

Winter Wildlands Alliance: A Voice for Solitude

The WWA builds on 10 years of defending winter time human-powered recreation

BY JILL MURPHY

In winter, the scenic backcountry in which we recreate is at its most delicate. Issues such as motorized vehicle use, climate change and decreasing wildlife populations are a persistent threat to the natural balance of the ecosystem. Winter Wildlands Alliance (WWA) devotes its efforts to protecting those ecosystems and educating constituents and enthusiasts on how to best preserve the backcountry they love.

Winter Wildlands Alliance Executive Director Mark Menlove brings us up to date on the Alliance's latest initiatives, and lets us know the best ways that we can get involved to protect these important places.

What is the aim of the Alliance?

Being aware of your impact on the environment is critically important to any of us who are engaged in outdoor recreation of any kind, but even more so for winter. Winter is a time when the wildlife is more vulnerable. Particularly for snowshoeing, backcountry and cross country skiing—activities where you get out into the winter environment—it's crucial to be aware of and engaged in the ecology of the places where you recreate. The WWA is working to protect those places.

We address snowmobiling and motorized issues, but we try not to have those define us. What we're really working on is to make sure that there is a balance, particularly on national forest lands, which tend to be the places that offer the most winter recreation.

Who started the Winter Wildlands Alliance?

The Alliance was founded in 2000, when four statewide and local groups came together to work on similar issues. Those four groups were: Snowlands Network from California and Nevada, Nordic and Backcountry Skiers Alliance from Idaho and Backcountry Snowsports Alliance (now part of the Colorado Mountain Club).

These groups of Nordic and backcountry skiers and snowshoers wanted more of a national voice and someone to coordinate the different local efforts. The goal was to make sure that there were areas available in their local National Forest or public lands for human-powered recreation.

What is your scope?

We're most effective working with local grassroots organizations on the ground, and we see our real scope through that grassroots network. We have 47 organizations that we work with, as well as direct individual members. If you count the collective membership of all of those grassroots groups, we work with over 30,000 people.

How do you fund your operations?

WWA gets a significant portion of funding through individual memberships and donations. We also get great support from outdoor industry companies with corporate partnerships, and a fair amount of support from foundations that fund conservation work.

These foundations like WWA because we're a different voice than the traditional environmental community, but we're certainly working toward a stewardship and conservation outcome.

And you are a founding member of the Outdoor Alliance?

Yes, through the Outdoor Alliance we work with the Access Fund, American Hiking Society, International Mountain Bicycling Association, American Whitewater and American Canoe Association. All human-powered recreation groups, we came together around a shared conservation and stewardship ethic. Together we work on broader policy issues that impact all of us, with a focus on what's going on in Washington D.C.

How did you get involved with the Winter Wildlands Alliance?

Just before getting involved with the WWA, I was living with my wife and children in a cabin at 9,200 feet in the Wasatch Mountains in Utah. I was doing backcountry ski guiding—snowmobiling in and out of the area six or seven months a year.



The Alliance is a voice for human-powered recreation, which is disturbed by excessive motorized vehicle use

I really got engaged in issues of motorized and non-motorized use, seeing the impact of snowmobiles on the places that my friends and I were backcountry skiing. So, when I happened to see an ad in Highcountry News for the job with WWA, it was the perfect fit. It's been great because it allows me to channel my passion for winter sports along with a real commitment to protecting the environment.

Where do you fit in the motorized/non-motorized conversation?

I have a lot of perspective on the issue, because I have spent many hours on snowmobiles myself. I think that they're great tools, and they can be very fun when used responsibly. Snowmobiles have their place in winter recreation, and our goal with the Alliance is to find that crucial balance with people who are going out to find quiet and solitude. Too often, our National Forests are out of balance with



The Winter Wildlands Alliance works to educate the public on how to preserve delicate winter landscapes

their management.

How does the WWA work with the outdoor industry?

We are a member of Outdoor Industry Alliance (OIA), and they are by far our closest partner. It's a powerful combination when we can go to these decision makers in DC and say, "we represent the voice of the recreation industry, recreation businesses and recreation users." The first partner Winter Wildlands Alliance and Outdoor Alliance went to 4 years ago, to establish a stance on climate change, was OIA.

I think that the industry has been—and is—very supportive of the work that's being done to protect the places that customers use their products. In fact, I think it goes deeper than that—since being engaged in this (and I've

"Too often, our National Forests are out of balance with their management"

Though it can be scary to step into that conversation at times, it is a great way to engage with customers and create awareness.

We have established the Backcountry partners Program for businesses that are engaging with these power constituents in outdoor and human-powered winter sports. Becoming a backcountry partner costs \$100 per year, and Elite Backcountry Partner costs \$250 per year. We see it as a way to engage retailers, but it's also an investment on their part to ensure that their customers have places to ski and snowshoe. Retailers can get involved through our website, winterwildlands.org, or contact me directly at mmenlove@winterwildlands.org.

