

# *Snowmobiling...*

## PLANNING FOR MULTIPLE USE WINTER RECREATION

### MYTH:

*Snowmobiling creates conflicts, so it is best managed by reducing or eliminating snowmobile access on public lands.*

### FACTS:

Public land managers are sometimes reluctant to expand or even continue snowmobiling access due to concerns about 'conflicts' between winter recreationists. However oftentimes these situations can be addressed with better multiple-use management rather than by closing areas to snowmobiling.

Since trailheads and parking areas are where

conflicts between snowmobilers and nonmotorized winter recreationists most typically begin – if they are going to occur – addressing conflicts at their origin is the single best management tool for land managers and recreationists to consider.

Parking is truly the 'root stressor' for winter recreation. While a nonmotorized family of four can easily park their vehicle in about 20 feet or less, a motorized family of four needs close to 60 feet of room to park their 4-place trailer and

tow vehicle. Plus they need extra room for loading and unloading their snowmobiles, as well as room to pull in and out with their extended length vehicle. And some snowmobilers travel with even longer trailers – for six or more snowmobiles – which increases their needs for adequate parking and maneuverability even more.

The result is that, if parking is not designed and managed well, winter recreationists (motorized and nonmotorized alike) can begin to become

stressed the minute they turn into poor parking areas. And their stress and 'conflict' can build from that point on, for the remainder of their outing, due to their initial hassle getting parked.

Winter 'conflicts' oftentimes are really just a need for 'more and better winter parking,' which typically requires project-specific NEPA analysis to address. This type of conflict can also sometimes be addressed by simply separating uses for only a short distance out of trailhead areas.



Photo by Kim Rasp



# Planning for Multiple Use Winter Recreation

## Excerpts from Facts and Myths About Snowmobiling and Winter Trails (2014)

THE FOLLOWING PLANNING PRINCIPLES CAN BE INSTRUMENTAL TOWARD ADDRESSING WINTER CONFLICT ISSUES WHERE THEY MOST OFTEN ORIGINATE – IN THE PARKING AREAS:

- ❖ When space allows, it can be beneficial to provide separate parking areas for motorized and nonmotorized recreationists to eliminate interaction between the groups while loading and unloading. When this is done, good on-the-ground signing is critically important to help guide recreationists to the staging area appropriate for their recreation choice. If possible, egress and ingress routes should also have some degree of separation between user groups to minimize interaction versus immediately placing them together in the same areas or onto the same trail routes.
- ❖ If available space does not allow for separate parking areas, staging areas should be zoned for nonmotorized and motorized parking areas. Again, good on-the-ground signing is critical to help guide recreationists to their designated parking zones.
- ❖ When designing and/or zoning winter parking and staging areas, it is critical to remember that the space required for maneuvering, parking, and unloading vehicles with trailers is significantly more than the space required by most nonmotorized users – so parking zones should be arranged and allocated accordingly.
- ❖ If possible, have motorized and nonmotorized egress/ingress routes depart from separate sections of parking areas, correlating to the separate parking zones. If topography or ultimate destinations for both groups make it necessary to depart staging areas from the same location, still designate separate motorized and nonmotorized routes and delineate them with on-the-ground snow poles and signing – and enforce it.
- ❖ If feasible, it is often advantageous to route nonmotorized users along or slightly into the tree line (if adjacent to open areas), while simultaneously routing snowmobile traffic either along the opposite side of openings or through the middle of open areas. If access routes must be located entirely within woods, consider cutting two trail routes with a degree of separation between them if possible.
- ❖ When designing or zoning staging areas for snowmobilers, it is important to recognize the need for snowmobile 'warm-up' areas close to parking areas. Oftentimes, older snowmobiles that have been hauled any distance on trailers tend to have their carburetors 'load-up' (flood), which requires that the machines be run a bit to clear their engines. While newer sleds with fuel injection have fewer problems with this, cold weather conditions can still create needs to warm up all snowmobiles. It is therefore important to have either open areas or extra trail space adjacent to parking areas so snowmobiles can be properly 'warmed up' prior to groups departing.

*Did you know...*

Poor parking is the root stressor for winter recreation.







NOHVCC photo

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This can cause difficulties and confusion if travel planning is conducted simultaneously due to substantively different impacts. Therefore

summer and winter travel planning is generally the most successful when conducted separately since snow is a temporary medium and winter tracks over snow disappear from the landscape.

