



Winter Recreation Planning

the good, the bad, and the ugly

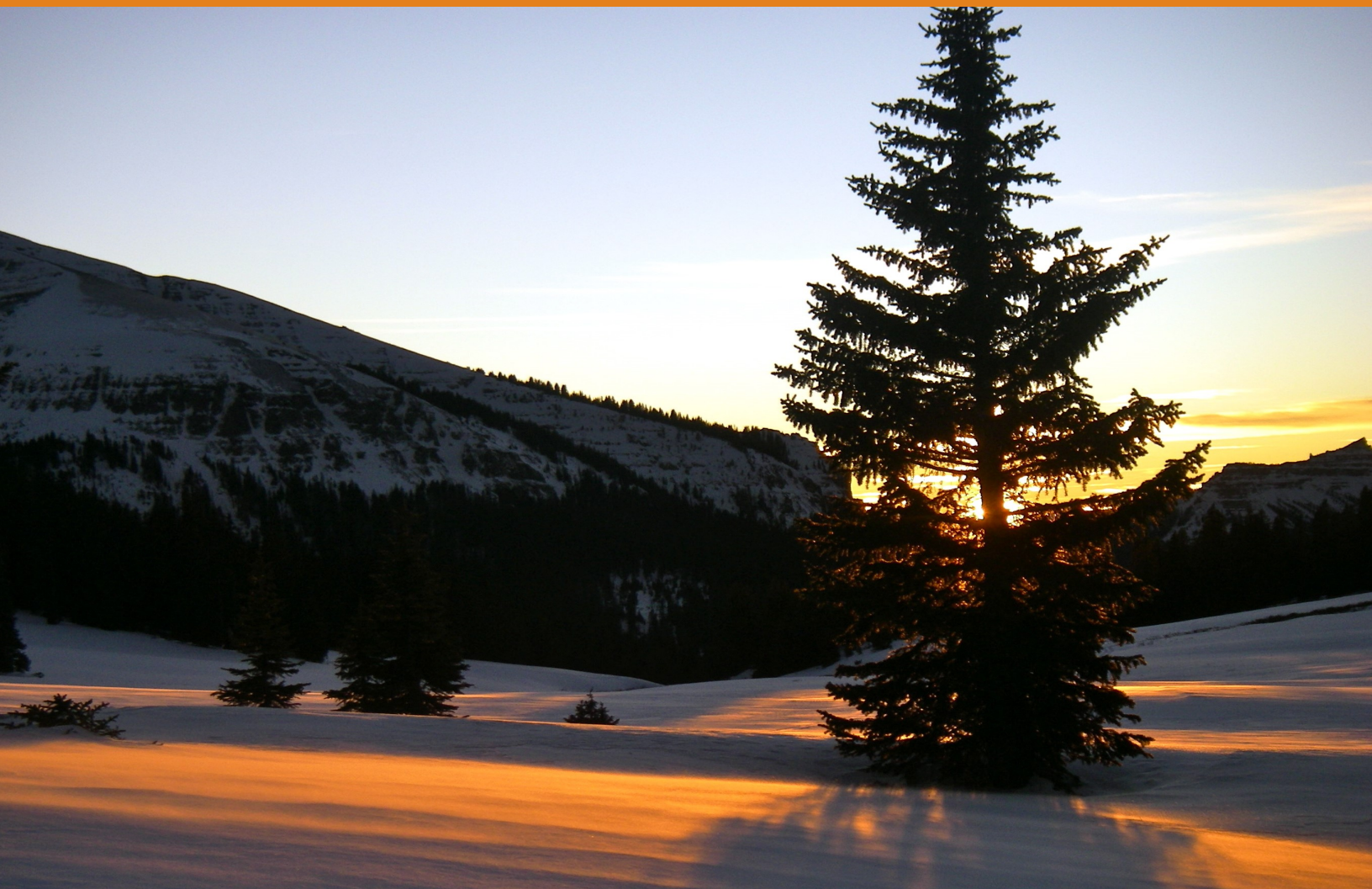


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The Forest Service has recently developed a new rule to guide winter travel management planning on National Forests across the country. Prior to this rule winter travel planning has been inconsistent and rare. However, despite this, there have been some very good winter travel and recreation management plans developed across the West. There are also examples of where winter travel management is desperately needed, and where people have tried, and failed, to solve user conflicts and bring balance to the backcountry through travel planning. This document outlines several case studies that demonstrate the broad range of travel plans and planning attempts across National Forest lands.

While travel planning is not a panacea for solving user conflict, a mandatory winter travel management planning process that is consistent across all National Forest lands will go a long way towards bringing certainty and balance to the backcountry. These case studies highlight what has proven to work, and not work, in winter travel planning and should help to guide future efforts in this regard.

Vail Pass, White River National Forest, Colorado **10th Mountain Division Hut Association, Backcountry Snowsports Initiative**

1

Through facilitated negotiations and compromise stakeholders worked together to create a plan that improves everybody's backcountry experience. Long-term success has resulted because those who crafted the plan have stayed engaged and followed through on their commitments.

The White River National Forest is one of the few forests to do comprehensive travel management planning under the 2005 Rule. The plan, finalized in 2011, specifies where over-snow vehicles are allowed by area, designates motorized routes through otherwise restricted areas, specifies the dates when over-snow motorized travel is allowed (November 23-May 20), and establishes a monitoring program. While there are many aspects of this travel plan that bear mentioning, the Vail Pass area deserves specific attention.

Vail Pass is easy to access, has abundant snow, and is in close proximity to the Denver metro area. These factors combine to make it an extremely popular destination for winter recreationalists. As in most places where there are many people pursuing many types of activities, there was conflict between motorized and non-motorized users on Vail Pass. This conflict escalated sharply starting in the early 1990's. Increases in the numbers of motorized and non-motorized users, a lack of regulations, and increasingly powerful snowmobiles that could travel into previously inaccessible terrain boiled together to create an unsustainable situation.

To solve these problems and reduce user conflict the Vail Pass Task Force organized in the mid-1990's. The Task Force initially came together to create a plan to operate Vail Pass as a voluntary shared-use area. However, because of lack of compliance by snowmobilers with the voluntary shared-use agreement the Task Force ultimately worked with the Forest Service to turn Vail Pass into a managed fee demo area.

