



# IS THE ATV INDUSTRY ADVERTISING SINFULLY?

## Responding to a Report by The Izaak Walton League

*"It has become clear that the ATV industry not only has largely ceased to promote responsible use of their products, it has begun to encourage use that is both potentially hazardous to the rider and detrimental to the environment." – IWLA Report*

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**D**id you know there's a secret conspiracy among ATV manufacturers to brainwash people into becoming motorized barbarians bent on the destruction of nature sheerly for their own pleasure? Yeah, neither did I. But thanks to a report by the Izaak Walton League of America titled *Caught in the Treads: Unethical Advertising in the ATV Industry*, I have been enlightened to the truth.

The problem, of course, is truth is always invented.

Because of the nature of independent sentience in human beings, the concept of truth is subjective. Sure, someone can try to convince you they are offering objective facts, but don't believe for a minute that translates to objective truth. There's no such thing. Reality is interpretive, and any argument anyone presents to you will always be colored by perspective and opinions.

The *Caught in the Treads* report is a prime example of this. It's filled with sensationalistic language designed to outrage people at supposed wrongdoings by the industry in its advertising practices. Well, I'm going to present some countering views here. Rest assured that I am not going to try and convince you I am preaching "the truth"; rather, I admit freely that all I will do is present opinions based on my biased interpretation of reality. Why, you might be thinking, should I bother? Because if there's only one set of opinions with no opposing views, people might start to believe they actually are true.

Now, I would like to emphasize that we here at *ATV-I* believe very strongly in the responsible use of ATVs, and it is not my intention to dismiss the notion that the industry needs to encourage such principles. Nor do I doubt that the Izaak Walton League of America (IWLA from here on) also has the best intentions in mind as far as promoting responsible use. I just happen to believe their interpretations are a little off the mark. I would also encourage those of you who haven't read the report to look it up on-line. It's available at [www.IWLAa.org/reports/atv.html](http://www.IWLAa.org/reports/atv.html), and isn't too long.

From the outset, the IWLA paints this report as a crusade to battle the forces of evil at work in the ATV industry. The very use of the word "unethical" in the title carries a lot of insinuations. They could have chosen "misguided," "delinquent," or some other less inflammatory term. But let's face it, "unethical" is an attention grabber. Never mind the implied judgement you are making on other people's morals. As if that's not bad enough, the Foreword refers to industry advertising showing "*scenes promoting joyous destruction.*" (pg. 5.)

The implication of the report is that the ATV industry has made a deliberate effort to persuade the general public it's ok to use their ATVs destructively. I hope I'm not alone in thinking this accusation is a little absurd. In case you think I'm exaggerating, I offer the following quote from IWLA Executive Director Paul Hansen: "This report provides examples of how much the ATV industry encourages

landscape abuse in its advertising while claiming to adhere to the principles of Tread Lightly! ..." (pg. 6.) Here's another excerpt from further into the report: "It has become clear that the ATV industry not only has largely ceased to promote responsible use of their products, it has begun to encourage use that is both potentially hazardous to the rider and detrimental to the environment." (pg. 12.)

The other target of the report is Tread Lightly!, a non-profit organization focused on promoting responsible use of OHVs. According to Mr. Hansen, "Across the nation, participation in Tread Lightly! is used as a cover-up for ATV abuse. It has become a green-scam that no responsible outdoor user should believe." (pg. 6.) Yes, this is where the conspiracy part comes in. When I see the words "cover-up" and "scam" in contiguous sentences, I get an image of payoffs and bribes being exchanged between shady characters in dark alleys.

So how exactly are the OEMs cheerily advocating the destruction of nature? The IWLA says they fail to adhere to the Tread Lightly! advertising guidelines. There are a couple of problems with this argument, though. First, guidelines are not rules. As the first half of the word would imply, a "guideline" is meant to create a standard by which to *guide* decisions; by their very nature, guidelines are subjective. The second problem is that some of the Tread Lightly! guidelines themselves may need a little bit of tweaking in their logic.

