**In Defense of Muscle Power**

Traversing Southern Indian’s contrarian waters was the toughest physical challenge I’ve ever faced, but the satisfaction derived in meeting it, commensurate to the ordeal endured—sweet victory after hard battle. Teddy Roosevelt would have approved. According to him, nothing is worth doing unless it involves ‘effort, pain, [and] difficulty’.

But, T. R.’s trifecta of worthiness is not a standard shared by some large percentage of public land users today. For many of these not so rugged outdoorsmen, nothing is worth doing unless it comes easy.

Until recently, ease was not an option in moving through backcountry. Muscle power was the only means to do it and those too lazy, out of shape, or disinclined to suffer, stayed home. But that changed, thanks to a proliferation of machines. Now, one can get almost anywhere they’d care to go without breaking a sweat.

Advances in horsepower, suspension, and design have tamed terrain. Jet boats operate in mere inches of water, snowmobiles climb slopes steeper than most skiers would dare descend, motorcycles reach highway speeds on rough mountain trails, and ATVs, essentially miniature jeeps, can transport you and your crew to the way back with a six pack. These innovations have led to a machine invasion on public lands today.

I shudder to think what the wilderness system would look like now had such contraptions been around in 1964 when the Wilderness Act was passed. Suffice to say, it would be considerably smaller.

I’ll admit, grudgingly, that machines have a place. They afford the opportunity for folks who can’t otherwise access backcountry to do so, and, they can be fun. I understand the attraction, having utilized the gamut of all-terrain vehicles while working.

Still, for me, they never delivered any sense of accomplishment, as if I had done something worth bragging about or felt particularly proud of. Those who throttle for backcountry kicks would disagree. I’ve listened as motorized enthusiasts extol the virtues of the ‘sport’, claiming to seek an experience no different from any other backcountry user—to enjoy freedom and adventure unbound in nature, but, even if true, how can one hope to find such rewards aboard a noisy, smelly machine?

Would a spectacular view afforded by dint of effort be equal to one driven to? Could a fifty-mile ride on a motorbike prove as satisfying as a hike of five? Different strokes for different folks, sure, but I want neither a two-stroke nor four-stroke conveyance bearing me down the unbeaten path.

Crossing eighty miles of Southern Indian Lake in two hours on a jet ski might prove a cheap thrill but could never equate to paddling that daunting distance over eight days of struggle and toil.

Of course, my way is just one way and not the way to enjoy public lands, much as I’d like it to be otherwise, and those favoring motors to muscles won’t be swayed by sanctimony. But neither should they be further accommodated or appeased because opportunities for motorized recreation already abound.

The Forest Service has 380,000 miles of roads, 60,000 miles of motorized trails, and many millions of acres open to snowmobiles, to say nothing of BLM’s 90,000 miles of motorized routes or the four million more of city, county, state, and federal roads in the country. Places to ride are not in short supply. Yet, for the boom and zoom crowd, enough is never enough.

Organized, well-funded, and politically connected, advocates for motorized recreation are strident in demands for more, claiming to being unfairly treated, locked out of the public lands if unable to access them on a machine, and arguing that only the young, fit, and wealthy will benefit should the right to ride is denied.

“We only want to share the trails,” is their rallying cry, which sounds reasonable, but makes no more sense than Black Sabbath sharing a stage coincident with Yo-Yo Ma or smokers inviting non-smokers to belly up beside them at the bar.

On this infernally combusted world, places for motors are not lacking, but areas free of them are. It is quiet recreation that is endangered. To protect it, land managers must say ‘no’ to motorized advocates seeking more. Saying ‘no’ is critical to good stewardship and any line officer; Forest Service District Ranger all the way up to Chief; as well as their BLM and state land counterparts, unable to utter it should never have been put in a position of power in the first place.

Imperative too is for leaders to fully consider how decisions made today will affect resources ten, twenty or even a hundred years hence. An activity that might seem reasonable to allow now, given low and infrequent levels of use, will likely expand over time and come to dominate the scene because use intensity almost always increases. Once the camel gets its nose under the tent, things are sure to be shattered inside. Mechanized and motorized use in the backcountry pose this threat like no other.

The wilderness champion and ecologist Aldo Leopold saw this coming a century ago, writing in 1925 that:

*The day is almost upon us when a pack-train must wind its way up a gravel highway and turn out its bell mare in the pasture of a summer hotel...when canoe travel will consist of paddling up the noisy wake of a motor launch... And, thenceforth the march of empire will be a matter of gasoline and [wheels].*

And lo, it has come to pass.