What is the advantage to becoming a backcountry partner?

At its core, we want to keep backcountry partners informed about issues at the local and national level that impact winter recreation. We include complimentary individual



Awareness of environmental footprint is crucial

been with WWA for 6 years now) I continue to be really impressed with the level of commitment and the authenticity of people engaged in outdoor business. By and large, they truly are people that care about the places where they recreate, and where their customers recreate. It's not just a business interest, but it goes beyond that to a real, deep connection with the landscapes they love. I think that's where any conservation starts.

What can members of the industry do to get more involved?

The goal of WWA is to keep an open dialog on these crucial winter issues, and to bring people to the table. Retailers in particular can facilitate that conversation because the customers that buy their products may be skiers, snowshoers or snowmobilers. Because retailers often serve as gathering places for all of these different winter enthusiasts, they can be a starting point to facilitate a productive dialog.

memberships so that employees can stay on top of conservation and recreation issues.

We also do a store decal to show customers that they are supporting an organization that is working directly on their behalf. That show of support for a winter-specific conservation organization is probably the biggest benefit of participation, because it shows the community that you are giving back.

Can you tell us about the Snowpack initiative?

The fact behind the Snowpack initiative is that climate change impacts all of us, no matter what we do or where we live. It is an especially big deal if you are someone who is passionate about winter sports, because less snowpack means a shorter ski and snowshoe season. The Snowpack initiative is something that we put together several years ago to really educate and involve our members of Winter Wildlands Alliance in knowing about climate

change and also knowing what we can do collectively to try to curb it. This initiative in particular has really become a major focus of the Outdoor Alliance.

A lot of our work with the Snowpack initiative has been on trying to move climate change legislation forward. Because the change in congress has slowed it down, our focus returns to educating our constituents



Executive Director Mark Menlove

and talking to skiers and snowshoers and the broader outdoor community on the impact of climate change and how important it is that we find a way to move not only ourselves personally but to move our government.

What about the travel management initiative?

We are working toward a change in the national regulation of how forests across the country put their management plans in place, and we're involved in both forest planning, which designates activity that can be done in the forest (including logging, mineral extraction and recreational use), and travel management planning, which details motorized and non-motorized use. It designates which trails, roads and areas can be used by motorized vehicles, and which will stay motor-free.

This is an issue we've been working on for a number of years, and we submitted a formal petition in August with 90 other recreation and conservation organizations joining us to ask the forest service to revise their travel management rule.

What work has been done on this front so far?

Historically, all off-road vehicles for all seasons were managed under the same

guidelines—including snowmobiles. Then, in 2004, a travel management rule came out to reign in cross-country travel by wheeled vehicles. For the most part, it limited motorized use to trails, roads and designated areas. As part of that process, they exempted snowmobiles—"over-snow vehicles"—but at the same time repealed the regulation that had been in place to manage these same vehicles.

This left snowmobiles in a vacuum with no regulation. Our petition simply asks the forest service to manage snowmobiles under the same guidelines they use for offroad vehicles in all other seasons. For us it's just a matter of consistency—managing all of these vehicles in the same fashion. Yellowstone National Park is a great example of a place where we have worked very hard to see improvements on this issue.


Why the focus on Yellowstone?

Yellowstone was our first national park, and it is really what we consider the iconic winter sanctuary. I see it as the postcard of all the things that are magical about the winter season, and it's a very important place for us. It's also a place that was incredibly abused by snowmobiles for a period. I think that even the most ardent snowmobile fan will admit that in the 1990's things were completely out of hand, when park rangers were wearing gas masks because the air was so polluted that a blue haze hung over everything.

It was clear that something had to be done, and it has been. The situation on the ground now is night and day from that, because of changes in the management. There has been a limit on the number of snowmobiles allowed

in the park, and it's mandated that they have to be what's called "best available technology," which is quieter and less polluting. The most important thing is that they have to be commercially guided. That has really eliminated a lot of the problem. Yellowstone has returned to the magical winter landscape it should be, and our work now is to make sure that these gains are put in place with some permanence.

How will you secure those gains?

Yellowstone National Park comes out with the draft of their winter use plan in February, to govern motorized and non-motorized use there and how the park is protected in winter. We work to make sure that the new plan will keep this balance of park use. 

