘less sound, more ground’ mantra, we’ve seen some major improvements. For example, at the most recent CO 600, we tested more than 120 bikes and only had one machine that required modifications to meet our current limit. And the current sound limit is 95 dBA, which is a lot quieter than what it was a few years back when everyone was failing the same test!” Not only is this proof that many off-road riders have been able to achieve a noticeable decrease in bike sound, but it also provides a glimpse at the kind of thinking that has helped to make loud bikes on trails a rare occurrence.

A veteran of the AMA, Simpson knows all too well how difficult it can be to reach and retain new members. But due to the consistent efforts of the TPA to support OHV organizations—in 2014, the TPA donated tens of thousands of dollars to various groups—interest in trails preservation is on the rise. “In a time when several off-road membership organizations are finding it difficult to gain financial support, the TPA is actually gaining in the number of supporters of the mission we have focused upon,” Simpson says. “Additionally, the involvement of the TPA has become a recognized factor in the legal proceedings related to use and retention of trails in the Colorado region. The growing number of volunteers who step up

to assist the TPA is a great trend that tells us to stay the course we started down several years ago. In addition, we have found it necessary to turn down a large number of applicants each year for the CO 600 event, which shows us there are a greater number of eager trail ambassadors out there than ever before. We see this as a real indicator that we are doing things the right way and are making a difference in the future of off-road riding in the Rockies!” There are many who wish that the Colorado 600 would be opened to more participants, but by keeping the event small and personal, Riggle and Simpson have found that they are best able to reach the core participants who come to the ride to learn how best to save the sport.

Another individual who is doing the work of many in keeping public lands open for motorized access is John Bongiovanni, a former Chairman of the Board of Directors for the Colorado Off-Highway Vehicle Coalition (COHVCO). Bongiovanni is a regular at the Colorado 600, and he recently gave a talk to all in attendance regarding some positive developments in OHV tourism. The main goal here is to get economically challenged rural communities to realize that OHV enthusiasts can provide a critical source of revenue. Once they get a taste of this, they fight harder than ever to help keep our public lands open to motorized use. “Rio Blanco County has been my favorite success story,” Bongiovanni recalls of the Meeker, Colorado, group. “They were the first to step forward and take me up on my offer to build an OHV tourism strategy, and they have been doing great with over 250 miles of



Behold: the world's most perfect trail.



Tigra Tsujikawa representing the ladies well!



This hill was no match for Francisco Ramos!



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Where there is traction, Mike Ausec will find it.



Step 1: Remove pipe. Step 2: Fix melted radiator hose!



The nightly bonfire: where trails go to sound difficult!

OHV trails called the Wagon Wheel Trail System. Go check them out! I believe that spreading the word about the positive impact of OHV tourism is a key part of keeping our public lands open. We need more than just enthusiasts fighting for access. We need the *communities* across the country to stand up and fight to keep our public lands open!”

Bongiovanni’s message to these communities is one of increased prosperity and quality tourism, but it’s also heavily reliant on off-road riders to spread the message. “When you are out enjoying our public lands, go into OHV-friendly towns to buy gas, groceries, motel rooms, etc. Also, be sure to tell the community who you are and that you are a responsible citizen who has chosen to spend hard-earned money in their community. It really does make a difference.” Of course, one of the most important aspects of OHV tourism is respect to the local riders in an area. Anytime you travel to a new trail system to ride, it’s critical to keep in mind that every local trail system has a local club that is responsible for keeping that area open. Not only do you need to be a good steward and treat these trails like they were your own, but it’s also important to support the fund-raising efforts of these local organizations, many of which are operating on shoestring budgets.

One of the members of the symposium’s audience, Bill Hearne, realizes just how much of an impact these local organizations can make. Hearne will take what he’s learned at the CO 600 back home with him to South Dakota, where he will share his newfound info with riders from his local club. As one of just a handful of attendees who has been to every Colorado 600, Hearne enjoys catching up with old friends at the event but says that its distinguishing feature is the educational value. “I don’t have near as much anti-OHV pushback in my state as the folks in Colorado have,” Hearne says. “However, I feel a personal commitment to do my part in the Black Hills. My main challenge is developing new and positive relationships with new or recently promoted Forest Service

managers, as this is a constantly changing pool of people. But I’ve learned that a single person can achieve results with consistent and forceful action. Since starting the process, we have made great strides in developing more single-track (about a 300-percent increase), fully developing the Dakota Adventure Loop (dakotaadventureloop.com), and creating another high-dollar fund-raising event: The Dakota 600. Come ride with me!”

While the Colorado 600 might seem like a war room full of generals, not everyone at the event is an old hand. Colorado 600 rookie Richard Crouse made the long trek from New Jersey to the event, and the experience had a profound impact on him. “The OHV knowledge I gained from the 600 is truly priceless,” Crouse says. “After experiencing the CO 600 I am eyes wide open to the present-day issues in the OHV world. I was amazed by the amount of knowledge shared by the members and participants. I would encourage startup OHV clubs and new riders to contact the leaders of the CO 600, who set the standard for OHV activism and have a wealth of knowledge that spans 30-plus years. Also, it’s important that we all stay in close contact with those who manage the lands we ride on. They are mandatory to keep on the OHV team.”

