

NORTH

Mines, quarries pose hazards for ATV riders

3 ATV-related deaths this year at abandoned mines

By Lynda Guydon Taylor
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Rich Umbel enjoys the peace, relaxation and, yes, fun of riding an all-terrain vehicle. But he cautions, "You have to have respect."

"Treating the off-road vehicle with respect is another way of saying that safety rules. Forgetting it could mean the difference between life and death.

Umbel, 35, of New Salem, Armstrong County, discussed the time his brother's brother-in-law was riding without a helmet on the highway, hit a telephone pole and was killed.

Might a helmet have saved his life? Maybe, but Umbel will never know for sure. In any event, Umbel believes he was not "respecting his quad," which is not designed for paved roads. Umbel, riding since he was 13, injured his kneecap when his three-wheeled ATV tipped over on top of him. Although he used to own several, he no longer rides because the hobby became too expensive.

It's not known what caused a Bentleyville couple to ride their ATV off a cliff or what role safety or the lack of it played, but David and Lori Creek were found drowned May 9 in Pigeon Creek in Washington County after a Sunday afternoon ride.

One thing is clear: David, 30, and Lori, 32, were riding in an abandoned mine. Their deaths became the second and third ATV-related accidents this year at abandoned mine sites in Pennsylvania.

Last year, seven people died in ATV fatalities nationwide at abandoned mines. Twenty-one have died since 1999 when the U.S. Department of Labor's Mine Safety and Health Administration began keeping tabs.

Pennsylvania has about 250,000 acres of abandoned mines with 10 percent of the population living within a mile of an abandoned mine. Riding

ATVs at abandoned mines can be a lethal combination of which the state Department of Environmental Resources, Office of Mineral Resources Management, is acutely aware.

A 50-year-old Fayette County man was killed April 10 in Brothersvalley, Somerset County, when his ATV overturned while he apparently was trying to back it down a hill.

"Abandoned mines present a wide range of issues. The other problem is a quarry. It presents all the same dangers. The main problem with quarries is people fall while climbing or swimming in them and drown," said Tom Rathbun, spokesman for the office of mineral resources management.

High walls or excavated cliffs where water is often at the bottom are particularly dangerous for ATV riders and hikers.

The solution is twofold: Get property owners to reclaim sites and fix them and educate the public about the inherent dangers.

Spoil, or coal refuse piles consisting of rock, dirt and coal, are particularly hazardous because they are very unstable, Rathbun said. The ground is soft and shifts. The Somerset County accident occurred on a spoil pile, he said.

People visiting abandoned mines have to be aware of unmarked openings, portals and air ventilation shafts. Some mine workings can be covered by vegetation. The ground gives way and people fall in, Rathbun said.

To correct the problem, the state tries to locate owners, who are responsible for posting no trespassing signs and reclamation. The problem is that, sometimes, the original owner has gone out of business, is bankrupt or no longer exists. Sites occur statewide — strip mines in Western Pennsylvania, blue stone quarries along the northern border with New York and limestone

mines in the central and southeastern part of the state.

The difficulty lies in locating and contacting owners. It's important that they take the problem seriously, Rathbun said.

"The situation in Washington County was tragic. [Mittal Steel, which owns the site] has responded promptly. We're pleased with the response we've seen from them."

That's not always the case, however. If the state is unable to locate owners, the state can request as much as \$25 million a year in federal funds to address the problem. The federal Office of Surface Mining lists specific sites it will fund based on how hazardous they are, Rathbun said.

"It's a big problem and we don't have the money to fix them all. We're going to spend the money as wisely as we can," he said.

While it is up to owners or the state to reclaim and repair the sites, the federal government has assumed the task of educating the public.

In 1999, the Mine Safety and Health Administration launched a Stay Out Stay Alive program to alert the public to the dangers of abandoned mines.

"We have no real jurisdiction over those properties. Education goes toward prevention," said John Ray Correll, deputy assistant secretary for operations for the Mine Safety and Health Administration.

Since its launch six years ago, 175 children and adults have died at abandoned mine sites. Twenty-one involved ATV riders of various ages.

Each year, MSHA, whose Web site is www.msha.gov, kicks off the program, usually in April, with a news conference and follows up with school visits. The agency also tries to reach adults through news releases.

Correll said abandoned mines offer an opportunity for excitement and exploration, which can have deadly consequences for the curious. While posting no trespassing signs is important, Correll said, it is no insurance people won't intrude. Correll said he formerly worked for a Minnesota company that erected a chain link fence around its property.

"That is a good effort but not foolproof. It's a big job. Many responsible operators are working to make areas safe and reclaim them. [But] many com-

The ATV Safety Institute's 'golden rules'

- 4 Always wear a helmet and other protective gear.
- 4 Never ride on public roads. Another vehicle could hit you.
- 4 Never ride under the influence of alcohol or other drugs.
- 4 Never carry a passenger on a single-rider vehicle.
- 4 Ride an ATV that's right for your age. The guidelines are:
 - a. Age 6 and older: under 70cc
 - b. Age 12 and older: 70cc to 90cc
 - c. Age 16 and older: over 90cc
- 4 Supervise riders younger than 16; ATVs are not toys.
- 4 Ride only on designated trails at a safe speed.
- 4 Take an ATV Rider Course; Call toll-free at 800.887.2887, or go to www.atvsafety.org.



Source: www.atvsafety.org

James Hlston/Post-Gazette

panies are in bankruptcy or dissolved," Correll said.

More than 70 partners, public and private, participate in the Stay Out Stay Alive program. The Specialty Vehicle Institute of America, which sponsors the ATV Safety Institute, is not among them, however, according to Mike Mount, a spokesman.

SVIA, based in Irvine, Calif., is a trade industry group whose manufacturer members offer a safety course. It lists eight Golden Rules for ATV riders on its Web site, www.atvsafety.org.

"Our mission here is to see people manage their risk and minimize any mishaps they may have while riding," Mount said. "Ninety percent of the time things go wrong, the rider is involved in one of those warnings on the golden

rules. If you adhere to those, you're going to drastically reduce your chances of having a problem."

The safety course, costing \$125 for adults and \$75 for riders as old as 15, covers three main topics: how to safely operate a vehicle, proper protective gear, and environmental responsibility and local laws.

Ranging in size from 150 pounds for a youth model up to 600 pounds for the largest, the ATV is, as Umbel believes, a vehicle demanding respect, especially when it comes to where it is ridden.

"They're fun, but you have to ride in the right spots."

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2005 Pennsylvania quarry hazards and deaths

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