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AMERICAN MOTORCYCLIST

Access Granted:
Chris Horgan Keeps
Trails Open

Teaching Kids The
Love Of Riding





AMA member Chris Horgan is a former Sierra Club, Greenpeace and World Wildlife member who formed the Stewards of the Sequoia in California 2004 to promote responsible recreation and environmental stewardship. He says that Stewards of the Sequoia members enjoy all types of responsible outdoor recreation, including off-highway vehicle riding, horse riding, rock climbing, fishing and more. The organization encourages everyone to share the trails, believing that no one group of users has more right to enjoy public land and trails than another group. We caught up with Horgan to find out more about his life and his organization.

AMERICAN MOTORCYCLIST: How long have you been riding motorcycles?

CHRIS HORGAN: As a kid I dreamed of riding in the woods, but with no off-roading opportunities in New York City, I had to content myself by devouring every dirtbike magazine and book I could find.

My love of bikes drove me to take my street motorcycle test as soon as I turned 17, at which point I parked the 10-speed bike I used daily on the streets of New York City and replaced it with a used 1973 Yamaha RD350.

While attending the Art of the Motorcycle collection at the Guggenheim

Museum it was surprising to find I had owned just about every bike in the collection from the '70s and '80s. I guess I should have kept them.

With no off-roading available, my desire to ride led me to road racing in the '80s.

I was finally able to begin my dream of trail riding in the woods at the age of 35 after moving to Connecticut. Right now I ride the dirt almost exclusively and have a 2005 KTM 400EXC, which is a truly incredible trail bike.

AM: Tell us a bit more about your experience with the outdoors.

CH: I was born and raised in the Big Apple, but even though I was a city boy, I have always loved the outdoors. After retiring at the age of 40 from my custom audio installation business, my

CHRIS HORGAN

Environmentalist Fighting For Single-Track Trails

BY BILL KRESNAK



Conrad Lim

wife and I spent four years touring the western United States in an RV. We saw all the usual sights like the Grand Canyon, Yellowstone and Yosemite, but took our time and stopped at most every national forest and other public lands along the way. My daughter KiSea was born on Halloween while we were on the road and toured with us for three years. She visited more national monuments and scenic areas by the time she was 3 than many people do in a lifetime.

Picking up maps at each Forest Service ranger station allowed me to search out legal single-track trails to enjoy one of my great passions: dirtbike riding. I logged about 8,000 miles of trail each year during our travels including every state west of the Rockies.

AM: When did you form Stewards of the Sequoia and why?

CH: In 2004, after having toured the western United States [and settling temporarily in California], I was determined to do my part to stop the closure of public lands, especially motorized single-track trails. Brian Hawthorne of the BlueRibbon Coalition, perhaps sensing my passion, suggested I start a local grassroots group.

Since I wanted to volunteer to maintain trails, I decided to encourage others to help too. So I started Stewards of the Sequoia and created our first Trail Appreciation Day. It was so unexpected when we quickly grew to be the largest on-the-ground volunteer organization in the Sequoia National Forest (in California).

Later that first year, while making a presentation about our trail work, a high-level Forest Service staffer asked me how I had gotten so many volunteers during what is traditionally the worst month of the year for volunteering. I guess my ignorance allowed me to think outside the box and not be discouraged by preconceived notions.

It was clear we needed to start working proactively to keep trails open, rather than complaining after trails were closed. We needed to have a seat at the table during planning processes that would affect our trails, and so began the Stewards Trail Preservation Program.

AM: What is Stewards of the Sequoia? What does the group do?

“In 2004 after having toured the western United States I was determined to step up and do my part to stop the closure of our public lands...”

CH: The Stewards of the Sequoia mission is to “promote responsible recreation and environmental stewardship.” We are a multiple-use group representing all forms of recreation. Our philosophy is that by sharing our public lands there is more for everyone to enjoy. Dispersing use over larger trail systems that allow all forms of recreation will minimize the impacts, too, so it is better for the environment.

We maintain trails on public lands to help keep them open and are heavily involved in public lands planning processes.

AM: What are some of the accomplishments of the group?