Today users pay \$6/day or \$40/season to access the Vail Pass Winter Recreation Area. These fees are collected by the Forest Service and directed to the Vail Pass Task Force through a cost-share agreement. The Task Force then uses these funds to pay for management services such as grooming, education, and enforcement. The area is managed under a plan that was created by the Task Force after more than a decade of meetings. Once the Task Force developed an agreement on winter recreation management they presented it to the White River National Forest and it was adopted in its entirety and is integrated into the White River National Forest travel plan. While this management plan has ultimately been a success, its creation was followed a rocky path.

The Vail Pass Task Force, a 501c (3), came together as way for the Forest Service to give stakeholders a voice. This voluntary group has 8 members – 4 representing motorized users (the local snowmobile club, a cat-skiing operator, the CO Snowmobile Association, and a local snowmobile guide), and 4 representing non-motorized users (the 10th Mountain Division Hut Association, CO Mountain Club, Quiet Use Coalition, and a private hut owner). The member groups have not changed since the Task Force's inception and the people representing the groups have stayed relatively consistent as well. In fact, 5 of the original 8 individuals remain on the Task Force to this day. For each decision the Task Force faces everybody has an opportunity to state their case and then the Task Force votes on the issue. In cases where votes are tied, the Forest Service makes a decision. This is rarely necessary, however, because Task Force members have done a good job of keeping issues in perspective and rarely vote on "party lines." Once the Task Force passes a recommendation the

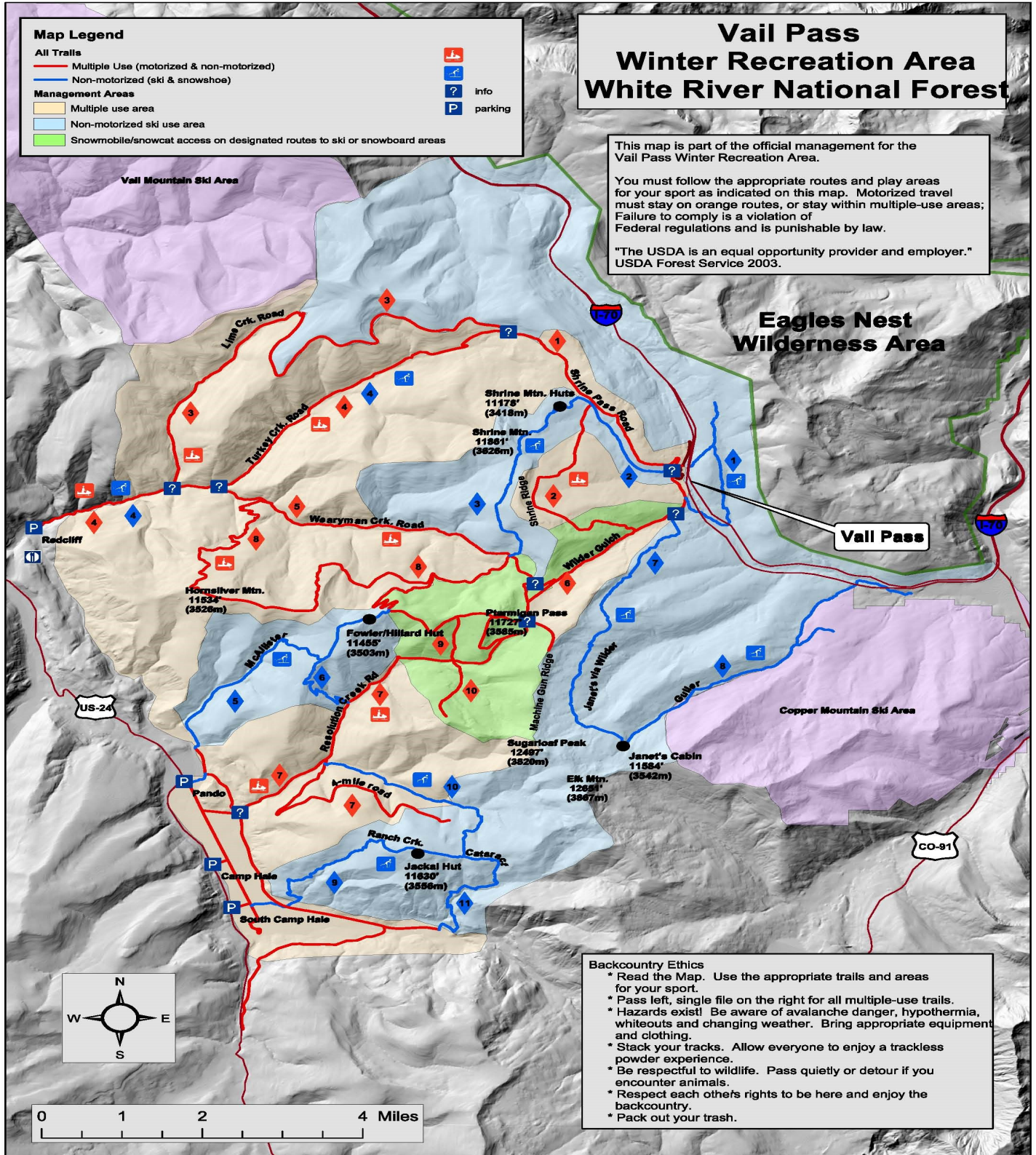
Forest Service has discretion whether or not to implement it or to modify the recommendation prior to implementing it. So far the Forest Service has implemented every recommendation passed by the Task Force. Although the Vail Pass Management Plan has been implemented, the Task Force continues to meet to discuss current issues such as grooming and education.

One of the most difficult aspects of creating the management plan was overcoming precedent and the history of the area. Specifically, the motorized community had to give up terrain that they had had access to for many years. However, in the end the Task Force was able to reach an agreement because everybody was willing to make concessions. The motorized members agreed to give up some access and the non-motorized members agreed to take on some of the grooming duties. In addition, everybody contributed financially to the success of the Task Force and Management Plan. However, money continues to be the biggest challenge facing the Vail Pass Task Force. The \$6/day user fee is not sufficient to properly manage Vail Pass. While these fees are supplemented by grants, it is likely that the Task Force will need to consider raising the daily and seasonal fee.

[The Vail Pass Management Plan](#) divides Vail Pass into motorized and non-motorized areas. Boundaries are defined by clear topographic or geographic features where possible. Because of the management plan people visiting Vail Pass know what to expect – where they can go, the types of uses they will encounter, etc. – and their recreational experience has been vastly improved. While dividing an area into many small pieces may not be the best solution for other backcountry recreation areas, this management strategy works very well for Vail Pass.

