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Hello,

I am respectfully submitting some suggestions about changes that could be made in the Manti-La Sal National Forest on Elk Ridge. I noticed online that this happens to be during the public comment period on the forest plan revision. But first, let me tell you why I am submitting these suggestions. My husband and I live in NW New Mexico and have been coming to Cedar Mesa and Elk Ridge several times a year to camp since 2002. The majority of our time spent in these places has been awesome. SE Utah is one of the premiere places in the US. And the rangers in the Manti-La Sal forest are some of the best! But they have their hands full.

Most of the visitors and campers we've encountered have been pleasant, quiet, respectful people, but there have been more than a few that seem determined to destroy the experience for everyone else, and this has gotten progressively worse over the last few years. There has been a big increase in camps full of 7 or 8 big trailers or 5<sup>th</sup> wheelers and every person in camp has a loud Razor or 4 wheeler or even louder dirt bikes. They race these machines up and down the roads gunning them past other campers spewing dust into the camps. They drive them all over the woods with no regard to the rules of the Forest. At night, they hold huge parties with loud music.

Here are a few of the worst things we have encountered over the years:

My husband had paid close to \$500 to elk hunt in the archery season on Elk Ridge. This was long before any talk about a National Monument. We were camped by the corral near the Peavine Trailhead where the road takes off to Dry Mesa. The campers north of us decided to have a screaming contest – literally. Really bizarre! One night, one after another, they screamed as loud as they could – for hours. They were still at it at 11:00 p.m. when the loudest 4-wheeler I've ever heard roared into the field by the corral. They – and several others – began to drive donuts in the field with spotlights yelling back and forth. We finally yelled over, "What are you doing?" Response, "None of your business!" We politely asked them to stop since we needed sleep so we could get up early to hunt. They got abusive and came over to our camp to threaten us and call us names. One of them said he was a local sheriff. He refused to tell me his name. His son was night hunting with a huge flashlight down in Burch Canyon and they were "waiting" for him. By midnight, the screaming north of us had finally stopped.

Another year, we were camped in a spot the rangers refer to as Reunion Meadows east of Peavine Trailhead where locals hold huge family reunions. We didn't know that at the time. Labor Day weekend came and so did the crazies. 4 wheelers roaring up and down the roads. A small girl about 10 years old came roaring through the woods on an illegal road right through our camp – repeatedly – with no adult in tow and no helmet. We could hear her drive back over to the neighboring camp where they were spending hours each day shooting their guns.

We were camped at the Y in the road when the local 4 wheeling crowd arrived for the weekend. We could hear one coming over a mile away blasting loud rock music from their machine. When it got to our camp, we could see that it was a young mother driving with her really young son in the front seat with her. The father and another young boy were in the back seat. Nobody had on a helmet. She roared around the curve at the turn – almost turning over – loud music blasting through the forest, the little boys holding on for dear life.

The summer of Covid-19 we came up to Elk Ridge in late June and were practically the only ones there. We camped behind the corral a mile north of the Y junction on the road to The Big Notch. We had been there a few days and had planned to spend the 14 allotted. But Tuesday evening a truckload of people pulling a camp trailer pulled in and began to park their trailer within 100 feet of our camp. We asked them what they were doing, and they said they were leaving their camper there to claim the spot for the upcoming weekend. We said we would still be there and we didn't want their camper there. They said it didn't matter what we wanted, they would be camping there too. There were dozens of other empty camp sites, but they said this was their favorite. We finally pulled out the camping rules the ranger had given us several years before and showed them they had to spend the first night in their trailer and then couldn't leave it for more than 72 hours unoccupied. It also said they were supposed to respect other campers. They said they had no idea those rules were in place, so too bad. We said go ahead and leave it here. We'll report you to the ranger. They finally left with their trailer. One of the men was wearing a pistol on his belt. The other man was wearing a brand new Amerigas Propane ball cap. We got pictures of them leaving and did report their bizarre behavior to the ranger.

Just this year, we were camped at the upper site above the corral by the Peavine Trailhead where the screamers had camped. When Memorial Day weekend arrived, a group of people with seven tents and 1 big trailer moved in to the spot down below by the corral. They had an incredibly loud dirt bike their young teenage son roared up and down the roads, gunning it to make it louder. At night, they played loud, thumping music around the campfire. One night they included a huge floodlight that lit up the forest all the way to our camp. Luckily, they turned in by 10:00 each night. Guess the smallest toddlers and babies needed some sleep. And best of all, they left after 4 days!

On this same trip, we watched as a different group began to occupy Reunion Meadows. When we came in on the Tuesday before the holiday, two huge camp trailers and one red tent were already in the site. By Friday, four to five more trailers and one motor home and more tents were added. They then went back to town and brought in enough four wheelers, Razors and dirt bikes for everyone. They began to roar up and down the roads and into the woods. We were hoping it would let up after the holiday, but it was not to be. A few days later, we turned onto a road north of their camp. As we rounded a blind curve, we met a boy about 10 years old on a 4 wheeler. A girl about 12 was behind him on hers. They were going as fast as they could. Behind them was Mom in a Razor with a boy about 5 years old with no helmet sitting in her lap with his hands on the steering wheel. Another small boy with no helmet sat beside her. Dad followed in his Razor. If we had not managed to pull to the side, it could have been a very nasty pile-up.

