

Ban snowmobiles in Yellowstone National Park

Daniel Dustin

Let me say at the outset that I'm not a fan of snowmobiles. I prefer cross-country skis or, better yet, snowshoes. I prefer peace and quiet to the whine of a snowmobile engine. I prefer plodding along at a snail's pace to being propelled over the snow at 25 to 35 miles per hour. I prefer inhaling clean air to the fumes from oil and gasoline combustion. I prefer flexible, breathable clothing to the bulky snowsuit designed for sitting atop a mechanical sled. Finally, I prefer a stocking cap to a helmet and visor. I prefer these things in general, but I prefer them especially when making my way through Yellowstone, our country's first national park.

Having said this, I recently drove a snowmobile 60 miles roundtrip to and from Yellowstone's Old Faithful Geyser via Montana's West Yellowstone entrance. If I was going to write about the snowmobile controversy in Yellowstone, I figured, I had better experience it. My day-long outing was filtered through a helmet and visor, bulky snowsuit, exhaust from a Polaris 600 two-stroke engine, 25 to 35 miles per hour speeds and the constant whine of a snowmobile engine. On several occasions, I had to negotiate my way carefully through small groups of bison sharing the same plowed roadway. And along one quarter-mile stretch, park rangers admonished me to "keep going" lest I disturb nesting bald eagles.

Yes, I had a good time. And though I came away from the experience a little less certain that snowmobiles are unequivocally bad for the flora, fauna and people who find themselves within earshot, I still believe they're inappropriate transportation in Yellowstone, or, for that matter, any national park.

The National Path Service Organic Act

In 1916, the Organic Act creating the National Park Service (NPS) defined its mission thusly: "To conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations." As countless scholars have noted, this administrative mandate contains confusing, if not contradictory, language. On the one hand, the NPS is obliged to manage the national parks so that their condition remains "unimpaired." On the other hand, the NPS is obliged to manage the national parks for the "enjoyment" of the people. How best to achieve these two conflicting goals has been the principal managerial challenge facing the NPS since its inception.

Historically, the most contentious issues have revolved around questions of access to the parks and, once inside, uses that are deemed appropriate or inappropriate given the NPS administrative mandate. If national parks are for the enjoyment of the people, access to them should be guaranteed. If national parks belong to the people, what the people do in their parks should also be up to them. Or so the arguments go. The major rifts have been over admission fees, transportation modes, questionable recreational uses, crowding and the impacts of varying park uses on the flora and fauna. The problems presented by snowmobiles reflect all these concerns.

Snowmobiles in Yellowstone

Before snowmobiles, winter was largely a time for Yellowstone to recover from the throngs of summer visitors. What winter use did occur favored a hardy core of cross-country ski and snowshoe enthusiasts who huffed and puffed their way through the park at a slow, deliberate and quiet pace. They had Yellowstone pretty much to themselves.

In the 1960s, the advent of two-stroke gasoline engines changed everything. Prodded by local businessmen in West Yellowstone and elsewhere, the NPS began catering to the burgeoning demand for snowmobile access to the park. Snowmobile tourism skyrocketed in the 1980s, and, as Ray Ring reports in the High Country News, "The park grooms 184 miles of its roads for snow traffic, and snowmobilers have far surpassed snowcoach tourists and skiers in the park (outnumbering them 7-to-1 and maybe 50-to-1, respectively). In an average season, 55,000 snowmobilers enter the park through the West Yellowstone gate, the great majority of all the snowmobiles in the park."

Snowmobile impacts range from noise and air pollution to adverse effects on flora and fauna. The traditional two-stroke engines are loud and highly polluting. Photos of NPS rangers donning gas masks at the West Yellowstone Entrance Station to keep from inhaling

exhaust fumes have helped galvanize public opinion in opposition to snowmobiles in the park. Exacerbating the situation is what some scientists believe to be a direct link between the grooming of Yellowstone's roadways for snow traffic and the increased ease with which bison move in and out of the park. In recent years, many of the bison have been infected with brucellosis, a highly contagious disease that threatens domesticated livestock outside the park. Fear of contamination has resulted in the killing of large numbers of bison when wandering beyond the protective boundary of Yellowstone into Montana.

Meanwhile, the International Snow mobile Manufacturers Association (ISMA), in concert with snowmobile enthusiasts and local area businesses, has championed the recreational and economic benefits of snowmobiles. The ISMA points out that snowmobiling appeals to people of all ages, is a great family sport and generates \$7 billion annually in the U.S. The ISMA also questions the scientific validity of studies demonstrating the detrimental effects of snowmobiles on the environment, while touting other studies demonstrating the absence of any such detrimental effects. Finally, the ISMA contends that snowmobiles in winter are no greater threat to Yellowstone than automobiles in summer.

To Ban or Not to Ban?

ISMA lobbying, coupled with timely litigation, resulted in the Bush administration reversing a Clinton administration proposal to ban snowmobiles in Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks. Proponents of the ban insist it was based on sound science, and that it remains the best environmental alternative. Snowmobile enthusiasts counter that the Clinton administration proposal didn't take into account improving snowmobile technology that will eventually reduce the negative impacts environmentalists find so objectionable.