CH: Stewards maintenance on trails since 2004 has included removing over 3,500 fallen trees, clearing 1,450 miles of overgrown brush, building 2,920 water bars to reduce erosion and planting over 500 trees to speed reforestation in burn areas for a total of almost 17,000 hours of volunteer work.

Another key aspect to Stewards work is advocacy in what we call our Trail Preservation Program. This includes submitting articles to local newspapers about the positive aspects of motorized recreation, educating legislators attending agency meetings for planning and, most importantly, reading and filing substantive comments on each agency proposal that affect our public lands.

We have been successful at preventing the closure of over 60 percent of the trails (at the Sequoia National Forest) while at the same time we have maintained trails so everyone can still enjoy them.

AM: What are some of the projects the group is working on now?

CH: Stewards are currently analyzing the Sequoia National Forest Plan revision to ensure that recreation is a priority for future forest projects over the next 15 -25 years.

Over the past three years we have been forest stakeholders in a process called the Sierra Cascades Dialogs, where we were able to stop a biased and incorrect science synthesis report from maligning motorized recreation. That report would have mistakenly provided a basis for closing trails in the future across the nation.

Last summer the Forest Service offered the public a mere 10-day comment period to review and analyze 1,646 miles of roads in the Sequoia National Forest to determine which should remain open in the future. It was quite a task for us to research so many roads and file a written proposal in such a short period of time with no advance notice. We had to drop just about everything.

AM: How many members are there?

CH: Right now Stewards of the Sequoia has roughly 2,800 members, out of which 260 have donated over the past year to help fund our efforts. We are kicking butt in every aspect of keeping trails open except one, and that is funding.

AM: How is the group funded?

CH: Other than a couple of small grants, Stewards is totally member funded. As with most organizations, the few do the work for the many and with too little funding. That is why it is so important for every person who enjoys motorized trails to donate to local grassroots pro-access groups in the areas they ride, as well as at least one state and one national group. They do more with one buck than the anti-access folks do with a hundred, but without support they cannot continue to fight successfully to keep your trails open.

We are grateful that AMA District 37 [Southern California] Dualsport has sponsored Stewards for the past three years. Fundraisers by local clubs like the Bakersfield Trailblazers, Chaparrals Motorcycle Club and Southern Sierra Fat Tire Association, and local businesses like Cyclesmith's, have helped Stewards make ends meet. Thanks so very much, guys and gals. You enable us to keep up the fight and keep winning.

AM: Why does the group clear trees?

CH: With more and more areas in the forest suffering from extreme fires, there can literally be hundreds of trees blocking the trail in just a single mile. Stewards just cleared over 1,100 trees from the trails this spring in a burn area, and hundreds more have fallen since, which we have worked with the Forest Service to clear as well.

AM: Do you consider Stewards of the Sequoia to be an environmentalist group?

CH: As people who enjoy the outdoors on a dirtbike or 4x4 or any other form of recreation, many of us care about the environment. We want healthy forests. Stewards was founded as a multiple-use stewardship organization to give a voice to the majority of people who want to see continued abundant access to their public lands and support active stewardship to keep those lands healthy. Stewards programs help increase people's awareness of the benefits of treading lightly to reduce environmental impacts and keep trails enjoyable.

So, yes, we are environmentalists, but we prefer to call ourselves stewards.

AM: What made you decide to get involved in fighting to keep trails open?

CH: Having seen firsthand the closure of the Massachusetts state forests to off-road vehicles in the '90s for no valid reason, I was aware of how easily access to our public lands can be restricted or even eliminated. Some of those state forests were reopened due to the efforts of local dirtbike clubs who maintained the trails.

It became clear help was needed to prevent trail closures. I wanted to do something more than just my annual memberships to BlueRibbon and AMA.

AM: Are you only concerned about motorized trails or for hiking, horse and other trails as well?

CH: Many years ago I realized every form of recreation is, or would be, in the crosshairs of those who seek to close our public lands. While motorized recreation was targeted first, there have also been attempts to restrict both mountain bike and horseback access. We are far more powerful and effective when we work together to protect our access. Stewards have always advocated for, and maintained, multiple-use trails that are open to all forms of recreation.

AM: What heroes have influenced you over the years and why?