While trails are important to get from one place to another, they are not the only focus of snowmobiling activities in many areas of the country; consequently both on- and off-trail opportunities are very important. This is distinctly different from summer motorized travel planning.

### CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING WHEN CONDUCTING WINTER TRAVEL PLANNING

Motorized winter recreation generally encompasses large areas and its participants are often quite mobile. By comparison most nonmotorized over-snow recreation takes place within 3 to 5 miles of trailheads. An exception is that a growing number of nonmotorized recreationists are using snowmobiles to access distant areas for backcountry skiing or snowboarding.

Modification of current winter travel management plans should be undertaken only when changing resource issues clearly indicate that adjustments are needed. Any modifications should consider both motorized and nonmotorized activities, examining how adequately existing plans are meeting public needs. Existing closures should be re-evaluated to see if

they are still serving the public interests and are still needed, and whether the mix of uses should be modified in view of changing demands and/or resource issues.

It is also important to assure a level playing field for both motorized and nonmotorized activities when approaching winter recreation management. If wildlife issues are driving area closures, it is likely that all forms of winter recreation may need to be excluded. While animals can be stressed by all human activities, they are often more likely to be stressed by nonmotorized recreationists since their 'more quiet' approach can resemble predator behaviors and ultimately elicit threat responses from animals.

The issue of managing 'conflict' must work both ways since – if those asserting conflict are regularly rewarded at the expense of other users – their incentive to continually push conflict as an issue becomes

### MYTH:

*Summer and winter travel planning is very similar and is best conducted simultaneously to address conflicts.*

### FACTS:

It is important to recognize there are significant differences between summer and winter motorized activities.



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more appealing and can essentially become an unending enterprise. All too often these types of conflicts are inappropriately elevated to decision-determining levels when the issues are actually very minor or isolated. When considering allocating exclusive use for one group or another, all uses should stand equal chances to be excluded. For example, if skiers insist that snowmobiling is incompatible with their desires, they should in turn be excluded from areas open to snowmobiling; otherwise the unending conflict enterprise continues to repeat itself.

Past winter travel management has largely allowed nonmotorized users to have their exclusive areas, plus free and unfettered access to all snowmobile areas – so the question has typically been ‘how much more area should the motorized

community give up’. This simply is not a satisfactory approach to winter travel planning; rather all users should have something to win or lose to help reach more effective and equitable compromises.

### IMPORTANT PRINCIPLES FOR WINTER TRAVEL PLANNING:

- ❖ Evaluate the unit’s entire land base – including areas currently closed to specific uses – to determine which areas are currently suitable or unsuitable for various winter recreation activities. While Congressionally-designated Wilderness is not available for motorized recreation, it is exclusively available for nonmotorized recreation and should be considered as such in determining the mix of uses. When performing this evaluation,

consider new information, new science, and

changes resulting from natural forces such as wildfires, diseases or other factors which may have changed the landscape.

- ❖ Determine – with the assistance of various user publics: where do people recreate on the public lands unit, and where would they go if given the opportunity to do so; what are the primary access locations and trails; where are the current loop opportunities, and where can new ones be developed; where are the play areas; what parking and trailheads are currently available, and what new ones

are needed; and what attributes of the winter experience are truly important to the different user groups.

- ❖ Evaluate the amount of use taking place currently by various user groups and examine likely trends in future demands for each.
- ❖ Use collaborative efforts between agencies and all user groups with a stake in the outcome early in the planning process. This collaboration should be used to help develop formal alternatives or proposals which the agency can duly consider during its planning analysis.



SNRA photo



Photo by Brad Hamilton

## *Did you know...*

A growing number of nonmotorized recreationists are using snowmobiles to access distant areas for backcountry skiing or snowboarding.



# *Snowmobiling...*

## PLANNING FOR MULTIPLE USE WINTER RECREATION

- ❖ Fully evaluate potential economic impacts of various proposals on surrounding counties, communities, and the region.

- ❖ Use adaptive management to ensure decisions can be adjusted in the future in response to changing conditions, such as new science, new trends, or large fires that modify native vegetation and wildlife habitats.

