Snowy middle ground

Wilderness advocates and snowmobilers come to terms in Montana

Ray Ring

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John Gatchell, 53, used to set chokers and topple trees for a logging crew; now he's a chief negotiator for the Montana Wilderness Assocation. The group, founded in 1958, now has more than 6,000 members and 17 staffers.

LINCOLN, Montana — Most people know this community because of what happened here in 1996: Federal agents swarmed a nearby cabin and pulled out Theodore Kaczynski, the Unabomber. He'd been living here incognito for 17 years while sending out exploding packages that injured people around the country, killing three.

But a better way to see Lincoln is through the eyes of the Ponderosa Snow Warriors. About 250 people belong to this snowmobiling club, and many of them turn out for mass rides on the 250 miles of trails that fan out from the town through the Helena National Forest. The Snow Warriors created the trails, providing not only recreation, but also a form of local society for the roughly 1,100 people scattered in these woods along the Blackfoot River.

"We're very proud," says Ray Smith, a 75-year-old retired Ford mechanic who puts in long nights piloting the club's groomer, preparing the trails for daytime traffic. "We do a hell of a job."

During the snow-free months, the Snow Warriors keep the trails clear of fallen trees and invasive species, using their one-ton pickup, ATVs, weed sprayers and chainsaws. They pick up litter along the main highway, and hold fund-raisers for local kids going to college and other charities.

And lately, the Snow Warriors have recognized that environmentalists are part of their largely conservative community. On a snowy day in December, as Smith and other snowmobilers meet with Forest Service staff in the local office of the Helena National Forest, they're joined by leaders of Montana's wilderness movement.

Together, they pore over maps of the forest, talking about the needs of wildlife, and what kind of winter recreation should be allowed along Huckleberry Pass, Marsh Creek, and other areas. The snowmobilers are cutting a deal with the wilderness advocates — dividing the land for 10 miles north and south into areas that allow motorized winter recreation and areas that don't.

The struggle between skiers and snowmobilers is part of it, but this agreement is also an effort to build support for future wilderness designations. And the effort goes far beyond Lincoln. The statewide Montana Snowmobile Association, other local snowmobile clubs, the Montana Wilderness Association and its local affiliates are all working together to wind down the state's long wilderness war, declaring a truce acre by acre.

Montana's wilderness war began in 1988. That year, Congress passed a bill that would have added about 1.3 million acres to the state's 3.4 million acres of wilderness. Virtually every daily newspaper in the state endorsed the bill, but President Ronald Reagan exercised a pocket veto. He let it die on his desk as he left office, reportedly carrying out the wishes of timber and mining companies. It's the only time any statewide wilderness bill passed by Congress has been vetoed.

A huge increase in snowmobiles and summertime ATVs brought preservation questions to a head, however. Beginning in the mid-1990s, the Montana Wilderness Association and the Montana Snowmobile Association faced off in bloody court battles that reached the U.S. Supreme Court. The wilderness group wanted motors kept out of 6.4

million acres of roadless forest; the snowmobilers wanted access. Each side won some and lost some, and together they spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on lawyers.

Finally, a few battle-weary leaders in each camp decided it was time for a new strategy. A local snowmobile club in Seeley Lake began negotiating with the Wilderness Association around 2000, and it spread from there.

Two men in particular represent the political shift: John Gatchell and Alan Brown, who became the chief negotiators for their sides. Gatchell grew up in a working-class Detroit neighborhood, didn't attend college, and moved to Montana in 1973, drawn by its wild landscapes. His first Montana jobs were in logging and construction. He began volunteering for the Wilderness Association, then signed on as the group's conservation director in 1985, a position he still holds. He reflects back on what he learned on those logging crews: They may have disagreed about regulations, he says, but "all the people I worked with were into wilderness — hiking, hunting and fishing."

Brown grew up in Great Falls, where his father ran grain elevators, and studied political science at the University of Montana. He got into snowmobiling as a family sport — his kids wanted to ride. Serving the Snowmobile Association in various roles, including as president, he made use of his career experiences: He's a labor relations expert, representing companies in hammering out contracts with workers. "I have sat at the (negotiating) table a lot," he says. The negotiators met regularly, walking the land, discussing their priorities. "The main thing we had in common," Brown says, "was that we both wanted large areas of the forests blocked up for our own kind of use."