> Backcountry Scientist Project <

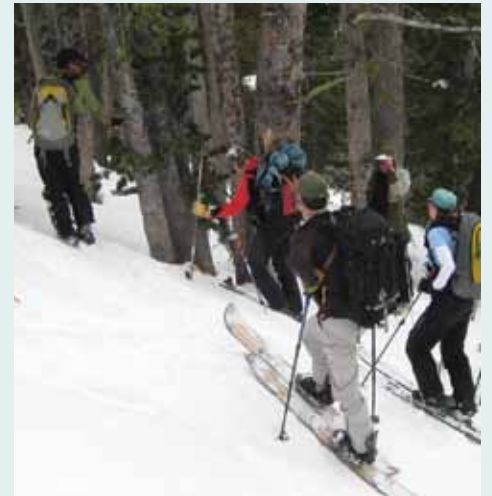
The Backcountry Scientist Project is a new program put in place last year to educate winter enthusiasts about winter ecosystems and animals.

"For the Winter Wildlands Alliance and our members, part of the pristine experience of being up in the mountains in winter is the opportunity to observe winter wildlife," says Executive Director Mark Menlove. "Many of these iconic winter carnivores that exist in the high mountain areas, whether they be wolverine, lynx, grizzly or wolves, are very reliant on the winter ecosystems, and damage to these habitats can threaten or endanger them."

Backcountry Scientist offers workshops for skiers, hikers and snowshoers to teach them about how they, as members of the backcountry community, can gain an appreciation for these threatened species and become advocates for their survival and conservation of their habitats. Students will learn how to collect DNA samples to document the presence of high-level winter corridors that are home to wolverine and lynx, and submit field observations to the WWA through an internet-based system.

The ultimate goal is to share the knowledge through a grassroots network of skiers, snowshoers and winter recreation enthusiasts, to bring greater attention to the conservation of wildlife and their homes.

The program, free to participants, is directly supported by a grant from Patagonia. With the help of additional sponsors, the WWA hopes to expand it further this year. "We're always looking for retailers to help us spread the word about the Backcountry Scientist Program or to serve as gathering places," says Menlove.



Backcountry Scientist educates about winter wildlife

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Backcountry Film Festival: Fun for a Good Cause

The Winter Wildlands' annual tour hits the road again to raise funds for local organizations

BY JOANNE PEACOCK

Last year, over 6,000 enthusiasts across the U.S. celebrated the human-powered snowsports experience at the Backcountry Film Festival. Started in 2005, the first event was a single film on a single night in Boise. Since then it has grown into a full-blown festival, with sites across the nation showing this year's selection of six inspiring films about backcountry skiing, snowboarding and winter ecology. This year it shows at more sites than ever, including international shows in Australia, Antarctica, Canada, and Europe.

A typical format for the event includes 90 minutes of film, with an intermission including a raffle. However, often sites will give the day their own flavor with silent auctions or other fundraisers. "It's a smaller festival than Banff, more tightly focused on celebrating the human-powered winter experience," says Winter Wildlands Alliance Executive Director Mark Menlove. "We try to have a good variety of film from these sports."

THE FILMS

This year the festival brings a fresh new crop of exciting films. "We have received the most entries that we have ever gotten," says Shelley Pursell, events and outreach coordinator for Winter Wildlands Alliance (WWA). "Clearly the word is getting out to filmmakers!" Grass-roots filmmakers and full-production filmmakers alike are encouraged to submit films featuring winter sport and ecology, and Pursell has a special message for participants in two particular winter sports: "We hope to find some really great snowshoeing and Nordic films in the future. One of the biggest requests we get is 'Get more cross-country and skate skiing!'"

This year's wide array of submitted films offered a top selection for the festival, and three were named this year's best-of-the-best. Teton Gravity Research's festival cut of *Deeper* wins the "Best of the Festival" award. It tells the story of Jeremy Jones and fellow elite riders who set out to experience first descents without the aid of helicopters, snowmobiles or lifts.

Other winners include the "Best Short Film," Sweetgrass Productions' *Desert River*, a beautiful ski adventure in the high desert of Alaska, and the "Best Environmental Film," *Whitebark Warrior* from TreeFight and Snaz Media. It highlights the impact of climate change on the thousand-year-old whitebark pines, as well as efforts to save the iconic trees.

THE FESTIVAL

This year's tour launched in November in Boise, Idaho. 500 attendees kicked off the winter season with the WWA, and many stayed for an afterparty at the local bar, which raised additional funds for the Alliance's causes with donated beer and a GoPro raffle.

As the tour rolls along, Outdoor industry members who can't make a showing in their area will be happy to find the festival at Outdoor Retailer Winter Market. It is showing at Brewvie's Cinema Pub on January 20. The films' directors, as well as Protect Our Winters, a nonprofit aiming to reduce the impact of climate change on mountain communities, are attending.

RETAILER SUPPORT

According to Pursell, retailers can be a great asset to the festival, getting involved in a number of ways. They can work with a local nonprofit to promote an event, or offer prizes for the raffle. They can also host a show in their hometown, either by partnering with a local nonprofit or running the festival solo and donating funds back to the WWA.