- ❖ Consider both direct and indirect management actions to help manage winter visitor use. This may include actions such as: trail grooming, trailhead snow removal, developing or expanding existing parking areas, providing loop opportunities, establishing access routes from

communities, construction of warming huts, and/or placement of restroom facilities.

- ❖ Consider how improvements are to be funded and maintained. Snowmobiling largely pays its own way via gas taxes and registrations or trail use fees. Evaluate how other winter users can also help pay their way for facilities they share with motorized users or for services such as ski trail grooming that may have historically been provided solely by agency funds.

- ❖ All restricted areas should be evaluated periodically to ensure clear justification

remains for the restriction. Closure areas should be manageable, enforceable, and easily recognized on the ground.

- ❖ Designated linear travel routes, through restricted areas that provide access to open use areas beyond the restriction, should be considered and accommodated whenever possible.

- ❖ The final step in travel planning should be development of detailed yet user-friendly maps that clearly identify boundaries of areas appropriate for over-snow vehicle travel,

along with areas designated for only nonmotorized uses.

- ❖ Once travel planning is completed, agencies should continue to work closely with user groups to ensure implementation of the management plan is working as intended. They can provide valuable assistance with plan implementation, including the maintenance and construction of facilities, trails, parking lots, and signage, along with providing education/enforcement, maps and informational brochures.



Photo by Kim Raap

# Planning for Multiple Use Winter Recreation

## Excerpts from Facts and Myths About Snowmobiling and Winter Trails (2014)

### MYTH:

*There should be substantially more miles of groomed trails allocated for cross-country skiing since it is a more popular winter activity.*

### FACTS:

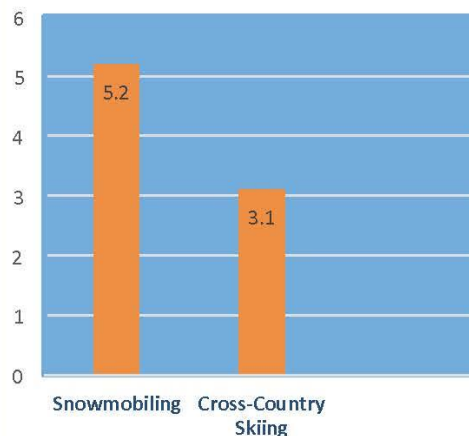
The USDA Forest Service National Visitor Use Monitoring (NVUM) program provides the best available information regarding the relative popularity and participation levels for snowmobiling and cross-country skiing. This long-term monitoring shows that overall participation levels are actually quite similar and continually fluctuate due to varying snow conditions across the country.

NVUM monitoring shows that snowmobilers spend

an average of 4.8 to 5.2 hours per recreation visit engaged in snowmobiling, while cross-country skiers spend an average of only 2.6 to 3.1 hours skiing per visit. Consequently, even though the popularity of the two activities may be similar, their needs for space are actually quite different. Since snowmobilers spend 40% to 45% more time on the snow during an outing, it is important to recognize when planning for winter trails and overall winter access that snowmobilers travel much further and subsequently require significantly more miles of trail for their day trips than what nonmotorized recreationists do.

Numerous state studies have shown that snowmobilers typically ride 60 to 120 miles per day in the West, and up to 100 to 200 miles per day in the rest of the country. In comparison research has shown cross-country skiers typically travel no more than a 3- to 5-mile

Average Hours Spent per trip



radius from where they park, resulting in no more than five to ten miles being traveled during an entire outing.

It is important to recognize there is a much greater actual need for snowmobile trail grooming than there is for ski trail grooming. Since snowmobile traffic has a tendency to create heavy moguls on trails, it requires much more frequent trail grooming to help keep them smooth and safe. Conversely cross-country skiing doesn't create this same heavy moguling effect.

The other extremely important factor to recognize is that a large number of cross-country skiers and snowshoers actually do not desire (or require) groomed trails for their outings. Since the purpose of snowshoes in particular is to provide flotation for travel across the top of uncompacted snow, having groomed trails is often deemed to be undesirable.