It goes without saying that the riding conditions at the Colorado 600 are absolutely epic, with several days of enjoying the local trail system while also learning from the most passionate OHV supporters in the country. Each morning, the group enjoys a big breakfast together while being addressed by a guest speaker, after which the mass of bikers splits into several different guided rides, ranging from long-distance adventure journeys to full on AA-level enduro loops.

During my adventures at this year’s 600, I spent considerable time both on and off the trail with Scott Bright, who is chairman of the Rocky Mountain Enduro Circuit, and Jim Rios, owner of Billet Racing Products (BRP). Both are Colorado-based business owners who are actively involved in the preservation of the sport,

and each one had good things to say about the current direction of our efforts. "I have seen some amazing things happening, especially in the way people and communities look at OHVs and the riders," Rios notes. "We were once looked at as reckless motorcycle riders, glared at, and even given the evil eye, but that seems to be changing. More and more people are seeing the caliber and quality of people that ride off-road motorcycles, not to mention the enormous economic impact we provide when we bring our families, motorcycles, and RVs to a small town and fill their restaurants and buy their fuel, food, and drinks. These towns are now welcoming us with open arms and smiles of appreciation, and I couldn't be happier with that."

Bright, who was instrumental in opening up and maintaining the area of Colorado where the 600 takes place, agrees with Rios' outlook. "I am hopeful for the future of motorized single-track in Colorado because of organizations like the TPA," Scott says. "With a little bit of money and some very coordinated efforts, we have been able to fight back the monstrous Wilderness Societies that would like the motorcycle industry to go away forever. It is a lot like the original Americans that used very focused guerilla-warfare maneuvers against the vastly superior British armies; rather than constantly fighting to keep from losing trails, we are to a point where we can gain some trails back that have been closed for some time. Yes, we do have the occasional losses, and those don't go down without a major fight. We are gaining ground, and I am grateful for that, and I see hope for my kids and their riding opportunities."

Despite his optimism, Bright is firm about maintaining our commitment to fighting for OHV access. "We are just now starting to gain some momentum, and now is not the time to sit back and watch this movement idle along in first gear!" Bright cautions. "We need people to pull out checkbooks and pile on the donations then get active about voting, working on trails, and being proactive in terms of protecting our sport. Keep in mind that the TPA is looking to expand into other states; imagine starting your own local club in California, Oregon, or Washington, and getting funded by the TPA to start engaging the local Forest Service about opening up some trails. Think of what could be done if riders from

every state stepped up to do this! There are a lot of victories right around the corner, but we have to stay on the gas and work together in order to achieve them. Letting up now is not an option!"

In the end, the Colorado 600 is a success because it provides a powerful catalyst for positive change in our sport while also maintaining a clear and defined mission: to preserve motorized recreation for future generations. In a time when some OHV users have written off their individual efforts as, "just a drop in the bucket," the Trails Preservation Alliance is doing an incredible job of educating the leaders of our sport and arming them with new knowledge to bestow upon other OHV activists. This ripple effect is leading to trails being opened—and, in many cases, closed trails being *reopened*—as well as improved relations with forest service managers, increased opportunities for young enthusiasts, and more support than ever for local clubs.

Naturally, though, every participant leaves the Colorado 600 wondering what can be done to mobilize OHV enthusiasts on a national scale. There are currently dozens of national organizations, yet the off-road community needs just one gigantic group to carry the ball for us. Will the AMA reorganize so as to merge with other national organizations, increase membership, and be the single unifying representative of OHV enthusiasts? Or will the OEMs and dealers be the ones to join forces, rally the troops, and take a collective stand against the onslaught of threats to the way we enjoy the outdoors? The way that things will unfold is not yet clear, though it's extremely evident that groups like the Trails Preservation Alliance—and the highly successful Colorado 600 event—are making positive forward progress toward advancing our access and sticking up for off-road riders. One thing is definitely certain: Now is the time for every single man, woman, and child to get and remain active in the fight to protect the future of our sport. And if you think the environmentalists are going to give you a fair shake, then I've got a nice lightweight adamantium skid plate I'd like to sell you. **DR**

WANT MORE? TO SEE WHAT THE TRAILS PRESERVATION ALLIANCE IS DOING (IN GREAT DETAIL), LOOK OVER THE 2014 END OF YEAR REPORT IN THE NEWS SECTION AT COLORADOTPA.ORG, AND CHECK OUT COLORADO600.ORG TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THE EVENT. YOU CAN ALSO CATCH THE COMPLETE VIDEO AT DIRTRIDER.COM/FEATURES/VIDEO-2014-COLORADO-600/. THE TPA WOULD LIKE TO THANK ALL OF THE COMPANIES AND RIDERS WHO MADE GENEROUS DONATIONS THIS YEAR.



Why is Ned Suesse smiling? Why not?!



The crew enjoys an epic Colorado view.



Stan Simpson



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Is this a whip or a crash? Would you believe us if we told you?