There are a number of factors that have contributed to the success of this management plan. First, the Task Force was made up of evenly represented stakeholders so that everybody had an equal voice.

In addition, the stakeholders were willing to compromise, are committed to the Task Force, and are financially able to help support the Task Force. The Forest Service has been a major factor in the success of this effort as well. The Forest Service created the space for the Task Force to form and has supported its efforts and values its recommendations. In particular the Task Force works very well with the District Ranger, who in turn has support from his supervisors. The Forest Service understands that the Task Force not only can help make their jobs easier, its success reflects positively on the Forest Service too.



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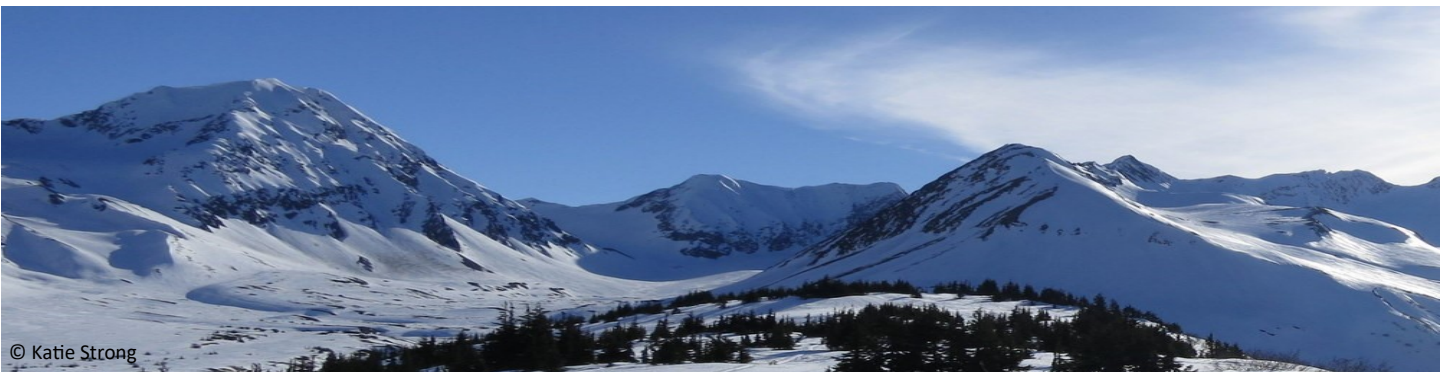
Clear boundaries and simple management strategies are essential to successful backcountry zoning.

The Turnagain Pass area on the Chugach National Forest is often cited as a prime example of where the Forest Service has done a good job of zoning the backcountry. The Seward Highway crosses Turnagain Pass and creates a clear and enforceable boundary to separate uses. All areas south of the highway on Turnagain Pass are designated non-motorized while snowmobiles are allowed north of the highway. Motorized users, including hybrid skiers, stay on the motorized side and backcountry skiers touring on the south side of the highway can rightfully expect a non-motorized backcountry experience.

Snowmobiles have been present on Turnagain Pass since before the creation of the Chugach National Forest and when Turnagain was included as part of the Chugach the Forest Service recognized that the area had potential for user conflict. As a result, Turnagain has been zoned to separate motorized from non-motorized winter recreation since the mid-1970's. This simple management plan has been effective and there has been very little conflict between snowmobilers and skiers on Turnagain Pass. A prime reason this management strategy has been successful is that it is easily enforceable, with unambiguous boundaries. Another straightforward approach to winter recreation management on the Chugach National Forest is at Resurrection Pass, where motorized use is permitted every other year. This type of black-and-white management strategy is not the solution everywhere, but the Chugach National Forest and other areas have demonstrated success with these plans because they are equitable, cause little confusion, and follow common-sense geographical boundaries.

Turnagain's management plan is continuing to work well but even the best management plans require updating. Given that the plan is several decades old, it may be time for the Forest Service and the public to take a fresh look at Turnagain Pass. When the plan was developed there were far fewer backcountry skiers using the area and the easy-to-access non-motorized zone seemed endless.

With the rapid rise in the number of skiers venturing into the backcountry and the prolific spread of heli-skiing, however, conditions have changed. The Chugach National Forest is currently revising its land management plan and this, along with the upcoming winter travel management planning process, will provide opportunities to re-assess how best to zone the Turnagain backcountry.



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Wood River Valley, Sawtooth National Forest, Idaho *Nordic and Backcountry Skiers Alliance of Idaho*

3

A skilled, neutral, facilitator can help all parties come to an agreement and equal representation by motorized and non-motorized stakeholders ensures a fair and balanced solution.

Skier/snowmobile conflict in the Wood River Valley followed the same predictable pattern seen in backcountry areas across the West. Each year brought more people into the backcountry and those on snowmobiles had increasingly more powerful machines. With the development of high powered powder sleds that were capable of reaching previously inaccessible terrain, snowmobiles began to track up backcountry slopes and marginalize human-powered skiers. One major point of contention was that snowmobilers wanted a groomed trail connecting the Sawtooth valley to Baker Creek, near Sun Valley, through an area called Galena summit. The ski community was completely opposed to this trail because it would bisect the world-class Galena Lodge Nordic ski trails. Although, at the time, the area around Galena Summit was not closed to snowmobiles, snowmobilers generally respected a voluntary closure. However, in the late 1990's controversy over use and access came to a head when a group of snowmobilers rode over Galena Summit, riding on some Nordic ski trails in the process. This led to outrage in the ski community and the Forest Service issued an emergency closure for the area around the Galena Lodge trail system. This only exacerbated the conflict.

By the 1998-1999 season, user conflicts had reached a point of outright hostility and action needed to be taken. The Forest Service and the Blaine County Recreation District organized a small, equally represented, group of skiers and snowmobilers and brought them together to try to work out conflict and address issues as they arose. At this time the Nordic and Backcountry Skier Alliance (a founding member of Winter Wildlands Alliance) organized as well. They began documenting conflicts, writing letters to the editor, and meeting with local, state, and federal elected officials, and the Forest Service, to convince the Forest Service to zone the backcountry into motorized and non-motorized areas.