First let's have a look at the guidelines:

#### **Guideline 1: Wilderness and Wildlands**

Tread Lightly! (TL) explains that since Congress passed the Wilderness Act in 1964, certain areas have been designated as Wilderness and therefore off limits to motorized vehicles. TL's reasoning is that the use of the word "wilderness" in advertising incorrectly implies "consent and allowable use of vehicles inside these areas." TL instead recommends using the terms "wildlands," "backcountry," or "great outdoors."

The problem with this rationale, though, is that the word "wilderness" came before the legal term "Wilderness." TL says, "People sometimes refer to remote backcountry areas as wilderness because they're so far removed from civilization." Well, according to Webster's Dictionary, wilderness is defined as "a region uncultivated and uninhabited." Therefore, the application of the term "wilderness" is a perfectly correct use of the English language.

#### **Guideline 2: Off-Road vs. Off-Highway**

According to TL, "Off-highway refers to the use of existing unpaved roads and trails. The term 'off-road' has become synonymous with 'go anywhere.'" Since staying on marked trails is an important aspect of OHV use, TL recommends avoiding the term "off-road" in advertising, editorial, and educational materials. I've got to say that as an industry, we've pretty much made this guideline obsolete. If you're at all familiar with *MI* and *ATV-I*, you know that we consistently use the term "offroad" to represent a particular market segment of the powersports industry (in fact, we use it so often that we have made it a single word). Most people in the industry have done the same.

TL does add, "It is understood however, there are some circumstances where the use of the commercial phrase 'off-road' may be necessary." At this point, though, arguing when using "offroad" is or isn't necessary is moot. It has become part of powersports vernacular. And it simply flows better than "off-highway."

One thing I'd like to comment on here (which I find extremely ironic) is that in the IWLA report, on the same page on which it quotes this Tread Lightly! guideline (pg. 10), it is written: "These guidelines are used as the basis for determining environmentally responsible off-road advertisements and promotions." Uh oh! It seems like the IWLA just wrote something that violates a guideline! I was able to count at least 10 other uses of "off-road" in the report – quite a lot, considering that the IWLA labels OEMs as being unethical for using that same term.

#### **Guideline 3: Staying on Designated Roads and Trails**

TL! recommends that "Whenever possible, show an obvious road or trail to a scenic destination." The reason is that users should not be encouraged to think their ATVs can appropriately be used to blaze new trails. No argument here.

#### **Guideline 4: Taking It Easy**

"When portraying vehicles in action, fun and excitement need not be excluded in advertising, but be aware of the implied message associated with excessive speed ... The implied message should be consistent with good judgement and safety." Again, this guideline makes sense.

#### **Guideline 5: Water – A Sensitive Issue**

TL recommends showing vehicles crossing water using bridges or "designated fording points to cross at a 90 degree angle to the stream, avoiding excessive speed and wheel spinning."

#### **Guideline 6: Avoiding Wet Backcountry Roads and Trails**

Pay close attention to this one, because later I'm going to bring up something

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tricky the IWLA did. Says the TL guideline: “Mud isn’t macho. Heavy vehicles can damage wet or soft backcountry roads and trails by creating huge ruts, making them impassable and encouraging others to bypass the obstruction, thus creating new roads and trails. Avoid scenes depicting these conditions.”

### Guideline 7: Silence Is Golden

This guideline says that noise can frighten wildlife and alter normal behavior patterns. Presumably, the recommendation to keep the volume down is meant to apply to radio or TV commercials, since volume is hard to depict in a magazine ad. The guideline does state, though, “Depict vehicle actions that demonstrate wildlife conservation.”

### Guideline 8: Leave No Trace

This basically says that anything carried in should be carried out. While it certainly makes sense as a public service message, I’m not sure how it’s applicable to advertisements.

Now that we’ve gone over Tread Lightly’s guidelines, let’s examine how the IWLA claims the “ATV industry blatantly breaks every rule of responsible environmental advertising set forth by Tread Lightly!” (pg. 22.)

