

Proper Trail Etiquette

As 4X4 ownership increases, so does the level of traffic on our trails. There is no special license required to drive in our beautiful desert, even though there are many different techniques and practices involved. There has been an often unspoken etiquette that is practiced by old-school 4X4 enthusiasts, which developed not just so that everyone can get along on the trail, but, primarily, for safety considerations. But, with the availability of 4X4's, the slow and steady progression of 4-wheeling initiation through involvement and camaraderie has been bypassed. The honor-by-association process misses the chance to be taught to the enthusiastic guy who just bought his first real 4X4. Not to sound like a snob, but it has become grimacingly obvious.

Let me share some of my experiences. During many of my off-road excursions, I have encountered all of the following bad trail manners: parked 4X4's, completely blocking the trail, who had simply not bothered to drive off to the side of the trail, to park out of the way, so others could pass; vehicles who were not properly equipped for the ruggedness of the particular trail on which they were attempting to travel were creating a bottleneck of 4X4's who were properly equipped for that particular trail; 4X4's tailgating another up a steep, rocky incline; and malicious dusting by speeding 4X4's (and tow rigs) on dirt roads.

All of this makes for a remarkably unpleasant back-country experience for both me and the people with me. I believe that most people want to play nice and do the right thing. So, I took all of this as a prompt to outline the basics of off-road driving etiquette. Whether you are an experienced 4-wheeler, or a newbie, enjoy this article as a fun and friendly rallying call.

Before I start the list, let me preface it by clearing up some things:

First, I think a lot of people don't even know what the word "etiquette" means, but they practice it. Etiquette, by Merriam-Webster's definition is "the forms, manners, and ceremonies established by convention as acceptable or required in social relations". The definition is just a stuffy way of saying "play nice". In our ever-busy world, a little good old-fashioned courtesy still goes a long way.

Second, in most cases, there are no laws regarding trail etiquette. Etiquette is simply courtesy practiced for the comfort, safety, and enjoyment of all participants. Although safety is really at the heart of trail etiquette, superficially, it is good manners. There are no Trail Etiquette Police who will jump out of the bushes to fine you for an infraction, nor pat you on the back for a good deed. But a good neighbor attitude will engender the sense of community among those who engage in off-road recreation.

Third, I make no claim to exhibit perfect trail etiquette at all times, but I am mindful of other people, and that is all we can ask of each other.

See Trail Etiquette on the reverse side of this paper...

1. **Respect our trails!**

Too many trails are being closed for any of us to take the attitude that we can do what we want off road. Use common sense and respect the area you are in - it'll go a long way to keeping that area open for future visits.

2. **Stick to the trail!**

Don't blaze a new trail just because you can. Instead, try to stay on the established path as much as possible.

3. **Don't litter!**

Not even a cigarette butt or a candy wrapper. If you pack it in, pack it out.

4. **Stop spinning those tires!**

Try to spin your tires as little as possible. You might think it's cool, but sudden traction can quickly result in broken parts. Also, it just ruins the trails for others - it breaks the surface crust and leads to faster erosion.

5. **Return those rocks!**

Should you need to stack rocks up to get over an obstacle, then be sure to put the rocks back where you found them afterwards. Many people enjoy the challenge as nature built it, not as you needed it to be to get over it.

6. **Know the limits!**

Every vehicle and driver, has limits. Leave your ego at home. Backing off and accepting that an obstacle is too much, or choosing another approach may prevent vehicle damage and, more important, personal injury.

7. **Leave wildlife alone!**

Don't disturb the wildlife; this includes predatory animals. We're treading on their turf. Just enjoy the fact you actually saw something in it's natural habitat.

8. **Slow down!**

Enjoy the scenery. Live the experience to the fullest. You don't want to spend time repairing damage you wouldn't have caused had you driven a little slower.

9. **Use caution when passing!**

If there is only room for one vehicle to pass, the rule is the more capable vehicle, or the more experienced driver, should yield the right-of-way.

When two vehicles meet on a grade and there isn't a safe place to pull over, the vehicle traveling uphill has the right of way. It is safer for the vehicle traveling downhill to back up, and it will be much easier for the downhill vehicle to get under way.

10. **Watch your dust!**

If you drive by someone on a dry dirt road at 15 mph or more, you are DUSTING them. Many 4x4's are open-air, so a big cloud of dust is not just inconvenient, but hazardous if the driver's eyesight or breathing is momentarily impaired.

11. **No tailgating!**

Closely following another vehicle is dangerous in any situation. Vehicles could be hit by rocks flung from spinning tires. All of us have experienced failed climbs. You do not want to be tailgating someone up a hill when he fails his climb.

12. **Never block the trail!**

It's not nice. It's not cool. If you see someone is blocking the trail, don't be a hot head. Nobody owns the trail! Give the person a chance to move.

13. **Look, but don't touch!**

I have been wheeling in the Yuma desert since 1987, and I have watched as little by little the historic artifacts left in the desert, many decades ago, by miners are slowly being stripped, and vandalized. It's illegal, and if you get caught, you will be prosecuted!.

14. **Be nice, be polite!**

Give a friendly wave as you pass others on the trail. You may need some help and there's a good chance you might see that person again.

15. **Don't be disgusting!**

It is disgusting to see used toilet paper laying about in the open, strung all over the bush and across the trail. If you have to go #2 (poop), don't leave it where we have to see it, or kids and pets can get to it. Bury it at least 6 inches, and put a large rock over the site.