These efforts generated the political cover that the Forest Service needed to take action. In response to political pressure and the ever-increasing conflict, the Forest Supervisor issued an ultimatum to the winter recreation community: skiers and snowmobilers needed to create a management map they could all agree on within a year or he would come up with a map nobody would like. With the Supervisor's threat to motivate them the Nordic and Backcountry Skier Alliance and the Sawtooth Snowmobile Club came together to form the Winter Recreation Coalition. They hired a professional mediator to facilitate their negotiations and within 9 months the organizations had reached an agreement (the Snow Pact) and created a user map. While not perfect, the Snow Pact divides the Wood River backcountry into motorized and non-motorized zones and mostly separates the two user groups. The Snow Pact was implemented by the Forest Service via a Special Order and has effectively eliminated user conflict in the Wood River Valley.

There were a couple of key moments during the creation of the Snow Pact that pushed the Winter Recreation Coalition towards resolution. By sharing their experiences and quite literally stepping into each other's shoes, the individuals on the Winter Recreation Coalition bonded and came to understand each other's perspectives. By going skiing, or at least watching people ski, the snowmobilers on the Coalition learned more about skiing – how fast skate skiers go down hills, what classic tracks on a groomed trail are for, why people love skiing – and how snowmobiling disproportionality and negatively impacted skiers' experience. Likewise, the skiers learned to appreciate why their snowmobiling counterparts love snowmobiling by riding with them.

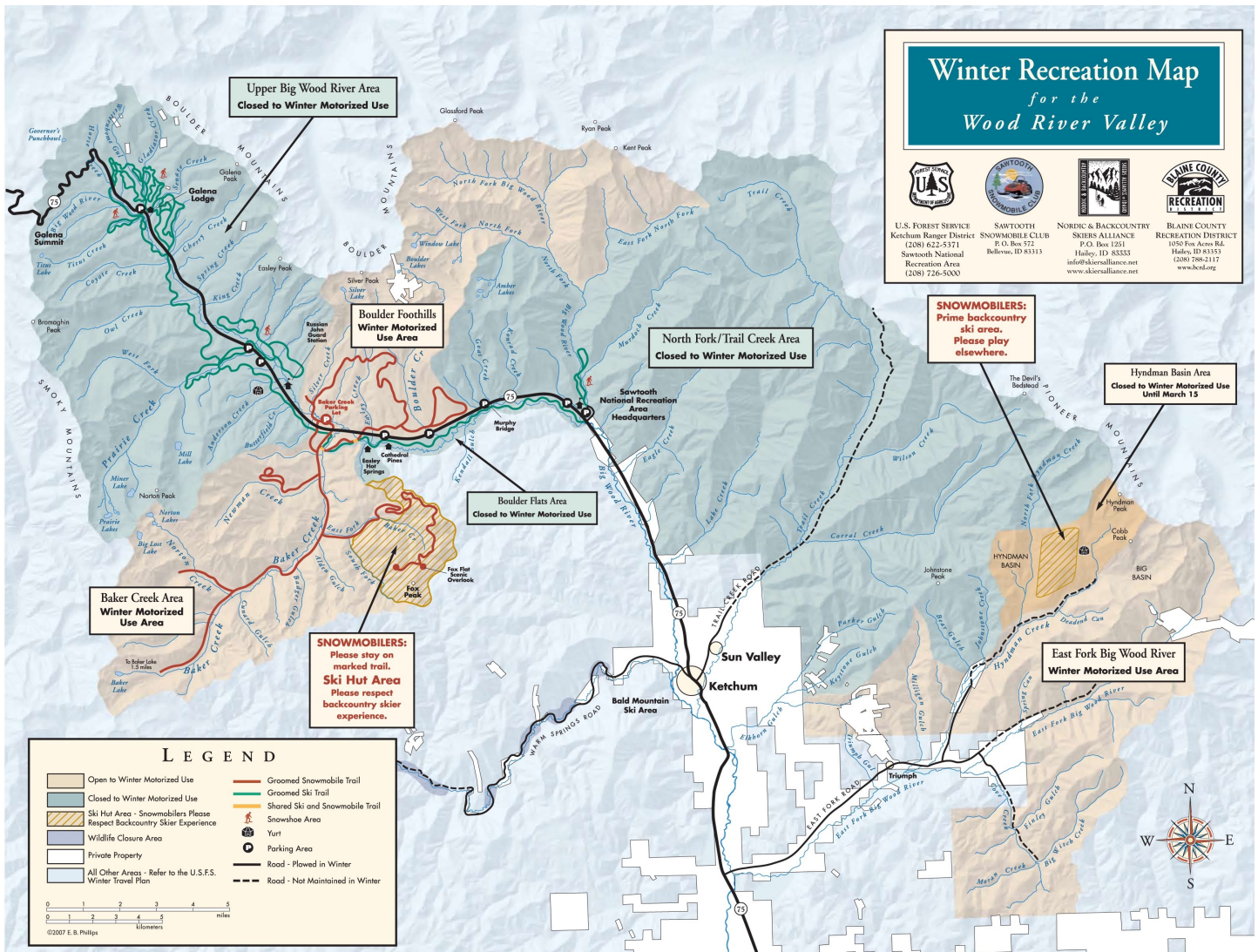
Another, less positive but equally formative, experience was an arson event. During the crux of the Winter Recreation Coalition's negotiations arsonists burned down a privately-owned backcountry ski hut. This event precipitated a lot of anger and mistrust in the community but the Winter Recreation Coalition was able to work through these feelings and accept the challenge presented by the arsonists. Despite clear signs that some people did not want to see the Winter Recreation Coalition succeed, they pushed through and finalized the Snow Pact.

The Snow Pact succeeded for a number of reasons. First and foremost, both sides had an incentive to negotiate – they knew that if they didn't the Forest Service would take unilateral action. Second, the Winter Recreation Coalition hired an excellent professional mediator to facilitate their negotiations. With the help of the facilitator the individuals in the Coalition were able to step into each other's shoes and understand each other's point of view. Hiring this mediator was only possible because all of the parties – the Forest Service, the skiers, and the snowmobilers – were willing to split the cost of hiring him. With the help of the facilitator, the people on the Winter Recreation Coalition were able to come up with a solution that would be best for the community even if it did not benefit their own personal interests. For the snowmobilers this meant

giving up over 200,000 acres and voluntarily abiding by closures. For their part, skiers recognized that snowmobiles would now have access to more than 100 square miles of high-value terrain that, until the advent of more powerful "powder sleds" in the 1990s, had been almost exclusively the domain of backcountry skiers in winter. Another important factor contributing to the success of this travel plan is the social and political makeup of the area. The local communities are very ski-orientated and local government officials were in favor of non-motorized designations. Finally, the members of the Winter Recreation Coalition were willing to commit a significant amount of time to this process and endure the stress and difficulty associated with it. All in all, there could not have been a better setting for an agreement such as the Snow Pact to develop and succeed. However, even with all of the factors that led to the Snow Pact, the process was still incredibly difficult and success was not guaranteed, or even likely.