To give an extra boost to the fundraising power, retailers can also partner with brands to co-op dollars. "Patagonia usually has funds set aside to support important causes such as this, and many other like-minded companies would do the same," Pursell explains. Alpenglow Sports in Tahoe City partnered with Patagonia to make a \$1,000 donation to the Winter Wildlands Alliance. (See below for their perspective on organizing the event.)

EVENT OPERATIONS

Hosting the Backcountry Film Festival can be a fun and rewarding way to connect with customers and support worthy causes. Involvement costs only \$100 for WWA member groups, and \$150 for non-members. With this, organizations receive a 2-disc DVD which includes all films, a press release to promote the event, and PDF files of posters and handbills that retailers can print.

Most venues will charge for the event, and WWA recommends asking \$10 per ticket. Some choose to run promotions, such as a 2-for-1 ticket sale. For organizations that do not house their own AV equipment, the Association recommends that they work with local groups to borrow it for the day.

"Running the event can help retailers connect with like-minded individuals in the outdoor community, and raise awareness" says Pursell. "It's a great way to celebrate winter and fundraise for these causes."

MANUFACTURER INVOLVEMENT

Each site hosts a raffle during the intermission between films, which is a great opportunity for retailers and manufacturers alike to offer support. "For manufacturers, participation is a great way to connect a brand to an audience," Pursell expresses.

This year, Mountain Khakis, Keen and Black Diamond have donated prizes. Platinum sponsor Clif Bar donated 1 percent of the revenue from their seasonal bars to help the Winter Wildlands Alliance put on the festival. They



This year's Festival premiered in Boise, Idaho in to a crowd of 500

also sent Clif Bars to give out to the show's audiences, and they are hosting a show at the Clif Bar Building in Berkeley.

A CELEBRATION OF WINTER SPORT

For outdoor enthusiasts around the country, the Backcountry Film Festival is a way to convene and get psyched for a new season of human-powered sport. "I see it as the regathering of the winter tribes after a long summer,"

says Menlove. "It really has become a celebration, just as we hoped it would when we originally put it together."

Enthusiastic about this season's wide reach, Pursell only sees the festival expanding further. "We are reaching out to get more shows on the East Coast," she says. "We are always working to involve more and more different venues and groups." 

The Retailers' Experience

The Mountain Shop – Fort Collins, CO

Manager Mike Caputo
Event: 12/09/2010
Organization: Colorado Mountain Club

How has your event grown from last year?

Last year's event was a bit smaller. It was really fun, but not as big. We had over 50 guests. This year we did things somewhat differently, and pulled in outside sponsorship from New Belgian brewery. We had 80 paying customers, and charged \$10 each, pulling in \$800 for Colorado Mountain Club.

How was the show?

This year's show was a lot of fun, and it ran very smoothly for us. Here in Fort Collins, we all love to dress up in costume, so we put a twist on the event and did an 80's ski theme. We had a great turnout and a really big raffle during intermission. From doors to close it was about 3.5 hours long.

What did you do to promote it?

Most of our promotion was just hitting the streets and engaging our customers. I recognized everybody that came to the event as customers from the shop.

How does the festival benefit your store?

We see it as a way to give back to the customers. It gives us exposure, and reminds our customers that we like to have fun, too. They come in to support us, the Colorado Mountain Club and the Winter Wildlands Alliance, so we say "thanks for coming in." It's more for our customers than for us, and they definitely deserve that.



Shelley Pursell, events & outreach coordinator, Winter Wildlands Alliance

Alpenglow Sports – Tahoe City, CA

Manager Brendan Madigan
Event: 2/4/2011
Organization: Winter Wildlands Alliance

Have you done the festival before?

This is our first year. We have done programs bringing in sponsored athletes and teaming up with nonprofits, and we have wanted to do a winter film series on our own, so this was a natural fit for us.

How would you describe the event?

It's kind of a human-powered version of a Banff film festival, which is super appealing to most people around here. The event is perfect because it brings people together, motivates and inspires them, and gives awareness to a worthy cause. It's a win-win for all parties involved.

How did you coordinate the \$1,000 donation with Patagonia?

We wanted to make a large donation because we support what the Alliance does for the human-powered outdoor community. We've been a Patagonia dealer for over 20 years, and we earned the money through a program of theirs where we can choose a nonprofit we support, and if it passes their strict credentials they will work with us to rally funds.

Did you face any challenges in organizing the event?

Winter Wildlands has made the process pretty seamless for us. Overall, being a small store, not having a huge budget for a film series, we have relied pretty heavily on the companies and what they can provide us to make the event appealing. We considered bringing in a speaker for this event, but that didn't work out this year, so it's something we will think about incorporating in the future.