CH: [AMA Motorcycle Hall of Famer] Clark Collins, founder of BlueRibbon Coalition, went riding with me many years ago in Idaho. As we stopped at the top of a cliff he told me of his work to save the trail system we were riding on, how he met with the governor of Idaho and was told his group—The BlueRibbon Coalition—was not significant and that the trails would be closed. Not one for taking “no” for an answer, Clark was able to keep the trail system open by working with the community.

That kind of can-do attitude and persistence is something I have always embodied in my work.

AM: What are some of the biggest challenges facing off-highway riders today?

CH: Apathy is our biggest enemy.

We are the silent majority. We just want to be left alone. Most people are, understandably, busy with their family, jobs and recreation. Most people do not want to join an organization or donate. Most people do not have time and do not want to attend meetings or read 1,000-page documents and submit comment letters. Yet those are some of the most important things one can do to stop closures.

Fortunately, there are pro-access groups who can do that work on your behalf, but they need your support.

I recall during the early days of



Conrad Lim

Stewards being told legislators would not listen unless my group donated \$10,000. This seemed wrong to me, so over the years I continued to educate legislators about the need to keep more trails open and was rewarded with support on many trail-related issues even though we had not donated even \$1 to any of them.

At one point my research revealed millions of acres of public lands had been studied 30 years ago and determined to be unsuitable for Wilderness designation, but they are just a mere pen stroke away from being designated as Wilderness today. This would prohibit all forms of use except hiking and horseback.

These are the lands where the majority of the public recreate mostly via motorized and mountain bike recreation. Local economies would be devastated and the majority of the public locked out of much of the remaining multiple-use lands in many areas. I contacted our local congressman to see if he was interested in doing something and he asked me to brief him. Much to his credit, [Rep. Kevin McCarthy (R-Calif.)] created a bill called the “Wilderness Study and Roadless Release Act” to release those lands back to multiple use as promised by the government 30 years ago.

Legislators want to work with us on off-road issues, but we have to take the time to tell them why it is important to us.

AM: What can off-highway riders do to help protect existing trails and create new ones?

CH: Join your local grassroots group, donate to help fund the fight and roll up your sleeves to help maintain trails. These three things will do the most to keep your trails open. It may surprise people to learn that doing those three things persistently over the years is also likely to set the stage for getting more trails.

AM: What has been the most frustrating part for you in fighting to keep trails open?

CH: Dealing with agencies who work at a bureaucratic, or seemingly glacial, pace can be extremely frustrating, where even the simplest thing like being allowed to volunteer can take years. The good news is that developing strong relationships with land managers, as grassroots groups like Stewards have done, will often speed up those processes.

AM: What do you find rewarding in your efforts?

CH: The most rewarding aspects of trail advocacy, to me, are riding the trails and seeing the work we have accomplished, such as eliminating rain ruts to improve sections of trails, or knowing the substantive comments we made have been effective to keep the trail open, or seeing the smile on riders’ faces as they enjoy a trail that would have been closed to them if not for our efforts.

AM: What would someone be surprised to learn about you?

CH: Back in the ’80s I used to be a Sierra Club, Greenpeace and World Wildlife member. Living in New York City at the time did not allow me to see the places these groups claimed were being harmed. I kept reading the magazines and alerts they would send me.

After a while I did my own research and found they were not always telling the truth about many environmental issues. Many of the problems that they claimed existed—such as damage due to motorized use of trails—were actually caused by water running down the trail and occur just as frequently on non-motorized trails. They were misrepresenting the information in order to try to pit user groups against each other.

AM: How important are motorized trails for a local economy?

CH: Motorized recreation has been one of the fastest growing forms of recreation for a while now. According to a study by the Outdoor Industry Association, off-roading contributes over \$110 billion directly to local economies and people enjoying motorized recreation spend more than any other form of recreation. Motorized trails bring people into rural communities where they spend those dollars.

When timber harvests were severely reduced on public lands, the government told us tourism would replace logging. Many rural economies which once depended on logging now depend on tourism, a large part of which is motorized recreation.

AM: Is there anything else you would like to add?

CH: Multiple-use pro-access groups and motorized groups have gotten better and smarter at keeping your trails open, but they lack the funding needed to engage in the many battles. If each of us would donate the cost of a set of tires each year to our local, state and national groups we would have the money needed to take back our trails.

I encourage everyone to get involved to help make a difference.