Not all is perfect in the Wood River Valley, however. The Snow Pact called for a voluntary closure near a backcountry hut but this has not been consistently observed. In addition, while monitoring and possibly revision of the Snow Pact are needed, neither of these have happened.





<http://www.skiersalliance.net/maps/default.html>

Lewis and Clark National Forest, Montana Montana Wilderness Association

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Incentives to negotiate, and compromise in those negotiations, are essential.

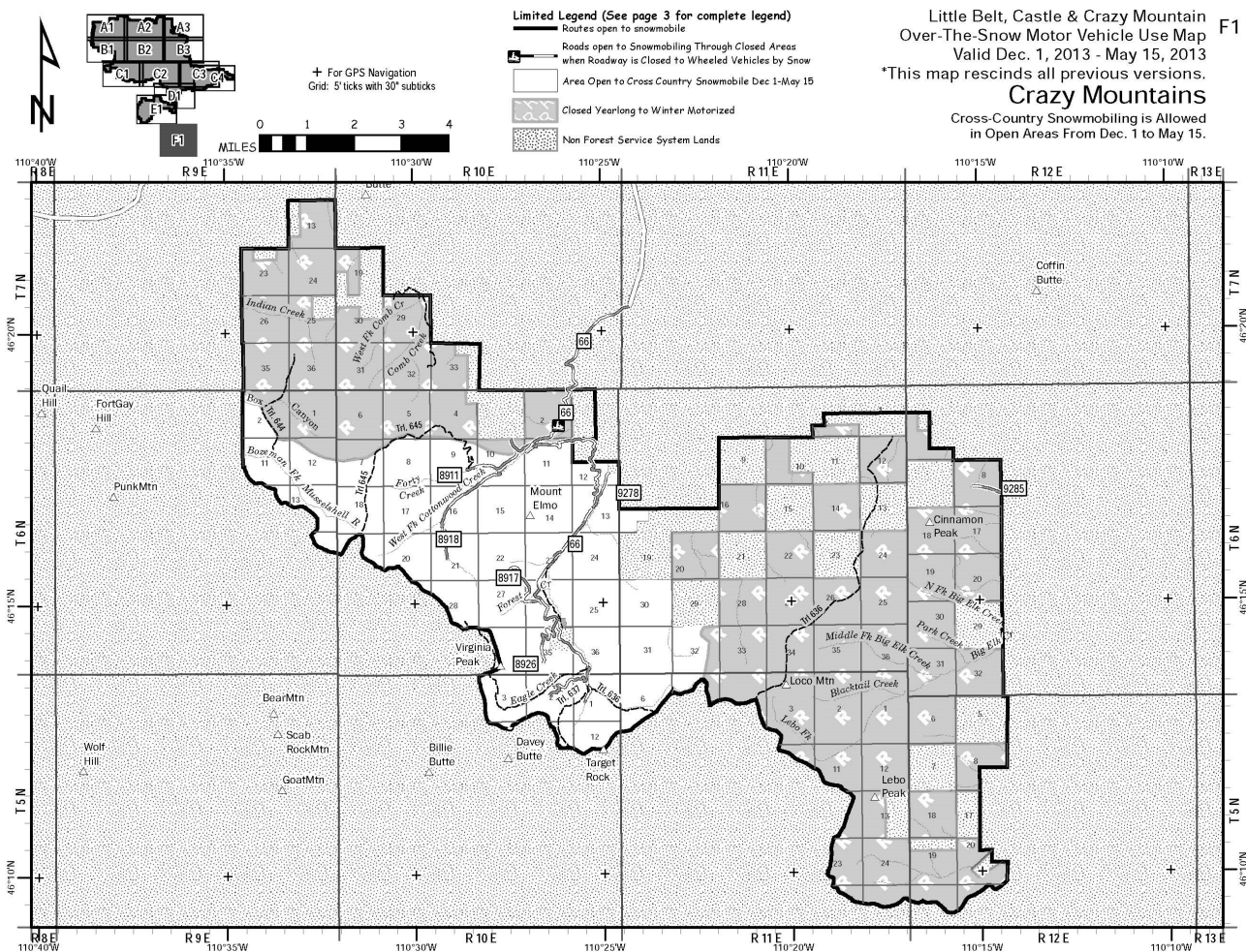
The Lewis and Clark National Forest was one of the first forests to develop a travel plan under the 2005 Rule and it chose to include winter travel management in the process. During this travel planning process the forest created two separate winter travel plans, one for the more primitive Badger-Two Medicine area and another for the more roaded Little Belt, Northern Crazy, and Castle Mountains.

The Lewis and Clark did not develop winter travel plans for the entire Forest as some areas already had established winter travel plans. The 2007 Little Belt/Crazy/Castle Mountains plan allows for a mix of motorized and non-motorized uses. This plan includes a basic map for each mountain range that depict open routes and areas. Under the 2007 travel plan those routes and areas not specified as open to OSVs on

the winter travel maps are closed. Meanwhile, the Badger-Two Medicine plan, completed in 2009, restricts snowmobiles entirely from this section of the Lewis and Clark National Forest.

During the development of these travel plans the Montana Wilderness Association negotiated with the Montana Snowmobile Association. The Montana Wilderness Association wanted to protect the Rocky Mountain Front, other important wildlife habitat, and key non-motorized areas in the Little Belts, Crazies, and Castle Mountains. The Snowmobile Association agreed to these restrictions in exchange for MWA agreeing to not protest motorized use in other areas. However, not all motorized users or organizations felt that they were represented by the Montana Snowmobile Association. These organizations did not agree with the reduction in motorized areas and subsequently sued the Forest Service to overturn the 2007 plan. However, while their challenge was upheld in District Court it was overturned by the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals and the 2007 plan has been implemented in its entirety.