### In violation of Guideline #1:

The report refers to a Bombardier ad which uses the term “wilderness.” I’ve already commented on this guideline above. In my estimation, it’s a real stretch to say a company is being unethical for simply using a word consistent with its dictionary definition.

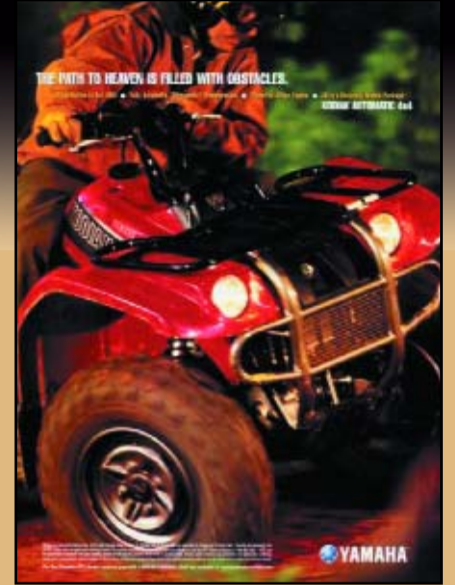
### In violation of Guideline #2:

Here, “off-road” was used in a Polaris ad. Again, this was discussed above. How is a company unethical for using a phrase which is part of the market vernacular? And how is the IWLA also not guilty, as it uses the same term repeatedly within its own report?

### In violation of Guideline #3:

This cites an ad for the Polaris Ranger, where the report contends the vehicle is blazing a new trail. (While it can be argued the photo angle is inconclusive as to whether there actually is a trail there or not, we won’t debate that here.) What the report fails to take into consideration is the point of the advertisement itself. The Ranger is being marketed as “The world’s best vehicle for the world’s worst terrain.” Yes, it’s important to stay on trails. But no doubt there are circumstances where there is a specific need to get to a location where there is no trail. How effectively could the message be delivered that this vehicle is designed for “the world’s worst terrain” if it were to be depicted on a trail that any less-specialized vehicle could traverse? Additionally, the vehicle is depicted climbing over rocks and dead logs.

recommendation of showing good judgement and safety. Well, first off, yes, the blurred wheels imply speed. But there is nothing that can show the speed in this photo is excessive. And yes, the driver is indeed leaning into the turn – exactly the way that all riders are taught to do in ATV training courses. If anything, this ad seems to demonstrate proper riding technique – a far cry from bad judgement.



### In violation of Guideline #5:

The report says this photo “shows wheel spinning on wet soil.” It looks to me like this vehicle is operating in a designated mud hole designed for just this purpose. How does one get out of a mud hole without spinning an ATV’s wheels?

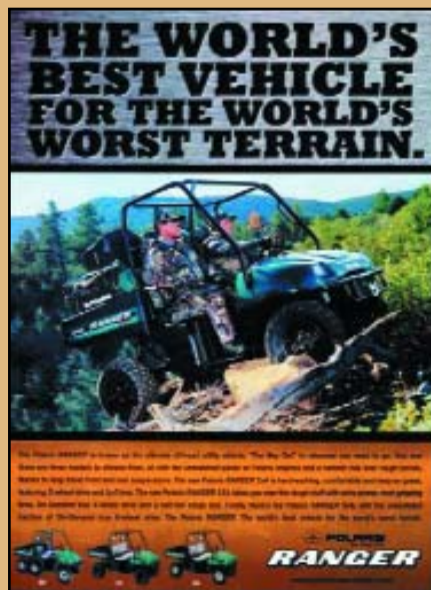
### Also in violation of Guideline #5 (pictured below)

Here’s a Kawasaki ad where an ATV is going through a streamlet. Whether or not you consider this a violation of the guideline is a matter of degree. The guideline says to avoid portraying areas such as “wetlands, spawning beds, riparian areas, and river banks.” Well, this picture doesn’t seem to portray any of those things. Considering the fact that the ATV’s wheels are only splashing through a few centimeters of water, it hardly seems like the type of area fish and other aquatic wildlife would be inhabiting. Additionally, the guideline states it’s fine to



depict ATVs in designated fording points. Is there any reason – especially considering the lack of depth to the water – to believe that this is not such a point?