The Bush administration's rescission of the Clinton administration's ban has baffled environmentalists and former NPS officials alike. Retired NPS Deputy Director Dennis Galvin, who worked on the winter use plan during the Clinton and Bush presidencies, was quoted in the Jackson Hole News & Guide as saying, "The ride isn't what Yellowstone is all about, the park is what Yellowstone is all about." Former Yellowstone Superintendent Michael Finley echoed Galvin's sentiments in the Dallas/Fort Worth Star-Telegram when he suggested Bush administration officials "decided they were going to have snowmobiles in Yellowstone no matter what the facts demonstrated. They never asked to review the facts. They had their minds made up. I watched an administration with a preconceived agenda unravel a thoughtful and scientifically based decision."

Despite such criticism, the NPS recently decided to allow continued access to Yellowstone by snowmobiles on an "experimental" basis. Included in the final winter management plan are restrictions on snowmobiles ranging from the gradual replacement of two-stroke engines with more environmentally friendly four-stroke engines, a dispersion of snowmobile use within the park to reduce congestion and pollution at the West Yellowstone entrance, the increasing use of commercial and non-commercial guides who will be trained to understand and respect the fragility of Yellowstone's winter ecosystem, and increasing reliance on snowcoaches, bigger and cleaner burning machines that can accommodate large numbers of people rather than one or two riders.

Beware of Technical Solutions

The snowmobile controversy in Yellowstone is a litmus test of NPS policy. Given its charge to conserve Yellowstone while simultaneously making it accessible for public enjoyment, the NPS' attempt at a "balanced" remedy is understandable and predictable. Yet, as ecologist Garrett Hardin reasoned in "The Tragedy of the Commons," an article published in Science in 1968, it's always easier to resort to a technical solution when managing a common property resource than to effect a fundamental change in the way we value the resource itself. In this case, it's easier to implore the snowmobile industry to use the best available technology (newer, quieter, less polluting engines) than to say snowmobiles simply don't belong in Yellowstone. It's easier to accommodate special interest groups (snowmobile manufacturers, dealers and enthusiasts) than to just say no to them. The question Hardin would have us ponder is, "At what cost?"

In *The Spirit of Yellowstone*, geographer Judith Meyer explores the cultural evolution of Yellowstone's meaning as a landscape, as a setting for human/nature interactions. She portrays a Yellowstone visit as something "worth the effort," as a journey demanding sacrifice and hard work. Yes, national parks should be accessible, she believes, but not easily accessible. Meyer describes a rich tradition of experiencing Yellowstone in ways that demand the expenditure of human effort and energy, of earning a view or an encounter with wildlife.

Meyer thinks snowmobiles trivialize the Yellowstone experience by making it too easily accessible. The warming huts, hotels and

restaurants the NPS maintains in winter to accommodate snowmobilers mean they no longer have to interact with Yellowstone on its own terms. As a consequence, the traditional solitude, silence and emptiness of a Yellowstone winter give way to crowding, noise, pollution and the harassment of wildlife. The NPS, Meyer fears, is unwittingly making common what should, by its very nature, remain uncommon.

In similar fashion, Joseph Sax contends in *Mountains Without Handrails* that the national parks were set aside to "exercise our contemplative faculty," to immerse ourselves in nature. Anything that insulates us from that immersion, that buffers us from that immersion, that competes with that immersion, obstructs what a national park experience ought to be. By Sax's logic, snowmobiles are insulating (bulky attire), buffering (helmet and visor) and competing (at 25 to 35 miles per hour) with the reason Yellowstone National Park was established in 1872.

Even if advancing technology dramatically reduces or eliminates the noise and pollution snowmobiles generate, they'll still be an inappropriate mode of transport in Yellowstone National Park. They'll degrade the sense of place Yellowstone has come to represent over time. Snowmobiles in winter, like automobiles in summer, are antithetical to the purposes for which Yellowstone National Park was created. The difference between them is that, when automobiles were first introduced into the national parks in the early 1900s, we simply didn't know as much as we do today about their degrading effects. We now know better, as evidenced by the prohibition of automobiles in Alaska's Denali National Park and ongoing deliberations over the elimination of automobiles in Yosemite Valley. We ought to learn from our mistakes, and banning snowmobiles in Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks provides us with that opportunity.

If we aspire to do justice to the NPS goals of conserving the national parks in their unimpaired condition while simultaneously making them available for the public's enjoyment, we must always weigh the first part of the equation more heavily than the second when it comes to planning and policy decisions. It's important to remember that the Organic Act qualifies what people may or may not do in the parks by instructing the NPS to "provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations." To do otherwise, to favor the public's enjoyment of the national parks over their conservation in an unimpaired condition, may well lead to Hardin's "tragedy of the commons," the inevitable destruction of all that makes the national parks unique in the first place.

BEYOND YELLOWSTONE

The snowmobile controversy in Yellowstone is an object lesson in park purposes and practices. The challenge for all of us in the park and recreation profession is to better articulate the purposes of the park systems we oversee so that we can more clearly distinguish appropriate from inappropriate uses.

The public nature of our professional responsibility complicates this challenge. The citizenry we serve is a collection of special interest groups, and our ongoing task is to sort through the claims those interest groups make on the public lands to determine what should and shouldn't be done for the sake of all stakeholders. It's a burdensome task, one made even more so by the fact that we're responsible for the welfare of all non-human stakeholders as well. (Remember the bison and nesting bald eagles.)

As the snowmobile controversy illustrates, more often than not, the mixture of science and politics muddies our task. Being good stewards of the land on the basis of a scientific understanding of ecological principles is an insufficient foundation for effective land management. Being politically astute is equally important. Places like Yellowstone deserve the best professional stewardship we have to offer. This goal requires vigilance and competence on all fronts.

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