The agreements that led to these travel plans happened because the parties had incentive to negotiate. The Montana Wilderness Association had previously won a lawsuit regarding the Lolo National Forest in which they successfully argued that the Lolo needed to enforce existing Forest Plan restrictions for motorized vehicles. In response to this lawsuit the local snowmobile club negotiated a Forest Plan Amendment with MWA that allowed motorized use in part of the area that would have otherwise been closed under the original Forest Plan. This chain of events demonstrated to the motorized community the benefits of negotiating with MWA and led to the negotiated agreement and travel plans on the Lewis and Clark National Forest.



<http://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/full/lcnf/maps-pubs/?cid=STELPRDB5340761&width=full>



Clearwater National Forest, Idaho

5

The Forest Service has broad management authority, including restricting non-conforming uses in Recommended Wilderness Areas.

The Clearwater National Forest included winter travel planning when they developed a travel plan to comply with the 2005 rule. This plan was completed in 2012 and over-snow vehicle use maps were published in 2014. There are 6 OSV maps to cover the 3 ranger districts on the Clearwater. This travel plan manages OSVs on an area-by-area basis rather than route-by-route as is done in summer travel planning and allows winter cross country travel. While many areas on the Clearwater are open to OSVs most Recommended Wilderness and some other areas are designated non-motorized. In addition, the Clearwater travel plan prohibits OSVs forest-wide during big game hunting season – October 1 through November 15 – to minimize impacts on wildlife. These simplified restrictions were implemented to reduce confusion for forest users. The OSV use maps clearly outline where snowmobiles are and are not allowed, show both motorized and non-motorized trails, and give information about adjoining jurisdictions.

Winter Wildlands Alliance applauded the Clearwater travel plan upon its release, commending the Forest for balancing motorized and non-motorized uses. The most significant piece of this travel plan is the closure of the Great Burn Recommended Wilderness Area to snowmobiles. This decision aligns with the neighboring Lolo National Forest's decision to enforce their 1986 Forest Plan decision to prohibit snowmobiles in the Great Burn (which straddles the two national forests). When the Lolo closed the Great Burn to snowmobiles (after being sued by environmental groups to enforce their existing Forest Plan) motorized groups and nearby communities unsuccessfully challenged the decision. The Clearwater Travel Plan is currently being litigated by motorized interests who want to continue snowmobiling in the Great Burn. The plan is also under litigation by environmental groups who feel it does not restrict motorized use enough.

While the litigation surrounding this plan is not yet resolved, this travel plan sets an example of how Forests can implement winter travel plans that protect the Wilderness character of Recommended Wilderness Areas. When the Clearwater decided to prohibit snowmobiles in the Great Burn Recommended Wilderness it set a precedent for future winter travel planning. This decision aligns with Region One's general approach to manage Recommended Wilderness Areas to protect their Wilderness character and is one of the first examples of putting this directive in place in the winter.

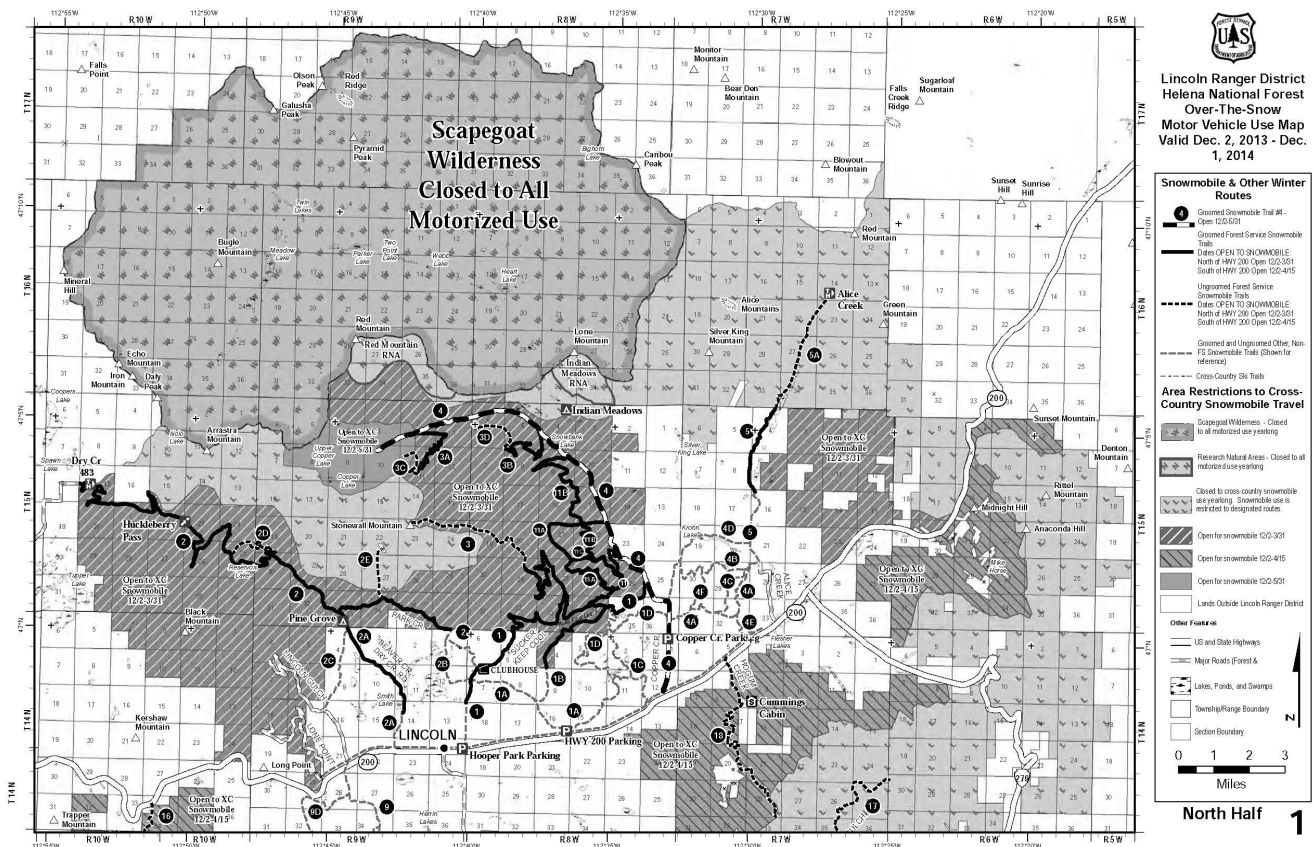
Lincoln Ranger District, Helena National Forest, Montana Montana Wilderness Association

6

When stakeholders come together early to craft their own plan for motorized access land managers listen.