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Photo by Kim Raap

### MYTH:

*The designation 'multi-use' is a misnomer and is rather de facto 'single use motorized' because the opportunity for human-powered recreation experiences are often lost on lands designated as multi-use since those lands are often dominated by motorized use.*

### FACTS:

Concerns about multi-use and single-use can cut

both ways. Snowmobilers usually pay 100% of the cost to groom their trails and then allow them to be used for other 'multi-uses' like cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, dog sledding or winter biking. So if it were not for the generosity of snowmobilers allowing the multiple-use of trails they fund, there would often be no groomed trail opportunities for nonmotorized recreationists.

On the other hand, as nonmotorized trail users continually try to whittle away at snowmobiling access with more closures to motorized uses, a growing number of snowmobilers are starting to advocate for single-use (snowmobiles-only)

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on groomed snowmobile trails. So a prime issue for continued multi-use is self-generated funding – or the lack thereof in respect to nonmotorized.

The reality is that closures to snowmobiling which extend farther than a 3- to 5-mile radius from plowed access areas – and are in non-Wilderness settings – are for all intents and purposes unnecessarily closed to all uses since they are too remote to be accessed by most cross-country skiers and snowshoers. The focus for nonmotorized use areas should therefore be within zones that are close to parking areas. Beyond those zones multiple use – or even 'domination' by snowmobiles – should be acceptable since no one else (or very few) will likely be there.

### MYTH:

*Substantially large areas should be closed to snowmobiles to create more areas for nonmotorized winter recreationists in every national forest.*

### FACTS:

Those pushing this agenda are inappropriately twisting the truth and applying global statistics to issues that are best considered at local landscape levels. While there are always localized situations where motorized and nonmotorized recreationists can benefit from working better together to resolve concerns, the situation on



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national forest lands is not as bleak or as one-sided as is often portrayed.

There are no credible reasons to support wholesale and widespread additional closures to snowmobiles on national forest lands; it simply is not justified or needed since land management plans have already zoned areas as 'open' or 'closed' to motorized recreation. Rather solutions should start by addressing conflict issues with plowed winter parking and dispersal of uses from trailheads. Poor parking is truly the root of most all 'real' versus 'contrived' conflicts and should receive the highest attention during winter planning processes.

In some cases access and uses may be able to be separated, but it will more likely need to continue being shared. There is no disagreement that nonmotorized users need areas designated for them close to parking. However 'cherry stem' routes may also need to be provided to move snowmobilers through and beyond nonmotorized zones – so that de facto 'no-use zones' are not unnecessarily created.

A growing number of skiers and snowboarders are also using snowmobiles to access backcountry areas. These hybrid users represent multiple use principles at their best and are one more reason why large blocks of forests should not be closed off to motorized access. The bottom line is that public lands are simply best managed for multiple uses.

### MYTH:

*There is disparity in the total miles of groomed trails provided on Forest Service lands, particularly in the West where some complain there are over 18,000 miles of groomed snowmobile trails and only 1,700 miles of groomed 'nonmotorized-use-only' trails.*

### FACTS:

First and foremost, there are over 18,000 miles of groomed snowmobile

trails on national forests in the West – and 135,000 miles of snowmobile trails nationwide – only because snowmobilers have chosen to tax themselves through state snowmobile registrations, user fees, and gasoline taxes they pay to fund the grooming of these trails. And nearly all of these 18,000 miles of groomed trails in the West (and the vast majority of the 135,000 miles across the country, depending upon landowner permission) are open to all winter nonmotorized recreation uses.

In no instance is the Forest Service unilaterally paying for the grooming of snowmobile trails with Forest Service funds. In contrast, the grooming that occurs on the majority of the 1,700 miles of nonmotorized trails on these forests is

either funded directly by the Forest Service or is subsidized with state Recreational Trails Program (RTP) grant funds – which are derived from the federal fuel tax paid on fuel used in snowmobiles, ATVs, off-road motorcycles and light duty trucks used off-road; all RTP funds are from motorized users. If there is an inequity it is that nonmotorized winter recreationists need to bring their own funding to the table, as the snowmobilers have done, if they want more miles of groomed trails.

Second, a large percentage of cross-country skiers and snowshoers do not desire nor require groomed trails for their backcountry recreational experience. Thus the alleged disparity is misconstrued and overstated.

