If you’re reading this, you probably spend a fair amount of time talking or thinking about adventure, particularly on a bike. In North America and a few other parts of the world, the fastest growing segment of the motorcycle industry is the adventure and dual-sport market.

If you need convincing, note that even Harley-Davidson is getting into the act. It’s an exciting time for adventure riders with so many new products, increasing numbers of routes being touted by the likes of BDR and REVER, and regular rallies and rider meet-ups throughout the year.

Amidst all this energy and fun, it’s easy to forget the millions of people in other parts of the world who are using motorcycles for basic survival. Spending even a small amount of time in the vast steppe of Mongolia, for example, reveals that every ger (yurt) has at least one horse and one motorcycle. Modern day nomads, herding yaks, cashmere goats, and camels, do so mounted on Chinese-made bikes as often or more than the traditional and spirited Mongolian horses. It’s no surprise then, when traveling through a remote national park in the ancient lands of Genghis Khan, that rangers are hard at work covering enormous swaths of often roadless wilderness by motorbike.

Unlike many countries where rangers patrol using a vehicle from a motor pool, Mongolian rangers live remotely, often with just their families, and are assigned huge areas to cover on their own for days or even weeks at a time. It’s one ranger, one bike, against myriad risks.
RANGERS
PROTECTING THE PLANET
Poaching is one of the major threats to these pristine and protected lands. Others, such as illegal mining, logging, and development are less known, but equally damaging to the area’s irreplaceable natural and cultural resources.

Consider the high mountains of the Altai in extreme western Mongolia, home to World Heritage Sites including thousands of years of petroglyphs along with rare animals such as the snow leopard. Saiga antelope, argali sheep, and the largest trout species in the world are also highly sought after by poachers and fetch high prices on the black market.

While horses remain not only a romantic, but also a practical tool in Mongolia, patrolling on horseback alone will no longer protect these endangered species from the growing menace of poaching and development. Motorcycles provide an affordable, reliable, and flexible option for rangers to travel into areas other vehicles can’t, areas often used by criminals to pilfer protected lands.

In places like Africa and Nepal, motorcycles are also used by rangers in the fight to protect elephants, rhinoceros, Bengal tigers, and many other critically threatened species. Rangers in Patagonia and the remote areas of South America use bikes to patrol for wildfire, drug trafficking, illegal harvesting and much more.
And right here in the U.S., while far less common than the areas mentioned above, those patrolling public lands have been using motorcycles for decades, particularly in western mountain and desert areas from the Canadian to Mexican borders.

While motorcycle use by urban law enforcement professionals in the U.S. is widely practiced, it’s far less common by public lands employees who often work in more remote locations. Motorcycle use by U.S. National Park Service employees, for example, has been rare, but not unprecedented.

In fact, the vast majority of public land in the American west is not well-known national parks, but rather Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and USDA Forest Service areas—millions of acres of multi-use OHV, back-country, and wilderness area accessible for adventure travel, hunting, hiking, mountain biking and more. BLM staff make extensive use of off-road bikes for a variety of tasks including resource and permit monitoring, law enforcement, search and rescue, border patrols, and maintenance operations.

Jake Szympruch is one such public servant, routinely using his bike to patrol vast expanses of southern Arizona. Jake is the District Chief Ranger for the Phoenix District of the Bureau of Land Management, the largest, by acreage, of all federal land management agencies.

Jake started riding motorcycles just seven years ago when he transferred to the BLM in Oregon. “There was a 250cc dual-sport sitting in storage from a previous ranger. I had no idea how to start it, let alone ride it, so it just sat there. After a couple years of working in areas with an extensive network of trails I could not access by truck, I decided I needed to learn to ride that motorcycle.”

While he dabbled a bit with the work bike, it wasn’t until Jake bought one and started riding in his free time that he began to develop the necessary skills to safely and effectively use the bike for patrols at work. Like so many of us, he was inspired by Charlie and Ewan’s *Long Way Round* series. “Next thing I knew, I had an adventure bike in the garage, and was developing my off-road skills. As I developed the skills to ride big adventure bikes off road, my skill level on the little 250cc work bike quickly accelerated. Now that I have the confidence to ride into remote areas by myself, I am able to access much more of my BLM patrol areas.”

BLM rangers have a number of options when it comes to machines for off-highway patrol. Some rangers work in areas best suited for quads or side-by-side UTVs and prefer those types of machines. Some find the versatility of having a street-legal bike, which can be used to travel the county roads between patrol areas, is more valuable. The flexibility to load a
motorcycle on the back of a patrol vehicle rather than towing it by trailer adds to the benefits. Bikes generally have less impact on the land when accessing remote areas. They can more easily ride around vegetation, doing less damage. The smaller size and lighter weight also make it easier to turn around in impassable areas. Jake occasionally uses quads and UTVs in his work, too, but he keeps returning to small dual-sport motorcycles because of their versatility.

One incident that stands out for Jake was when he was called to assist a sheriff’s department with a search and rescue mission for an elderly woman who had become separated from her family in a remote area of a national forest.

“A U.S. Forest Service officer and I both had dual-sports. We were able to perform many miles of hasty searches and set up the initial containment perimeter for the search area using hiking trails. Using the hiking trails as containment lines allowed us to make the search much smaller than if we had relied on roads, which were a considerable distance away. Reducing the size of the search area allowed the ground teams to better focus their efforts. During the second day of grid searching, a K-9 team located her, and I was able to rapidly respond into the remote location on my motorcycle. I was the first medically trained person to arrive on scene and treated the patient through the several-hour long evacuation.”

In August 2019, Jake is taking time off from his ranger duties and joining 14 other adventure riders with Rally for Rangers to bring new motorcycles to his park ranger colleagues protecting snow leopards in remote western Mongolia. “Motorcycle and rafting adventures have taken me around the world. With my interest in the outdoors I have sought out opportunities to visit national parks and public land areas in other countries. While visiting these parks, I’ve seen the lack of equipment the rangers struggle with,” he said. “Last year, after coming across an article about the Rally for Rangers project, whose mission is to help the park rangers in Mongolia and a few other countries replace their worn-out old motorcycles with new bikes, I knew this was what I was looking for. The opportunity to help my fellow rangers acquire the tools I have available to do the job I do… what an amazing opportunity!”

Tom Medema is co-founder of the Rally for Rangers Project and a career park ranger in the U.S. His passion for adventure riding, protecting the environment, and supporting park rangers internationally drives this philanthropic effort. Tom now works and lives in the Washington, D.C. area. RallyForRangers.org

Poachers negatively impacted by the new bikes recently burned two of them in Tengis-Shishged National Park.

The rangers of Altai Tavan Bogd can more effectively protect their park on their new Yamaha AG200s.