

outdoors



Snowmobiles: Earth eaters?

By LEM MESEE
Outdoors writer

"Snowmobiles, dune buggies, trail bikes and other such machines, improperly used, can harm vegetation, wildlife and watersheds, and conflict with backpackers, cross country skiers and other users of public land."

That quote comes from the announcement of a conference in Ann Arbor March 17-18 to review U.S. Department of Agriculture policies for off-road vehicles (ORVs).

Not only can they do harm. They do harm.

USDA manages our national forests, four of which are in Michigan. Co-sponsors of the conference are USDA and the University of Michigan.

The theory of ORV owners seems to be: "I spent good money on this machine, and now the government owes me a place to run it. I got my rights."

Yet any lover of the woods has to know what kind of damage ORVs do:

- Hillsides torn up by trail bikes and subjected to erosion.

- Vegetation mowed down.

- Animals spooked from their otherwise inaccessible habitats.

- Ice fishing ruined by the vibrations and racket from snowmobiles.

ORVs are great tools. Somewhere I read that the snowmobile was invented by a Quebec man whose son died in a rural cabin because a doctor couldn't get there. Conservation officers, cops and mailmen ought to have them when they need them.

But as toys? Conference speakers will include academic types, user groups, non-user groups, state and federal agencies.

If you're interested in attending, contact: U-M Extension Service, Department of Conferences and Institutes, 412 Maynard, Ann Arbor 48109.

Don't expect anyone to recommend outlawing ORVs. Says the announcement: "The conference will focus on improved ORV management to protect environmental values and minimize conflicts of use. A major thrust will be

to review USDA policies and provide recommendations for improved department compliance with two executive orders."

OAKLAND University near Rochester will be scene of two environmental films and workshops sponsored by the Public Interest Research Group in Michigan (PIRGIM).

Both free programs are open to the public.

Tuesday at 11 a.m. the films "The Killing Ground" and "Strip Mine Trip" will be shown in the exhibit lounge of the Oakland Center. A workshop on toxic waste problems in Michigan will follow.

The films will be shown a second time at 8 p.m. in the multipurpose room of Vandenberg Hall.

A week later, at 11 a.m. Feb. 26, PIRGIM and Greenpeace, the national organization to save the whales, will present the film "Greenpeace Voyages to Save the Whales" in the exhibit lounge of the Oakland Center. A workshop will follow.

The film will be repeated at 8 p.m.

MORE THAN 800 recreational vehicles and exhibits are on display at the Detroit Camper and Travel Trailer show that opened Friday and runs until Feb. 24 at the Detroit Artillery Armory, W. Eight Mile near Northland.

The trend of last year will continue — lighter vehicles that can be towed by smaller cars with less consumption of gasoline.

Hours are 2-10 p.m. weekdays; noon to 10 p.m. Saturday; and noon to 8 p.m. Sunday.

General admission is \$3; senior citizens and kids 6-12, \$1; parking is \$1.

On display will be travel trailers, motor homes, camping trailers, truck campers, vans, pickup truck covers, recreational vehicles, accessories and booths with information on campgrounds, conservation clubs, insurance and financing.

Industry groups are the show's sponsors.

Looking up

Planet action for skygazers

Two planets, Mars and Jupiter, will come as close to the earth this February as they will get during 1980.

But they will be rivaled in brightness by the star Sirius, says University of Michigan astronomy Prof. Richard G. Teske.

The earth, moving along its orbit about the sun, has been gradually overtaking the two outer planets and will pass them near the end of February. Ruddy-looking Mars will then be at a distance of "only" 63 million miles, with creamy-colored Jupiter more than six times farther off, he notes.

As they rise in the east after sunset, Jupiter's greater reflectivity and immense size — more than 20 times that of Mars — make it the brighter of the two planets even though it is the more distant, Teske says.

WHEN MARS is closest to the earth on Feb. 25, fine details on its surface cannot be seen from earth, he says.

"Little wonder, then, that Mars' craters, barren valleys and immense volcanic mountains had to await discovery by television equipped spacecraft.

"Our ability to observe fine detail with earth-based telescopes is limited by the same atmospheric effects that cause the twinkling of the stars," he explains.

"Air currents near the ground and winds blowing at all altitudes disturb light rays from stars and planets that must pass through many miles of our atmosphere before reaching a telescope."

The U-M astronomer says "sky watchers can judge atmospheric effects for themselves by observing magnificent Sirius, brightest star in our earth's skies, which is almost directly south at around 9:30 on February evenings.

"On crisp and clear nights, Sirius seems to dance and twinkle con-

spicuously, often fragmenting into showy colors of red, blue and yellow. When this happens, the astronomer's view of small features on the distant planets becomes disappointing and hopeless.

"EVEN WHEN the weather seems most tranquil, tiny motions of air cells can seriously effect the quality of astronomical 'seeing' and prevent our taking advantage of the actual capabilities of large ground-based telescopes," Teske says.

"This is one of the reasons that the National Aeronautics and Space Administration plans to launch into earth orbit a large space telescope during the mid-1980's," he adds. "Observing from above the disturbing effects of the atmosphere, the space telescope will reveal details that cannot be seen from the earth's surface."

However, when looking at Sirius in a telescope under the best conditions of "seeing," a most unusual companion star can be observed orbiting around it, Teske points out.

"The companion star contains about as much matter as does our sun, but its diameter is only a little more than twice the earth's. Consequently, the material of which it is composed has an extremely high density, several tons to the cubic inch."

Such objects are called "white dwarfs," and are the embers of dead stars, Teske notes. "Producing no energy of their own, they slowly cool off over billions of years, becoming fainter and fainter as the eons pass.

"Some astronomers think that between one-thirtieth and one-tenth of the stars in our galaxy are white dwarfs, feeble embers of once brilliant stars that have ended their existence because they have exhausted their supplies of hydrogen and helium fuel."

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