

We give the MS+L bully pulpit to:
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Cold snow squeaks underfoot as I follow my seven-year-old son, Asa, up a narrow ski trail in central Idaho's spectacular backcountry. My wife, Dana, and five-year-old daughter, Etta, are not far behind us. Three other families string out along the trail sharing in this winter adventure. Asa skis on a hand-me-down telemark setup. But he insisted on bringing his alpine skis too—they'll work better on the jump he wants to build. As he crests a low ridge in lightly falling snow, alpine skis strapped to his backpack mountaineering style, I picture my son as a grown man setting off for adventure. I can only hope there will be undisturbed places like this.

The very trail we're on, and the backcountry yurt it leads to, represent the winter world I want my children to inherit. A decade ago Idaho's Wood River Valley, home to Sun Valley Resort and a vast array of backcountry terrain, was literally ablaze with strife between snowmobilers and skiers. The Boulder Yurt, our destination this morning and our base for the next three days, became both an icon and a casualty of the conflict when it was destroyed by arson in April, 2000.

Today, thanks to the Wood River Winter Recreation Plan, an agreement created by a coalition of skiers, snowmobilers, community leaders and Forest Service officials, the rebuilt Boulder Yurt represents the epitome of winter solace—pristine snowfields and the silence of deep winter. Meanwhile, just down the valley more than 100 square miles of prime snowmobiling terrain is designated for motorized use. The plan, which is built around separating users, works because there are large, accessible areas set aside for both skiers and snowmobilers.

This successful template was the genesis for Winter Wildlands Alliance, the national conservation group I work for. Our organization works to protect winter ecosystems and to ensure balance between motorized and non-motorized use on our public lands. We're making progress, but I'll admit that success stories like Wood River Valley are hard to come by. On far too many of our National Forest lands the current winter management, or lack thereof, results in those with the biggest, loudest, most powerful toys getting their run of the place and the rest of us being pushed aside. The result is ongoing conflict. If you backcountry ski in places like Colorado's Rabbit Ears Pass, Utah's Franklin Basin, Montana's Mount Jefferson, Wyoming's Togwotee Pass, or Oregon's Tumalo Mountain, you know exactly what I mean.

The conflict didn't begin in earnest until the 1990s when new snowmobile technology and the introduction of powerful "powder sleds" enabled snowmobiles to access the highest and steepest mountain terrain. The newfound popularity of off-trail snowmobiling means that skiers, instead of finding untracked snow and winter solitude as reward for a long uphill ski, are often greeted by deep ruts, blue smoke, and engine whine.

But this is about more than untracked powder. Responsible for my own survival out in that big, cold, all-encompassing silence, being alive somehow seems more real. Then there's the sensation of dropping into a steep chute where at each turn the surrounding snow moves with you; letting go of conscious thought and simply allowing the practiced movements and muscle memory to take over. It feels downright spiritual.

The backcountry is big enough for skiers and snowmobilers if we focus on solutions rather than conflict. I've logged enough miles on a snowmobile myself—commuting for three winters to a cabin high in Utah's Wasatch Mountains—to freely admit that snowmobiles have their place. But it isn't *every* place. ms+l

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