The most recent winter travel plan to be finalized by a National Forest is the Blackfoot-North Divide Winter Travel Plan, implemented by the Lincoln Ranger District on the Helena National Forest in September 2013. Much of the foundation for this travel plan was laid out 9 years earlier during negotiations between the Montana Wilderness Association, a local snowmobile club (Ponderosa Snow Warriors), and the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks. In 2005, after completing their negotiations the parties presented the agreement, which was endorsed by the local County Commissioners, to the Helena National Forest in a highly publicized ceremony. Due to funding and other priorities the official travel planning process took a long time to complete but was eventually finalized in 2013 and not protested by any individuals or groups.

The final travel plan is characterized by a system of motorized and non-motorized areas that are defined by topographic features or boundaries. In addition, certain designated routes through otherwise non-motorized areas are open to snowmobiles. These routes and areas are depicted on an easy to read and freely available map. Simplified travel restrictions outline the dates during which snowmobiles are allowed in specific areas. Because the Lincoln Ranger District is grizzly bear habitat the Travel Plan also sets limits on



<http://www.fs.usda.gov/detailfull/helena/maps-pubs/?cid=STELPRDB5444167&width=full>

Given how frequently National Forest management or travel plans are appealed by at least one group the fact that this plan was not protested speaks volumes about the value of open communication and opposing parties working through their differences outside of the NEPA process. In this case the Montana Wilderness Association was able to get the Snow Warriors to agree to no snowmobile access in roadless areas along the Rocky Mountain Front in exchange for having an area with lower Wilderness values but better for snowmobiling designated as open for snowmobile use. The Forest Service was then willing to include these designations in the Travel Plan because they knew they had widespread public support. The negotiations gave the Forest Service political cover and the courage to designate a large swath of the Rocky Mountain Front as non-motorized.

Tony Grove-Franklin Basin Winter Recreation Area, Uinta-Wasatch-Cache National Forest, Utah *Nordic United*

7

Management plans do not always solve conflict or bring balance to the backcountry.

Not every winter recreation management plan brings balance to the backcountry. The Tony Grove-Franklin Basin Winter Recreation Use area of the Logan Ranger District, located on the Uinta-Wasatch-Cache National Forest is one such example.

In 2003 the Wasatch-Cache (now Uinta-Wasatch-Cache) National Forest finalized a new Forest Management Plan. Nordic United, an organization that represents Nordic and backcountry skiers, was very involved in this Forest Plan revision and worked to create non-motorized winter recreation areas in the easily-accessible backcountry near Logan. This area had been used primarily by skiers for many years until the advent, and increased use, of powerful snowmobiles that could easily access off-trail terrain. During the Forest Planning process tensions between skiers and snowmobilers escalated as Nordic United advocated for the Forest Service to designate non-motorized zones in the Tony Grove-Franklin Basin area of the Bear River Range.

While the planning process was highly contentious, in the end the new plan designated 9,500 acres in the Bear River Range as non-motorized. The remaining 10,500 acres in Tony Grove remained open to snowmobiles. The ski community felt that the final Plan was equitable and presented a reasonable solution to the problem. The motorized community, on the other hand, was upset and felt that they had been unjustly banned from areas they had previously used.

The new Forest Plan was only in place for one year before it was changed because of political interference. Congressman Rob Bishop wrote to the Forest Service asking them to re-evaluate the Tony Grove-Franklin Basin Winter Recreation Use Area. As the 2003 Forest Plan stated that the non-motorized boundaries depicted in the Plan were approximate and that actual boundaries would be established in coordination with the State of Utah and local users, the Forest Service obliged. The Forest Supervisor decided to utilize a “mediation arbitration process” to determine the final boundary lines and both parties (Nordic United and the local snowmobile club) presented their plans to the Forest Service. Through this process, which Nordic

United felt was unfair and disingenuous, the boundaries were re-drawn according to the plan presented by the snowmobile club, and the non-motorized areas were reduced by about 60%.

With the current management plan the number of skiers using Tony Grove-Franklin Basin will almost assuredly continue to be outnumbered by snowmobiles in the future. While overt hostilities have decreased since the Plan was finalized, conflict continues. Some skiers have adapted by becoming hybrid skiers and snowmobile to the Wilderness boundary in order to access terrain that is off-limits to snowmobiles. Others have stopped skiing in the area altogether. The Tony Grove-Franklin Basin Winter Use Area is a particularly disheartening case study because the Forest Service had originally created a Forest Plan that represented a compromise between motorized and non-motorized users. Political interference trumped the planning process.



Togwotee Pass, Shoshone National Forest, Wyoming

8

An example of how travel planning is needed to find balance in the backcountry.

Straddling the Continental Divide and split between the Shoshone and Bridger-Teton National Forests, Wyoming's Togwotee Pass is beloved by winter backcountry enthusiasts and has a history of backcountry skiing that dates back nearly eighty years. At nearly 10,000 feet, Togwotee Pass provides backcountry skiers, cross-country skiers and snowshoers with accessible mountain terrain and reliable powder. The American Avalanche Institute, Central Wyoming College, and National Outdoor Leadership School use the area for instructing backcountry snowsports enthusiasts in avalanche education, winter camping, and backcountry skiing. Togwotee Pass has also been the location of several rope tows and, more recently, a snowcat skiing operation.

For backcountry snowsports enthusiasts traveling from Freemont County, WY, Togwotee Pass is the closest option for backcountry skiing. Unregulated motorized winter recreation has degraded the quality and safety of Togwotee Pass for non-motorized recreation. Historically, steeper roadless slopes, ridges, cirques, couloirs and bowls were places where non-motorized users could naturally separate and recreate without the need of designated non-motorized areas. However, modern snowmobiles can negotiate terrain previously inaccessible to them. These advances in snowmobile technology have eroded the natural separation that previously limited conflict between motorized and non-motorized recreationists.



Togwotee’s backcountry skiers and snowshoers have repeatedly asked the Forest Service to designate quality non-motorized areas where they are not subjected to the noise, pollution, crowding, and associated safety hazards associated with snowmobile use. Each time they have been denied. Most recently the Togwotee Pass Backcountry Alliance and Winter Wildlands Alliance tried to get one small area – 1 square mile – of Togwotee Pass designated for non-motorized winter recreation during the Shoshone National Forest management plan revision. This small area, encompassed by Two Ocean Peak, is one of the few areas accessible to local backcountry skiers on a day trip and has a long history of backcountry ski activity. Designating Two Ocean as non-motorized would have left the vast majority of Togwotee Pass open to snowmobiles. The Forest Service declined to do this, citing that Two Ocean Peak was too small to include in a large-scale planning document like the Forest Plan. Because of the long-standing history of skiing on Togwotee, the documented conflict, and repeated failed attempts to find a solution, Togwotee is a disheartening case study.