Photo by John Vogel





# *Snowmobiling...*

## PLANNING FOR MULTIPLE USE WINTER RECREATION



ISMA photo

Third, snowmobilers require significantly more miles of trail for typical day outings than what nonmotorized recreationists do. Numerous research studies have found that the average distance traveled by snowmobilers in a day ranges from 60 to 120 miles in the West, and is around 100 to 200 miles per day in the Midwest or New England. In comparison, cross-country skiers and snowshoers generally state they are hard pressed to cover more than five to ten miles on ungroomed snow in a day's time. Additionally,

national forest planners commonly use a '3-mile radius (6-mile round trip) from a trailhead' as the distance traveled 'by the average skier or snowshoer' during a typical day trip.

Thus snowmobilers require 6 to 24 times more miles of trail and open riding area than what cross-country skiers and snowshoers do for an 'average' daily outing. Therefore, this 10 to 1 ratio is not an inequality but rather what is needed to provide a reasonable range of opportunities for snowmobiling.

**MYTH:**  
*70% (81 million acres) of USDA Forest Service lands in the western continental U.S. are open to snowmobiles.*

**FACTS:**  
While up to 81 million acres of forest lands may technically be 'open to snowmobiles,' a significant amount of these acres often do not either have enough snow cover to support snowmobile use, or are too heavily timbered or too steep to be accessible by snowmobiles.

Therefore these lands, while technically 'open,' are often classified as 'unsuitable' or 'not practical' for snowmobiling in agency land use planning processes.

While the exact number of total 'unsuitable' or 'not practical' acres on national forests is unknown, it is a substantive portion which generally exceeds at least 25 to 50 percent of individual forest lands. At least 10 percent (over 8 million acres) of western forest lands are located on the fringe of the Snowbelt and host zero miles of snowmobile trails.

Some forests have determined through travel planning processes that their total 'suitable'



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snowmobiling acres are really quite minimal. For example, the White River National Forest in Colorado – a heavy snow area extremely popular for all winter sports – determined only 7.3% of its lands (168,000 acres out of a total of 2.3 million acres) were ‘practical’ for snowmobiling due to a combination of heavily forested areas and extremely steep topography (WRNF Travel Management Plan and Draft EIS, 2006). This scenario is common across the West.

**MYTH:**  
*Only 30% (35 million acres) of USDA Forest Service lands in the western continental U.S. are managed as ‘nonmotorized’ recreation areas.*

**FACTS:**  
Nearly 100% of National Forest lands are managed as open to all nonmotorized winter recreation uses. The only exceptions are small areas where crucial wildlife winter range or other sensitive habitats have been closed to all human

presence. Otherwise nonmotorized recreation can – and does – occur everywhere.

**MYTH:**  
*More areas should be closed to motorized uses since about two-thirds of the ‘35 million acres’ managed as nonmotorized recreation areas in the West lie within designated Wilderness areas – so they shouldn’t really count since they are often inaccessible to skiers and snowshoers*

*given long distances from plowed roads and trailheads to reach many of them.*

**FACTS:**  
Just because some Wilderness areas may not be easily accessible due to their remoteness does not warrant advocating for more areas to be closed to snowmobiling. Motorized access has already been removed from Wilderness areas. Therefore nonmotorized recreationists should work with land managers to make better use of lands they already have exclusive use of – versus being quick to say ‘we can’t access them easily so we want other (closer) areas set aside for us.’

To a large degree, all lands greater than a three-mile radius from plowed parking areas are equally ‘inaccessible’ to nonmotorized uses irrespective as to whether they are within designated Wilderness areas or not – since they would be too far for the average person to access under human-power.

This position should be resisted since it is a pretense to push principle-based set-asides (which realistically would be used by none or very few) versus set-asides that are logical and practical for nonmotorized recreational access, i.e. within three miles of a trailhead.

Photo by Kim Rasp





# Planning for Multiple Use Winter Recreation

## Excerpts from Facts and Myths About Snowmobiling and Winter Trails (2014)

# Snowmobiling...

## SOCIAL CONFLICTS

to diminish snowmobilers' freedom of choice across public lands. In particular the quiet-use movement has forced snowmobilers out of open terrain like meadows and creek bottoms and into less safe and more avalanche-prone riding areas. While steep areas are attractive to some snowmobilers, the result of losing open terrain close to roads and parking areas is that family-friendly snowmobiling terrain continues to erode away – which is not an acceptable or desired condition. More emphasis must be placed on ensuring snowmobiling areas are available close to parking areas for families and novice riders.

