

Noise is Not Power

When motorbike engines are generally smaller than those of cars, why is it that the former often make more noise? Is it because some bike riders think noise equates to power? Or is it because the stringent regulations that are supposed to govern noise emissions of both cars and motorbikes are flouted by some manufacturers and retailers of aftermarket motorbike accessories?

For many years, a segment of bike riders have been adding accessories to their bikes to make them produce more power than an original showroom model, often with the result that they become much louder and more intrusive to pedestrians. For almost as many years, other riders have been working hard to mitigate the damage that noisy bikes do to their reputation and recreation. The latter group, including the TRF are now taking their requests to the highest level.

Earlier this year, DEFRA (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs) issued a consultation on 'Mechanically Propelled Vehicles on Public Rights of Way'. The purpose of this consultation was to look at ways of reducing the damage and disturbance purported to be caused by vehicles being driven and ridden through the British countryside on legal rights of way. Members of the public often point the finger at trail bike riders, claiming they are the main culprits, even though in many areas, there is no evidence of damage or disturbance. Even more common are complaints of the intrusive noise caused by their machines. What many members of the public do not know is that currently, these riders have very little control over the noise their bikes make.

Paying for Power

Car and motorbike manufacturers are strictly regulated on the amount of noise any of their vehicles destined for the public highway can make. Even those that are engineered to sound louder, thereby giving an impression of power – including many sports cars and motorbikes – are subject to these regulations. Without the enclosed bodywork and exhaust pipe length of cars, modifications to the silencers of motorbikes lead to a disproportionate increase in noise levels compared to cars.

Presently there are no regulations enforceable in the real-world governing the purchase and fitting of accessories which make motorbikes illegal for road use such as exhausts, once new bikes have left the showroom. Enthusiasts can buy non-standard, post-production exhausts for their machines, to increase the output of the bike by several brake horse power, with little risk of prosecution. Riders often pay many hundreds of pounds for such a piece of kit. The result however is usually a noisier and more intrusive bike.

Manufactured Choice

The TRF, Britain's national organisation for off-road riding, claims that the future of its recreation is in danger, partly because of the insensitivity of the very industry on which members rely. The MCIA (Motorcycle Industry Association) is the body which represents motorbike manufacturers and retailers. Members of the TRF feel that the MCIA is not providing sufficient support to riders who want more choice and who want to improve the reputation of their recreation.

In June, the TRF sent a strong message to the MCIA, asking for its support for a campaign to make trail bikes quieter. The voluntary organisation wants the MCIA to help provide solutions to counter those who claim that trail riding is no longer compatible with Britain's countryside. While the TRF encourages all its members to ride in a responsible manner, it can have little influence on the noise of their bikes and is requesting that the MCIA take responsibility for this area.

The TRF is asking the MCIA to get sensitive about noise, by restricting the sale of aftermarket noisy exhaust systems. These are used mainly for competition bikes and have no place on trail bikes. Restrictions would prevent riders from buying a new trail bike with a quiet exhaust system and then adding a non-standard exhaust that makes the machine louder, for the sake of a small increase in power.

Whose Problem?

The TRF is pushing the MCIA to bring in these changes, in order to safeguard countryside motorcycling for the next generation and to counter the prejudice towards bikes expressed in DEFRA's consultation. However, so far, people within the motorcycle industry have maintained that the problem is not theirs to worry about, that everyone else is just too sensitive and that it is the responsibility of the police to apprehend the law breakers.

Geoff Wilson, Chairman of the TRF, says, "Through their own actions, trail riders can do much themselves to take their recreation into the 21st century. However, there are many things which the motorcycle industry must do as well, such as making bikes quieter. A programme of customer education and information at point of sale is needed, while competitive riders should be encouraged to ride at sporting events, rather than bringing race track noise levels to rural green lanes".

He continues, "So called 'off-road' bikes have moved on at a pace that some other users of the countryside cannot accept. Motorcycling and the needs of the countryside have been on a diverging course and it is time to bring them back together again. The MCIA has a key role to play in convincing the government that the biking world is sensitive and accepts that there are problems in some parts of the countryside that it is actively working to solve."

A Range of Solutions

Other solutions that the TRF is working to implement include sophisticated and selective route management processes, such as flexible traffic regulation orders and route hierarchies. The adoption by riders of a low-impact attitude that encompasses greater sensitivity to speed, surface damage, tyres, noise and safety of others using the same tracks is being actively encouraged. The organisation would also like to see the adoption of a series of special byway rules to minimise primary legislation.

The TRF is a national, voluntary and non-competitive body that was established in 1970, for people who enjoy exploring green lanes by motorbike. It aims to conserve our heritage of green lanes for everyone to enjoy. However, without top-level support of the MCI, the future looks unsure. It is for this reason that the TRF will keep pushing for the changes in motorbike manufacture that it deems necessary, to safeguard the future of its members and their recreation into the twenty-second century.