Finding balance on Togwotee will continue to be an uphill battle as human-powered proponents must counter a much larger, more vocal, and economically powerful motorized community that has no incentive to negotiate with the backcountry ski community. However, the forthcoming winter travel management rule may present an opportunity for all users of Togwotee’s backcountry community to find a resolution to this ever-growing conflict. Travel management is exactly the sort of fine-scale planning that the Forest Service claimed Togwotee falls under when they declined to address this issue during the Forest Plan revision. In addition, the Executive Order that the travel management rule must comply with specifically states that the designation of motorized trails and areas will be based upon the promotion of safety of *all* users on [public] lands and minimization of conflicts among the various uses of those lands. Togwotee Pass is a classic case of where backcountry zoning to strike a balance among uses is needed, and winter travel planning is an opportunity to do just that.

9

Demonstrating why incentives matter in negotiations

Finding balance in the Sierra Nevada backcountry has been a frustrating and unsuccessful challenge. One example of where backcountry and cross-country skiers tried and failed to carve out a non-motorized zone is the Iron Mountain area on the Eldorado National Forest.

Historically, funding for snowmobile trail grooming in California was through a grants program within the California Department of Parks and Recreation Off-Highway Motor Vehicle Recreation Division with approval of the OHMVR Commission. This funding was a small part of the total grants process with the vast majority being for wheeled vehicle recreation. However, the establishment of groomed snowmobile trails never went through any sort of environmental review process despite the fact that the grantees received public funds. The Nordic Voice, predecessor to Snowlands Network, lobbied the OHMVR Commission for changes to the State's OSV status quo that allowed funding to continue without public review and fair consideration of the needs of other forest users. They argued that new snowmobile trail grooming displaced non-motorized visitors from places that they had enjoyed in the past.

One of the areas where snowmobile trail grooming caused conflict with backcountry skiers was near Iron Mountain, along Highway 88 on Eldorado National Forest. This area is a historic backcountry ski area but this historic use was not considered when the 55 mile long Silver Bear Snowmobile Trail was developed. When the state of California agreed pay to groom much of the trail system there was little or no consideration by the State or Forest Service of the impact nor the setting aside of a non-motorized area. In addition, snowmobiles are not required to stay on trails, and do not, further reducing available ski terrain. Once the trail system was developed motorized use grew and has made the area undesirable for non-motorized winter recreation.

In early 2000 the political winds shifted and changed the makeup of the OHMVR Commission. The new majority chose not to fund grooming the Silver Bear Snowmobile Trail system. This decision spurred the snowmobile community to negotiate with the ski community in hopes of getting trail grooming funds restored. Over the course of a year a plan was developed whereby two small areas would be designated non-motorized in winter while the Silver Bear Snowmobile Trail system would be expanded into an adjacent area – Baltic Ridge. The proposed non-motorized areas did not conflict with the Silver Bear Snowmobile Trail and contained good backcountry ski terrain. On the other hand, the Baltic Ridge area is too far away for the average skier to visit in a day and contained an extensive network of roads that could form an extension of the Silver Bear Snowmobile Trail.

In February 2005 the involved parties, including the Forest Service and the OHMVR Division, attended an on-the-snow event and the plan seemed to be close to finalization. However, shortly thereafter the OHMVR Division changed funding for snowmobile trail grooming from a grant process to internal funding. While the grant process is subject to approval of the Commission, internal funding is not. Once snowmobile trail grooming was no longer subject to review, the snowmobile community had no incentive to work with backcountry skiers and all negotiations stopped. In the end the ski community did not get any designated non-motorized areas around Iron Mountain and snowmobile use continues to grow. This case study demonstrates the importance of there being an outside force providing incentive for both parties to negotiate. In this example the snowmobile community had no reason to work with non-motorized forest users once funding for grooming was no longer serving as an incentive.



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Lessons Learned

These case studies reveal a number of lessons learned that will be valuable in future winter travel management planning efforts. Successful plans – such as the Wood River Valley Snow Pact and the Vail Pass Winter Recreation Area – are negotiated by a small group of committed individuals who are driven by mutual incentives, and are able to get to a point where they recognize and understand values that are different from their own. Often, to get to that point, these negotiations require a professional facilitator to mediate between opposing sides weighed down with a history of anger, frustration, and conflict.



Finally, these negotiations take time. It took 12 years, with 3-4 meetings per year, from when the Vail Pass task force began its work until the travel plan was implemented. By comparison, the Wood River Valley's Winter Committee was much faster, at less than a year, but with much more frequent meetings.

There are lessons to be learned from failed efforts as well. Cases such as Togwotee Pass, Iron Mountain, and Tony Grove demonstrate the importance of all sides having an incentive to negotiate. In these cases if the incentive to negotiate evaporates then the dominant party, the one with the most to lose, generally walks away from the table. Likewise, if there is no incentive the dominant party may never come to the table at all – as the case on Togwotee Pass shows. Finally, the Tony Grove case study illustrates how political interference can completely overturn a negotiation, even after a plan appears finalized.

Negotiating a plan is an important step but meaningless without successful implementation and enforcement of the plan. In the case studies above the successful plans shared a number of characteristics that make them sustainable, and most importantly, enforceable. These include:

- Clear boundaries using topographic or geographic features
- Simple maps accompanied by simple restrictions
- Large contiguous non-motorized areas that are close to trailheads

While seasonal closures are often utilized, and can be important, they can be difficult to enforce. Likewise, voluntary agreements generally do not work. If a group decides to take this path, they should make sure it is backstopped by monitoring and a commitment to revise the agreement if needed.

Most importantly, creating successful winter travel management plans requires all parties to view each other as people, not anonymous user groups, with legitimate values and opinions. Even if you are absolutely convinced that you are right about a particular issue the other parties at the table deserve your respect and attention. No one group deserves exclusive access to our public lands, but as Winter Wildlands Alliance has emphasized before, not all uses are appropriate in all places. Finding balance in the backcountry takes effort, patience, and understanding but it is worth it.



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