

GLORIETA/ROWE MESA – THE SACRIFICIAL LAMB

By Linda Patorni

You can still find solitude and natural beauty in many parts of the Santa Fe National Forest on Glorieta/Rowe Mesa. You can ride or hike for a day and not see another soul. You might come across grazing cattle, or deer, or elk or wild turkeys. And in late spring the wild flowers are spectacular. I used to ride my mule there, often alone. I don't anymore. I no longer feel safe or comfortable. It's no longer a pleasure.

To get to those quiet unspoilt places you have to try to ignore the trash, the old refrigerators, cars, mattresses, twisted metal, the spent shells and empty beer bottles. And you try to keep to a single trail but sometimes it veers off into a network of intersecting tire-marked tracks baked into the hillsides. Some tracks dead-end at scarred trees and widen into dustbowls. Many are now gullies that become torrents when it rains, and you know nothing will ever grow there again. Late last year I was riding on the Mesa and two dirt bikes sped by me in a dust cloud. I was the one who moved out of the way. They made no attempt to slow down. It was as if I didn't exist. My neighbors have not always been so lucky and recently one was thrown from her horse as an OHV roared by, its occupants laughing. Over the past few years I have seen a steady increase in off-road vehicles on the Mesa and the devastation and debris they leave behind. The new Forest Service proposal will make it worse.

The national Travel Management Plan currently underway by the Forest Service is looking at all national forests to try to stem further degradation by Off Highway Vehicles (OHVs). A good thing you would think. They are assessing which routes should remain open to motorized traffic and whether there should be designated areas for OHVs. The Forest Service has held a series of public meetings – though I have yet to find many members of the public who knew about them – and they have now issued their draft maps for New Mexico. Unfortunately the Mesa has become a casualty of this exercise.

The Forest Service map for Glorieta/Rowe Mesa shows the proposed “official trails” for year-round use by OHVs. These “official trails” cover the entire map of the Mesa in an intricate spider-web. They were identified largely by aerial survey and represent not only numbered roads and forest service roads but also those random tracks created over time by off-roaders. They are all now “official trails”. In other words, go and make us a track and we'll endorse it. Each would have a 100-300 foot buffer either side for camping. Simply put, the Mesa will be turned into an OHV playground. Furthermore, the road density exceeds even the Forest Service' own road density guidelines. They would argue that nothing has changed as the Mesa is already open to motorized vehicles. This may be the case, but OHV traffic is primarily local and relatively limited because you have to know where the Mesa is. This will change.

Once the maps are published the Mesa will become a destination point for OHV users all over the country. They will be in brochures and on the web. Not known to shy away

from tourism, New Mexico will welcome them with open arms, with their trucks, trailers, RVs, the works. The OHV lobby is strong, loud, growing, and has money. OHV use has exploded over the last few years and there are now 50 million OHVs tearing up our national forests. They organize manufacturer-sponsored rallies and events and they are longing for areas like this. Their websites ask OHV enthusiasts to write reviews to promote OHV tourism in new areas. In addition, they have been actively seeking a designated OHV area close to Albuquerque and Santa Fe and for some time have sought to annex the Mesa for this purpose

It is evident that the Forest Service sees the Mesa as an easy target. The 100,000 acre forest has close access from the interstate. At first glance, a desk study (which is all they have done to our knowledge) might suggest that the Mesa is not a watershed, that perhaps there is nothing obviously fragile about its soils or wildlife. The communities are small, rural, and fragmented by the Mesa's physical geography, unlikely to react. Furthermore, people are driving all over the Mesa anyway. In other words, it is expendable, an ideal dumping ground. Put them all on the Mesa and everyone else will be happy. No one has noted that the elk are starting to return, that it is in fact a haven for wildlife and to our knowledge no one has hiked the Mesa and seen its spectacular landscape. And no one has discussed its rich history, the unique petroglyphs dating over 5000 years, some of the rarest and unusual in New Mexico.

A community group, whose website is Glorietamesa.org, is outraged by what is happening and is rallying to be heard and bring some sense to this process. This group is made up of members from the communities around the mesa, ranchers, individuals who have chosen to live in a quiet rural community, other recreationists who see this as yet another threat to our open spaces. Ranchers see OHVs as a scourge. Time and again fences are broken, windmills and structures destroyed, water tanks riddled with bullets and cattle are startled by the roar of OHVs tearing up the land. The small community of Canonicito at the base of the Mesa is also outraged by the proposal. Already they have seen an increase in OHV traffic and a few years ago witnessed the death of an OHV rider on the switchback of County Road 51 coming down from the Mesa. If the proposal goes ahead, access to the Mesa through Canonicito is the obvious route for OHVs trailering to the forest. The one-lane winding road is ill-equipped to handle increased traffic of this type.

And all communities are terrified by the possibility of fire. The Mesa, like many parts of New Mexico, is a tinderbox. Does an OHV rider from Tennessee have any idea what can happen when he drops a cigarette on the ground in New Mexico? Does he have any idea that if in trouble, his cell phone will have no signal, that when it rains the Mesa roads become a swirling soupy mix rendering them impassable for rescue vehicles? Perhaps he doesn't care, but we do. Enforcement, even now, is laughable. There is none and we see nothing in the Forest Service proposal to assure us that it is being addressed. The heaps of trash and the ongoing damage to personal property is witness to the lack of enforcement.

My personal view is that OHVs have no place in our national forests. My personal outrage is that the majority who enjoy quiet recreation are effectively eliminated from our forests. We are brought up to believe that we all share this resource. But the Forest Service is sacrificing our forests to a single category of user, the OHV hobbyist. He can continue to destroy our environment because he has been granted permission. He can enjoy his sport whether I am on the trail or not, whether there are cattle grazing, people living close by, or structures in place. I cannot, because of him. I don't go there any more.

The bizarre logic of this exercise is baffling. The Forest Service is undertaking this huge, costly exercise to pander to the very group that is destroying our forests. They are talking about designated areas, signage. The terminology is changing too – they are the OHV-users and we are the non-OHV users. When did the majority who quietly respect and love nature and their national forests suddenly become non-OHV users? What is the Forest Service doing for people like me?

For more information or to offer support or voice concern, go to Glorietamesa.org or contact the author at 505-422-2288.