Related to this, the report later shows (on pgs. 22 – 23) a photo taken of a pair of riders on an ATV with the caption, “Operator behavior reflects industry advertising as users drive



Foliage surrounds the vehicle, but is not being trampled by the vehicle in any way we can see.

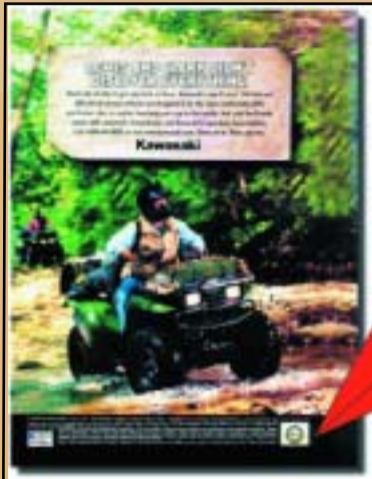
### In violation of Guideline #4:

Here we have an image of a rider leaning into a turn. The IWLA report complains that “the blurred wheels and driver leaning into the turn implies speed,” which violates TL’s



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## Continued Response to a Report by The Izaak Walton League



their vehicles through the Upper Missouri River.” This statement borders on ludicrous. First, I cannot understand how this irresponsible use of an ATV is in any way similar to industry advertising referenced in this report. As you can see, the wheels of the vehicle are completely submerged in a river bank – definitely not something any industry ad has shown to my knowledge. Second, I would like to know just how the authors of this report made the determination that the operator’s behavior was influenced by anything other than his own lack of intelligence. Did the authors ask him why he thought this type of riding was ok? Did he respond, “Because I saw it in an ad?” The report is fabricating conclusions to further its sensationalized premise.

### **In violation of Guideline #6:**

Here, the report references Arctic Cat and Yamaha ads with ATVs splashing through mud. And here is what is written: “The Tread Lightly! guideline states: ‘Mud isn’t macho. Avoid scenes depicting these conditions.’” Did you catch the little trick they played? If not, go back up and read Guideline #6. The IWLA report conveniently omits the part about “soft backcountry roads and trails creating huge ruts.” The gist of the guideline is to not show conditions where ATVs are riding on soft, wet trails. The IWLA has portrayed the guideline as a ban on showing any mud whatsoever.

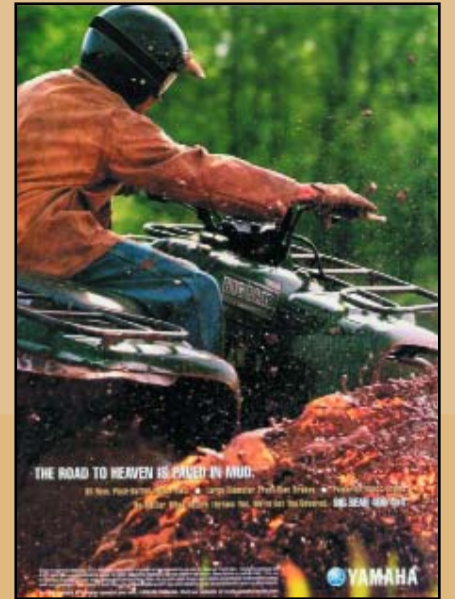
Mud riding, as anyone in the industry knows, is evolving into its own sport within the

ATV segment, with many companies offering specific components to enhance performance in these conditions. What’s more, mud holes are often advertised to attract riders to private riding areas. For example, in May, I went to the ATVA’s web site and checked out their featured riding area for that month. It was the Coal Creek Mining Manufacturing Company area in Tennessee. I quote from the site: “In terms of riding, Coal Creek has everything an ATVer would ever want, with wooded trails, hills, creek crossings, mud holes ...”