Each day in camp, we endured the sounds of really loud dirt bikes and Razors roaring up and down all the roads around us, spewing dust everywhere and into our camp. One afternoon, the ranger stopped in to say hello. Shortly after he left, we heard a constant roar of motors down by the corral. My husband, Skip, decided to go down to see what was up. He found 3 adults on Razors and 10 to 12 young kids on 4 wheelers and dirt bikes roaring through all the fields by the corral doing wheelies and careening up on their side wheels and jumping bushes – many with no helmets. Skip asked the one adult standing there what they were doing and that it was illegal. The guy responded, “It is? We didn’t know that.” Skip said, “Well, it’s up to you, but the ranger was just here 30 minutes ago.” Then Skip came back to camp to tell me what he had seen. We walked a little way down through the woods to see if I could get pictures of them doing their thing. I couldn’t, but they were having a meeting and then we could hear them all drive off. (We encountered wads of toilet paper everywhere in the woods the tent campers had left.) We drove down and got pictures of all their tire tracks in the fields. Some of those people were in that camp at least 16 days if not longer. Many of them were still there when we left after our 14 days.

We have been almost run over several times in the roads by people on Razors going so fast they can’t control their machines when they come around a bend and meet someone head on.

We know that some of this is not new, definitely has nothing to do with the new National Monument, and much of it occurs on holiday weekends. If it isn’t brought under control with the numbers of OHV’s and big campers being purchased and brought to the woods, I can’t even imagine what a zoo it will be like up on Elk Ridge in the coming years. We know that some things can’t be changed without a major policy change that takes forever. But there are some things that could be done to make a difference now. I also realize that the two rangers that are tasked with trying to keep things under control are desperately undermanned. Even if there were more rangers, it would be impossible for them to drive even the main roads day in and day out to try to corral the worst of the offenders. But it does seem that the rules could be made clear so that most people might actually follow them. So, after many hours of observing how the Forest is run and what goes on there, here are my humble suggestions that might help change things for the better

1. The only sign that shows many of the rules for the National Forest that I’ve ever seen is located at the Gooseberry Ranger Station. That station is many, many miles from the Forest boundary. Many campers never even drive past that station. Most don’t stop even if they do drive by it. So how in the world would they ever know what the rules are? After someone has driven about 30 miles or more into the woods, that sign tells them there is no water available and that they should bring their own. So, are they supposed to drive 30 miles back to town to get some?

The small signs at the boundary of the Forest say there is a 14-day camping limit. Another tiny sign says to drive only the roads on the official map. I don’t remember it saying specifically DO NOT drive off the roads. Where is someone supposed to get an official map after having driven any number of miles of dirt roads to get to that sign at the edge of the Forest? One tiny, brown, easily missed box at the Kigalia road several miles into the forest offers free maps and they aren’t necessarily the official maps. How does that help? It doesn’t. Even those maps are confusing and almost unreadable if you haven’t brought a better map along to compare it to

that map. Even The Notch isn't noted on it. That brown box is easily missed. Even the small signs at the boundaries are easily missed if someone happens to be glancing into the woods or watching an oncoming RV as they drive by. There should be unmistakable, big signs on all the roads at the Forest boundary like the one at The Notch or the ones down on Cedar Mesa. They should say at the top, "STOP HERE!" The major rules should be listed there and readable maps should be provided with major landmarks shown to orient users. There could be a brochure box with a sign that says, "TAKE ONE – REQUIRED". The brochures could repeat the major rules.

2. In the last few years signs have been added to some of the more heavily used campsites stating the 14-day limit for that site. That was a good start, but that leaves anyone trying to buck the rules or didn't see the small signs at the boundary to assume that other sites aren't limited to 14 days. And several of the more popular sites don't have the new 14-day limit signs. The wording also still leaves people who don't know the rules to just move next door and stay another 14 days, instead of 10 miles away or come back after 28 days. Those signs posted at the more popular sites should say clearly that camping is limited **throughout the forest** to 14 days within a 28-day period, they can't just move over to another site.
3. There could be small brochure boxes next to the camping signs that contain the rules. It could say, "Take one – Required." It could be required that the brochure be displayed on their camper or tent to prove they've actually seen one. Or when the ranger stops in to say howdy, he could ask them to show him their brochure.

Some more suggestions about camping rules:

All campers in a site should be required to leave after the first one has been there for 14 days. The locals are driving up and leaving a camper 4 to 5 days before they plan to camp. Then more are brought up on the following weekend. They all stay at least 14 days, the first set often staying past their 14 days. By bringing up a new camper at the end of the last camper's 14 days, they can effectively tie up a camping spot all summer if they wanted to.

Campsites should be limited as to the number of campers, trailers and all OHV's in the site. Maybe only two or three trailers with their OHV's should be allowed in a site.

