

Off-road vehicles destroying lake's rare natural resources

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The illegal use of all-terrain vehicles on public property around Nashville's J. Percy Priest Lake is becoming an increasing problem that could cost the area some of its rarest natural resources.

Middle Tennessee is the only place in the world that certain plant species can grow. Many of these rare plants are being destroyed by small off-road vehicles on the grounds, officials said.

"Needless to say, a plant doesn't like to have a motorcycle run over it," said conservation biologist Sherry Roberts. "I don't know why people seem to think that it's OK to do that. Just because this is public land doesn't mean that somebody can come in and tear it all to pieces."

Of particular concern are the cedar glades, which are among the rarest habitat types in the world. A cedar glade is an opening in a wooded area with limestone beneath the surface.

"Plants that grow in the cedar glades grow nowhere else," Roberts said.

One of these plants is the Tennessee coneflower, which only grows in Davidson, Rutherford and Wilson counties where there are cedar glades. The species has been registered as endangered since 1979, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Web site (www.endangered.fws.gov).

Other rare plants on the grounds are the glade onion, Tennessee milk vetch, leafy prairie-clover, evolvus, limestone flame-thrower and the Duck River bladderpod.

"We've had several groups come out and ask to collect seeds and do scientific studies (about the habitat)," Roberts said. "It just breaks my heart to see people with no more care than to ride a four-wheeler over it."

Even if the use of off-road vehicles were to cease today, it would take "the longest time" for the land to begin to repair, Roberts said.

The destruction of rare plant species is just part of the problem associated with off-road vehicles. The use of these vehicles also promotes erosion and silt runoff into the lake, disturbs wildlife and is often associated with pollution and litter.

"The soil structure is fairly thin here, and we have a lot of rock with a thin layer of soil, and once these vehicles come over there they, of course, damage the vegetation, expose

the soil, which then is vulnerable to erosion from rain and running off and things like that," Resource Manager Todd Yann said.

The use of these vehicles around the lake is a direct violation of Code of Federal Regulations, Title 36, Yann said. Those who violate the regulation are subject to a \$5,000 fine or up to six months in prison.

But with 19,000 acres of land, the lake staff has a hard time monitoring the grounds to protect the wildlife against this activity.

"We get calls from adjacent landowners that say there are folks riding on public land adjacent to their properties, and we just see it as we're running down the line and so forth," Yann added. "But it's very difficult to catch anyone doing that because we don't have any vehicles of that nature."

Yann also said that sometimes people will leave litter in areas that are so far off the road the staff cannot even get to it to pick it up. That trash inevitably ends up in the lake, he said.

"That affects fish, certainly the clarity of the water. It can cover the bottom, keeps species from the food that it favors," Yann said.

"We want the lake to be in good, clean, nice condition 200 years down the road," Roberts said. "It is a very precious resource."