Divvying up public lands often unnecessarily and inappropriately pits user groups against one another – and doesn't solve the root issue of growing intolerance within our society. Instead, more emphasis should be placed on requiring all user groups to 'play together in the sandbox.'

Increased 'demand' doesn't always correlate to not having an 'adequate supply' of nonmotorized quiet-use areas. All too often this position is pushed as a social/moral change agenda versus being based upon factual on-the-ground needs. Any thoughts of eliminating multiple use should first ensure nonmotorized users are fully utilizing existing 'exclusive use' nonmotorized areas since they can already travel everywhere motorized recreationists are allowed if they so choose.

Unfortunately even though they essentially already 'have it all,' groups continue trying to close more areas to snowmobiling while pushing their narrow agendas. Consequently a local 'needs assessment' (and not a 'wants assessment') should be conducted in targeted areas before considering any reallocation of lands for winter recreational uses.

Photo by Kim Raap

### MYTH:

*Conflicts require that multiple use management practices be abandoned.*

### FACTS:

It is important to recognize that 'user conflicts' are really 'social conflicts' based upon the collision of different ideals and expectations – with the degree of conflict ultimately influenced by varying degrees of intolerance for those

who choose differently. Public land managers are not the 'social police' since their missions are primarily grounded upon multiple use management principles. Consequently resolution of social intolerance is an issue outside agency missions. Public lands management should instead focus upon reasonable sharing versus yielding to society's growing intolerance for those who think, act, or recreate differently.

While every acre is certainly not suitable for every use, abundant Wilderness and a growing push for more segregated nonmotorized 'quiet-use' areas continues



# Planning for Multiple Use Winter Recreation

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### MYTH:

*Separating uses is always the best way to manage winter recreation on public lands.*

### FACTS:

Separating uses (segregation) is a poor option for managing public lands. It is an extremely polarizing premise that often leads to long-term ill-will and decreased support for agencies. Consequently land managers should be cautious about embracing it as a suitable or sustainable management principle.

Segregation has proven to be poor public policy for this country in many respects. A synonym for the word 'segregation' is discrimination. Therefore it is unlikely that 'segregating recreational users' based upon motorized and nonmotorized uses – as is often purported to be a 'fix' for public lands conflicts – will be deemed any more appropriate or successful when evaluated over the long-term.

It is interesting that federal agencies preface land use planning documents with a statement like what is used by the Forest Service

"The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) prohibits discrimination in all its programs and activities on the basis of race, color, national origin, age, disability, and, where applicable, sex, marital status, familial status, parental status, religion, sexual orientation, genetic information, political beliefs, reprisal, or because all or part of an individual's income is derived from any public assistance program."

Recreation conflict – which is really social conflict – is often addressed at length in these land use plans. Since many social conflicts are in reality connected to differences in political beliefs, age, sex, religion, and/or race – and persons with disabilities and the elderly are more dependent upon motorized vehicles for their recreational outings than younger or more able-bodied persons – it would seem that 'segregating' recreational users based upon their class of use would be a violation of this anti-discrimination standard that prefaces all planning.

### MYTH:

*Pristine untracked terrain for skiers and snowshoers is rapidly disappearing under the tracks of snowmobiles.*

### FACTS:

Reality is that untracked terrain is important to motorized and nonmotorized winter recreationists alike – so education directed at both groups as to how to 'share the powder' is likely to gain more ground than enacting large closures to snowmobiling under the pretense of 'saving powder.'

Complaints that 'snowmobilers traveling freely are tracking up the landscape' are illogical since the vast majority of

skiers and snowshoers never get beyond a '3- to 5-mile radius' from where they park their car – so what difference does it really make if lands beyond that zone are tracked up or not? Efforts to provide untracked terrain for skiers are important but should be focused only close to their access areas. At the same time experience shows these set-asides don't really solve all conflicts because it often just shifts rifts to being within like user groups (skiers complaining about skiers).

For nonmotorized and motorized recreationists alike the question really becomes 'who gets to track up the terrain first?' The answer is that this is not an agency's issue to solve – it's rather a case of 'the early bird gets the worm' (powder) – and everyone else gets the leftovers until the cycle repeats itself after the next snowfall.



Photo by Ken Rapp