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ARIZONA OHV PROGRAM COORDINATOR BOOSTS USER PARTICIPATION WITH "TRAIL TALKS"

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 NEWSLETTER

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Jeff Prince is a landscape architect and has designed multi-use trail systems and ecotourism/economic development projects in the U.S., Mexico and Costa Rica. He is also a lifelong explorer of Arizona's backcountry on two wheels, four wheels and no wheels (hiking, kayaking). Last October, Prince took a job as the Statewide OHV Program Coordinator with Arizona State Parks, and the OHV community has been benefiting from his experience and insights ever since.

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"As a landscape architect, I design solutions and draw pictures of environments, whether it's a trail,

park or someone's backyard," said Prince. "With this job with State Parks, it's really about solving people problems and social issues. I have an interest in OHV recreation. Okay, what are the problems out there and how do we create programs that address those problems to reach meaningful solutions?"

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One of the first problems Prince tackled was low attendance by the public at agency meetings. He knew from experience-and countless chats around backcountry campfires-that it's tough for the working public to get to meetings held on weekday evenings. So after his first well-advertised but poorly attended meeting as a state employee, he moved them to Saturdays at places people ride and changed the format from meetings to "Trail Talks."

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"It's a free-form format," explains Prince. "The purpose is to get our motorized public connected to the various agencies and people who have a stake in OHV recreation while promoting riding opportunities funded by the Arizona State Parks Statewide OHV Fund. It's more conversational than a government employee standing in front of a PowerPoint and going through an agenda." If the Trail Talk is on BLM (Bureau of Land Management) land, Prince asks one of the BLM's local staff members to participate, allowing user groups to express their concerns and get answers to their questions, as Prince puts it, "right from the horse's mouth."

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"It's interesting, because people are more candid on a Trail Talk than in a formal setting," said Prince. "Introverted people are less likely to talk in a room of 100 people, with maybe 25 percent against OHV for one reason or another. And you have a lot of vocal OHV people, too. The voices of the middle or moderate ground are less likely to speak up, because they get intimidated by the polarized sides. But if you do it out on a trail ride, out in the field, they're more likely to talk. And I've noticed we get more participation from women too."

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Prince held his first Trail Talk on a Saturday in January at the Table Mesa Recreation Area, just before a local 4x4 club held an introductory class on rock crawling. About 100 people showed up. He did a short presentation for those attending the club event, talking about the area and how it relates to the Arizona State Parks OHV program. He then visited with a dozen people from other user groups. Some had ridden their ATVs from local towns and had questions about trail issues, including accessing trails from their homes, working with land managers, trail improvements for mountain bikers and hikers on the multi-use system and concerns about target shooting (legal in designated areas).

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The second Trail Talk was held in February, a few miles northeast of the historic town of Florence, AZ. "It's incredibly scenic, with awesome geologic features, a fun riding area, with Jeep trails, technical routes, areas where stock 4x4 vehicles can travel, as well as ATVs and motorcycles," said Prince. This time, he held the event in conjunction with a work day by some of the state's OHV Ambassadors. They were in the area to install an informational kiosk on BLM land, which gave Prince the opportunity to introduce them to local user groups.

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"The public came out in side-by-sides and ATVs from a local club in Florence," said Prince. "We had an informal conversation. It went really well. We got new perspectives from clubs, mostly older, retired folks this time, who had different concerns. They do a lot of trail cleanups out there, told me about those efforts and wanting to do more."

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Prince sees his new role as a conduit for positive change, getting trail users organized to work with land managers in order to develop projects.

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"When you build a community of people, they are more likely to participate in the community," he said. "That's what I'm trying to do on a state level. By getting them involved and paying attention to what's happening, it fosters better understanding and we'll get to a better place. People say I'm a little idealistic when I say that, but I know it works."

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In fact, Prince's informal approach and Trail Talks are working. In just two months, the number of subscriptions to the State Park OHV newsletter jumped by several hundred, more than a

professional media company was able to produce in a year.

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Prince would like to see more enthusiasts take the jump to agency jobs related to OHV recreation. In his first newsletter, he introduced himself as "the new guy" at Arizona State Parks. "Fasten your seat belts or secure that chin strap because you are in for an exciting ride this year," he wrote.

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We don't doubt that for a minute. Congratulations to an OHV rider who took the leap to an agency position, and is helping create a positive future for OHV recreation in Arizona.

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