There should be quiet hours campers are required to observe, just like in regular campgrounds. 9 p.m. to 6 a.m. or so.

There should be no loud music, or flood lights or screaming!

Excessively loud dirt bikes and Razors should not be allowed within a certain distance of other campers – or not at all! They should be confined to the trails provided for them.

Give instructions on how to deal with toilet paper. Collect it in a baggie and take it home.

Can a camper lop off a small tree limb to make way for their camper? If not, say so. Can they cut firewood? If not, say so. We found a whole live pine tree that had been chopped down and hauled off. Was this legal?

Tell campers exactly where they can dump their trash in local towns. The hand out we received from the Ranger said we could dump it in Blanding. When we tried, we couldn't find anywhere to do so. Someone finally directed us to the local landfill.

Change the current rule about campsites not being more than 150 ft. from a legal road. That one is a bit odd since many of the older established campsites sit further back than that. I have yet to see that rule enforced. And if 4 wheelers and dirt bikes are going to continue to be allowed full reign, most campers will want to be further away from all the dust they kick up. Most shade is further back too. Perhaps the rule should say any new sites should be within 150 ft.

4. All illegal roads should have a sign post in the middle saying they are closed. As it is, some do, some don't. Some legal ones don't have a numbered marker. It is all very confusing. We have tried diligently to follow the rules and find it confusing. Many people we see on Elk Ridge could care less about it especially if you don't make it clearer. If the illegal ones were marked, no one would have to rely on a confusing, almost non-existent map. More people might actually try to comply. We think it's great that some of the roads have been closed.
5. The rangers should drive around in unmarked cars at different times of the day and night. Many locals seem to know when they'll show up, then break all the rules after they've gone by. Some of that would still happen, but if the element of surprise were introduced, it might slow some of it down. Game cameras could be installed to catch offenders at some of the more heavily used areas such as the corral by the Peavine Trailhead.
6. People who are caught breaking the rules should be fined on the spot, not just warned. They've apparently learned to laugh at that and continue to offend. A warning to that effect could be put in the rules brochure. It could even warn of a lifetime ban for repeat offenders.
7. The rules need to be less confusing and clearly stated. One year a ranger came into our camp, introduced himself and handed us a rule sheet – the same one we showed to the camp intruders. This was a good thing. It's never happened since. I know it's a hassle for the rangers, but this should be done all the time, even if they've handed you one before – especially since the rules seem to change over the years. We found out after looking up online where to send this letter that the rules online were different than the ones handed to us by the ranger. The handout said we had were limited to 14 days camping – it didn't say within each 28 days. Or we could move 10 miles away. It didn't say 10 miles straight line. We assumed it meant 10 miles by road. That handout said a camp had to be inhabited the first night and then a camp couldn't be unoccupied for more than 72 hours. The sign at Kigalia says a camp can't be unoccupied for more than 24 hours. Which is it?

8. Post speed limits. My suggestion after careful observation? 20 MPH for most vehicles, slower in narrow sections and blind curves. 15 MPH for Razors and 4 wheelers – or less! As it is, there are very few if any speed limit signs around. Even the rangers didn't seem to know what the limit was when we asked.
9. Provide phone numbers and contact information to campers in the rules brochures where they can report violations. Tell them to get a picture if possible. Get license numbers if possible. Tell them where they can get cell phone reception on Elk Ridge. There are a few spots. Offer rewards to those willing to report violations with proof.
10. State in the rules brochure what the fines will be if they break the rules. Are there currently any fines? If not, there should be.
11. The rules for the Manti-La-Sal Forest should be posted in the local newspaper – probably weekly if possible. They should be included in the 101 Things To Do brochure that gets handed out in Blanding. Then the locals could quit claiming that they didn't know the rules when they break them.
12. One last major issue – cows and hunters! There seems to be no regulation concerning cows. There were huge amounts of them in the Forest in the summer of 2020. No one will admit to knowing why or who allowed it. Who counts them? Who regulates this? Issues with overgrazing of cows and sheep have occurred repeatedly throughout the southwest over the last few centuries. Everyone already knows the bad consequences of this. It hurts the forest, it hurts the wildlife. It's not sustainable. We've seen where the cows have totally trashed the springs and dead, rotting cows left lying in the tanks. This should be stopped. We've also seen hunters spotlighting at night and staying for months at a time up on Elk Ridge. Too many bear hunters and their dogs endlessly chasing the bears. Hunters riding in the open backs of jeeps, guns ready to shoot anything and everything from the road. This should also be stopped. I know some of it can't be, but some of it could.

The National Forest is a forest with wild animals. It all needs to be respected. It isn't an amusement park! Campers who are there to enjoy the quiet and solitude and wildlife need to be respected too. It seems to me that the rules need to be stated clearly and obviously. They need to be enforced across the board – locals included. The rangers that enforce them need back-up and support. Get some volunteers to help report violators. Or just don't have any rules. What we see happening now just doesn't make any sense!

Sincerely,  
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