

Section 2: Overview of the Off-Road Sector Issues

2.1 Introduction

This section contains a brief discussion on specific issues in the off-road sector. Key issues in the sector lie with off-road vehicle users and off-road trails.

2.2 Impact of Off-Road Vehicles on the Environment

In assessing applicable environmental and other legislation, it is important to consider the link between off-road vehicle use and the environment.

The use of off-road vehicles can present serious detrimental impacts to the environment and incompatibility with other users of the land, if not managed in a responsible manner.

It is widely accepted that off-road use of vehicles may result in one or more detrimental environmental effects, including, but not limited to:

- Physical soil damage, often readily visible, resulting in:
 - Erosion, causing soil loss and damage to stream banks, streams, and fish habitat;
 - Soil compaction and serious adverse impact on flora and its regeneration; and
 - Degradation of trails, including rutting and breakdown of trail edges.
- Disruption of wildlife breeding and nesting habitats, especially of vulnerable species, resulting in loss of young;
- Disturbance of wildlife, leading to weakened physical condition, death, and possible extinction of some species;
- Damage to archaeological, scientific, historical and other significant sites, and damage to natural features, sometimes with irreversible effects, especially on rare features of interest for scientific study;
- Facilitation of illegal hunting, fishing and the illegal trade in fauna and flora;
- Danger to the safety of other land users because of vehicle speed, steep terrain, sharp curves, slippery or unstable trail surfaces, and/or limited visibility;
- Competition with other land users: vehicle operators, with their increased mobility, generally use a greater quantity of scarce land per recreational user;
- Introduction of air and water pollution to areas presently removed from any such sources; and

- Excessive noise, which, in close proximity, may result in physiological effects on humans and fauna, or may induce anxiety, altering animal behaviour patterns, and which, in most circumstances, seriously degrades the solitude of natural areas for other users.

Annexure A includes a detailed breakdown of impacts as identified in the Western Cape Guidelines Series.

2.3 Off-Road Trails and Routes

There is currently no standard accepted definition for an off-road route or trail in South Africa.

The Western Cape Provincial Department of Environmental Affairs and Development Planning probably provides the best definition, included in their “Provincial Guidelines for the Western Cape: Assessment and Evaluation of Proposed and Existing Off-road Routes: A Guide for Environmental Assessment Practitioners, Authorities and Route Planners, 2006”. These guidelines define an off-road route as:

“...any road, route or track, other than proclaimed roads, which can be used by motorized vehicles, including 4 x 4s, 2 x 4s, all terrain vehicles (“ATVs”), quad bikes and off road trail bikes for recreation or any other use”.

The term “route” is used to encompass all kinds of off-road routes and trails on private or public property, including graded roads used for management purposes and access, double tracks (4x4, 2x4 and quad bike tracks) and single tracks (off-road trail bike tracks).

According to the NOW Business Plan, there were 591 such trails or destinations in 2005, with the bulk of these being eco-trails (off-road trails) and nature reserves (see **Table 2.1**). The current number of trails and destinations is estimated at 430, but the split of these trails and destinations by type is currently unknown.

Table 2.1: Trails / Destinations

Destination	Number	% of Total
Eco-Trails (Off-Road Trails)	193	33%
Nature Reserves	168	28%
National Parks	86	15%
Game Reserves	42	7%
Fly Fishing Beats	23	4%
Game Farms / Hunting Farms	20	3%
Tourist Resorts	16	3%
Hiking Trails / Mountain Bike Trails	15	3%
Racing / 4x4 Playgrounds	12	2%
Protected Areas	10	2%
Golf Courses	4	1%
Community Rest Camps	2	0%
Total	591	100%

Source: NOW Business Plan

Legislation exists to protect the environment from damage (discussed in further detail in **Section 3**), but the off-road sector is criticized for causing damage. Why is this so?

According to SAROOF, there are millions of hectares of land under the ownership and management of landowners and farmers that are not aware of the fact that legislation applies to them or that they are in contravention thereof.

SAROOF estimates that between 50% and 70% of routes in South Africa are in contravention of National Environmental Management Act, Act 107 of 1998 (“**NEMA**”) EIA Regulations to some degree. Many of these trails and tracks may in fact be in contravention, with this contravention being unintentional. In addition, some route owners and operators are under the incorrect assumption that they are operating legally, having “been approved” by local conservation officers.

2.4 Off-Road Vehicle Users

Estimates indicate that there are in excess of 500 000 off-road vehicles in South Africa.

Off-road vehicle users can be divided into 6 categories, viz:

1. AAWDC and AMID club members;
2. Non-AAWDC and non-AMID club members, but members of other clubs;
3. Private individuals who are not members of a club and are experienced off-road drivers;

4. Private individuals who are not members of a club and who are inexperienced or marginally experienced off-road drivers;
5. Commercial users who have off-road experience and have been trained – This is generally a safety, health and environment requirement for e.g. Eskom, South African National Parks, Defence Force, SAPS, MTN, Vodacom, Cell C and other government departments and NGO's etc; and
6. Untrained commercial users.

According to NOW, it is the irresponsible behaviour of a handful of these vehicle owners and users that are giving the off-road sector users a bad name, and are resulting in damage to the environment. Of this, quad bike users are reported to be the worst culprits.