

DNR right to keep ATVs from North Shore trail

Designating route for ATV use without study or preparation would be a mistake

Some things government needs to move quickly on; others are better left to a slower, more contemplative process.

The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources wisely has chosen the latter route in denying a proposal to open the North Shore State Snowmobile Trail for ATV use in the warmer months.

Even more contemplation is needed. State DNR Commissioner Gene Merriam and other state officials made an on-site inspection of the proposed 48-mile stretch of trail from just outside Duluth to Silver Bay before coming to a decision.

The state has been pressured by ATV enthusiasts to open that part of the North Shore Trail to ATVs partly because it is not heavily used during the summer months. The trail, largely separate from the Superior Hiking Trail and popular with snowmobile users in winter, is open to hiking, biking and horseback riding in the off-snowmobile season.

The usual battle lines are drawn on this issue between environmental interests and motorized vehicle interests. Environmental advocates contended parts of the trail would be subject to erosion and runoff into trout streams where the trail crosses sensitive areas. They also cite noise and traffic.

The motorized vehicle camp believes the environmental con-

cerns have been exaggerated; that opening the trail to ATVs would actually benefit the region because riders would more likely stick to the trail rather than venture willy-nilly into areas where real environmental harm could result. They have received the backing of the St. Louis and Lake county boards.

But it's the state's decision, and the decision to err on the side of caution regarding the environmental impact is the proper one at this time. Merriam left the door open to opening some part of the trail to ATVs in the future "with certain reroutes and physical improvements."

They can cross that stream when they come to it.

Meanwhile, the 2003 Legislature passed a measure calling for the DNR to expand motorized trail designation, something that should and will continue aside from the controversial North Shore proposal.

Count on this: Wherever motorized vehicles are proposed for public lands, the same battle lines will be drawn. Motorized use should not lose every battle. The state needs to respond to their needs as well as be stewards of the environment.

But simply forging ahead by designating the North Shore State Trail segment without more study would have been a mistake.

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