Yes, mud holes. Apparently, the Izaak Walton League is ignorant of the fact that designated mud holes are often deliberately put into ATV riding areas. Instead, the report gives the misleading impression that riding through mud should be condemned because it is automatically destructive. It is true that mud can be destructive *in certain circumstances* as described in the Tread Lightly! guidelines. However, since the photographs do not show soft backcountry roads being destroyed by an ATV – rather just the ATVs themselves splashing some mud – it seems again to be a stretch to claim the OEMs were unethical in creating these ads.

### **In violation of Guideline #7:**

Ok, here perhaps is the report’s strongest argument. An Arctic Cat ad depicts an ATV having just passed over a ruffed grouse, with the caption, “So much ground clearance even the dumbest birds are safe.” I suppose anyone would have to admit this doesn’t show appropriate respect for wildlife. However, I would also say the ad is more humorous than unethical. Let’s be real here: the ad was trying to be funny. Yes, it may not be politically correct (or in this case “environmentally correct”). But then again, most funny things aren’t. After all, if one of your friends tells a dirty joke to get a laugh, do you call them unethical? (There’s nothing in the TL guidelines about banning humor ...)



### **In violation of Guideline #8 (pictured on page 7):**

The same photo that was used in the second Guideline #5 violation is repeated here. States the report, “As with many ads that depict ATVs tearing up soil and creating mud, the Polaris ad below does not illustrate a ‘Leave No Trace’ message.” First point: of all the “many ads” showing ATVs tearing up soil, I saw none presented in this report. Second point: ATVs do not create mud; water combing with dirt creates mud. Third point: the IWLA again either ignores or is not aware of the fact that many riding areas have deliberate mud areas riders are meant to go through, probably similar to the one depicted in this photo.

Besides assaulting the OEMs and Tread Lightly!, the report does little else except reiterate information about ATV abuse that is hardly surprising. Yes, everyone knows that when ATVs stray off the trail, they damage surrounding terrain. Yes, everyone knows that illegal riding needs to be stopped. But the *Caught in the Treads* report offers nothing in the way of effectively addressing the actual problems. The Izaak Walton League has instead chosen to assign a false blame, more or less manufacturing an issue to write about in order to perpetuate the feeling that it is doing something. The report has been shrewdly constructed and worded so that a cursory glance through it will elicit a shocked reaction. However, upon closer inspection, one realizes there isn’t much substance to the arguments.

I do not doubt that the authors of the report have anything less than a noble desire for our wildlands and offroad recreational use to coexist. But the attacks on the ATV industry and Tread Lightly! are simply misguided and not very useful. The Izaak Walton League states in the report’s conclusion that current ATV advertising campaigns “promote improper use of their products, which has resulted in a substantial amount of damage to our public lands.” Where is the evidence for this? How is it even possible to establish such a correlation? The authors speak as if they have concrete scientific data for this, when all they really have are suppositions. Such specious reasoning abounds in the report. Is the real purpose here to encourage better user education, or to encourage the industry to run more bland advertisements and possibly sell fewer ATVs?

The issue of ATV abuse is a very serious one. I certainly can’t fault the Izaak Walton League (or anyone else) for trying to stop it. But I personally feel it would be more productive to explore avenues leading to improving user education rather than trying to scold the ATV industry for advertising its products just as any other industry would. And organizations like Tread Lightly! should be applauded for the efforts they’ve made in preventing OHV abuse rather than denounced for being “a green-scam.” Yes, advertising can carry powerful messages. But banal ads aren’t going to solve any problems. And finger-pointing doesn’t equate to lifting a hand to help.

[Editor’s note: In the upcoming months, we hope to speak with the OEMs and with Tread Lightly! for their perspective on this issue. We also encourage our readers to submit their opinions. Please send comments to [art@atv-industry.com](mailto:art@atv-industry.com)]