In the last six years, they've made five deals that cover about 2.5 million acres of national forest in eight mountain ranges. In each deal, the statewide groups and their local affiliates have taken the lead, agreeing on where motors should and should not be allowed. They draw boundaries around areas where they can't agree, hoping to settle those later. Then they present the results to the Forest Service.

The Forest Service praises the negotiations, but considers each deal "a starting point," says Helena National Forest supervisor Kevin Riordan. The agency conducts months or years of additional studies and gathers public comment, to fine-tune the terms and record them in travel plans. "We have an obligation to hear from people" who are not involved in the deals, or who don't like them, Riordan says. But pretty much everyone agrees that the Forest Service needs a kick-start. The agency is "bogged down with conflicting rules," Brown says.

"Some decisions," Gatchell adds, "won't be made without direct citizen involvement."

Within the environmental and snowmobiling camps, the politics remain tricky, and disagreements aren't uncommon even among staffs, boards and the groups' own members.

The national groups for each camp — The Wilderness Society and the BlueRibbon Coalition — support the negotiation strategy, but in some cases, where local snowmobile clubs disagree with each other, the Coalition has "stepped back" and not taken sides, says Brian Hawthorne, the Coalition's public-lands director.

A snowmobile club in White Sulphur Springs refused to sign the agreement covering the Little Belt range, even though two other snowmobile clubs, as well as the Snowmobile Association, signed it. "We're giving up too much play area (off trails)" in the Little Belts, says Noreen Neighbor, a leader of the White Sulphur Springs club.

Among the environmentalist critics, a small group called the Central Montana Wildlands Association opposes the deal covering the 94,000-acre Big Snowy Wilderness Study Area. The Wildlands Association is suing the Forest Service, saying the agency has failed to protect the wilderness study area, and that it should do a full study of the impacts of winter and summer traffic before implementing the deal.

Tom Woodbury, a lawyer representing the Wildlands Association, says the group includes skiers "who don't want to hear a lot of snowmobiles whizzing around" the backcountry. He also says the deal is bad for lynx, a species protected by the Endangered Species Act. Some snowmobile play areas "are in the middle of prime lynx denning habitat," he says, and the trails make it easier for coyotes to roam the high country and eat the hares on which lynx prey.

The Wilderness Association and the Snowmobile Association have now intervened in that lawsuit on the same side, backing the Forest Service and the deal. Gatchell says that the act of Congress that created the Big Snowy Wilderness Study Area allowed snowmobiles in up to 20 percent of the area; the deal, however, reduced that to 15 percent and blocked off the portion that "has the best wilderness characteristics," including prime habitat for lynx, mountain goats and wolverines.

Both Gatchell and Brown say the agreements will make it easier to keep snowmobilers within their designated areas, because the clubs that signed on will become enforcers. "Both sides have got extremists," Brown says. "On our side, we've got people who don't believe there should be a single area where they can't ride."

The deals address only winter traffic, not the ATVs that penetrate the backcountry in summer. One reason for that, Brown says: The ATV drivers "don't have any statewide organization" to pull them together for negotiations.

As conflicts over winter motors increase around the West, only a few similar negotiations have been successful (HCN, 1/19/04: Yellowstone snowmobilers suffer whiplash). "It's always a tough go," says Mark Menlove, head of Winter Wildlands Alliance, a Boise-based group for nonmotorized recreation.

In Idaho, for example, snowmobilers and skiers using the Sawtooth National Forest divided up some terrain near Ketchum about five years ago, at the urging of the forest supervisor. But today, environmental groups are suing the Idaho Panhandle National Forests, trying to force the closure of 77 miles of snowmobile trails through habitat for endangered woodland caribou.

The Montana efforts also stand out because they show the Montana Wilderness Association's systematic attempt to advance its goals statewide. Since the 1988 setback, Montana has seen several new wilderness proposals fall inches short of congressional approval; some passed in the Senate or in the House, but none became law because representatives could not resolve differences in the bills. "By giving a little, and getting

a little (in the snowmobile deals), we're broadening the public support" for future wilderness bills, Gatchell says.

At the negotiating session in Lincoln in December, the Snow Warriors' leaders, along with Gatchell, Brown, and a few other players, address what could someday be a crucial aspect of this deal: Gatchell assures the snowmobilers that no future Wilderness Association proposal to Congress will try to close the snowmobile routes covered by the agreement. And in turn, the snowmobilers promise Gatchell that they will not oppose any attempts to designate the quiet areas as wilderness. In that sense, Gatchell says, "We're partners."

The author is HCN*'s Northern Rockies editor.*

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