

# FRIENDS+FOES OF THE BACKCOUNTRY

Allies and enemies, saints and sinners: outlined in the following pages are 12 friends and foes of the backcountry: people, organizations, products and ideas that, for better or worse, affect your backcountry experience.



**FRIEND**

## WINTER WILDLANDS ALLIANCE

Proponents of quiet recreation

**F**ROM POWDER HALLWAYS to the hallways of Congress, WWA is a leading voice for backcountry skiers and riders who value the “quiet” part of quiet recreation. And as a non-profit organization devoted to promoting and preserving human-powered winter recreation on public land, the challenges facing WWA are many.

From lobbying for protection of motor-free public lands to providing a networking system for grassroots ski and conservation groups across the country, from organizing SnowSchool sites that educate kids about winter ecology to arranging Backcountry Scientist outings for adults (p. 32), WWA has its fingers in a lot of pies.

The most polarizing slice of the whole, however, remains the snowmobile issue. “We’re not anti-snowmobile,” emphasizes WWA executive director Mark Menlove. “But we believe there are *some* places where snowmobiles shouldn’t be.”

He’s talking about places like Tumalo Mountain, OR; the Boulder-White Clouds mountains in ID; Togwotee Pass, WY; Hatcher Pass, AK; and scores of other locations—all prized by backcountry users—where WWA is working to ensure fair, sustainable access for human-powered and motorized users alike.

To learn more about WWA, or to get involved with a project in your area, visit [winterwildlands.org](http://winterwildlands.org). —*Drew Pogge*

**FOE**

## GLENN BECK

The voice of...what?

**W**HEN IT COMES TO his stance on the environment, Glenn Beck is his own worst enemy. And ours. It’s almost unfair to use his vociferous, duplicitous rants against him. Almost.

“I think we should hate the environment,” Beck said on his Fox network program in February 2008. “Don’t worry about what happens to the environment. It doesn’t worry about what happens to you, does it? Think



about it. Hurricanes? Part of the environment. They roll in. What’s the environment’s role? It creates the hurricanes! Does it give somebody, you know, some place to hide? Let me tell you something. Thank God for us people who are supposedly melting that pointless piece of ice so someone can put the land to good use. No thanks to you, Mr. Environment.... And while I’m at it, thanks for making Antarctica completely uninhabitable. It’s not like we need more land or more resources. Don’t worry about all the people starving up here. You know, don’t worry about us. Just cover the whole continent in ice. Why don’t you do that? Who needs it? Just ice. And penguins, birds that don’t fly.”

Well, Mr. Beck, you know what else the pesky little environment created? Avalanches. How ‘bout we go skiing? No, seriously, you first. —*Adam Howard*

Photo (form left to right): Jeff Cirrico, Gage Skidmore, Arnold Paul, Stephen Matera

FRIEND

# NATIONAL PARKS

America's best idea

**E**VER SINCE CONGRESS made Yellowstone the world's first National Park in 1872 for "the benefit and enjoyment of the people," and established the National Park Service in 1916 to ensure the parks would remain "unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations," over 83 million acres have been protected from development in the U.S. Today, 1,200 parks in 100 countries all over the world protect hundreds of millions of acres of irreplaceable wilderness, where the word "backcountry" is defined in its truest sense.

American parks like Crater Lake (see p. 40), Rocky Mountain, Grand Teton, Yellowstone, Denali, Yosemite, Glacier, and North Cascades offer access not only to some of the most dramatic, snowy and varied ski terrain on the continent, but an increasingly rare natural resource: quiet solitude. It doesn't hurt that the National Park Service is headed by a backcountry skier and climber (Dec. *Backcountry*, 2009), or that he's enacted an aggressive Climate Change Response Program designed to help the parks adapt to the rapid environmental



changes that threaten their natural, social and cultural systems.

The NPS talks the talk of climate change, but also walks the walk, with a formal commitment to sharply reduce internal greenhouse gas emissions, water and energy use by 2016. The Service is also a leader in implementing alternative transportation, smart infrastructure, renewable technologies, and policies that minimize waste. All of this, with an ever-shrinking budget: 2011 appropriations fall \$22 million short of 2010 spending, and there is an additional \$8 billion to \$9 billion of

backlogged necessary park maintenance due to years of underfunding. In short, the NPS is strapped, and there's no end in sight.

But for backcountry skiers and riders, parks are invaluable, both as powder playgrounds and as examples of environmental stewardship. They are more than friends of the backcountry: they *are* the backcountry. Wallace Stegner—famed historian, conservationist, and sometime skier—called our national parks "the best idea America has ever had." For information on parks near you, check out [nps.gov](http://nps.gov)—*Drew Pogge*

FOE

# COAL

A terrible stocking stuffer



**C**LEAN COAL IS A MYTH. Mining and burning coal to produce energy contributes to greenhouse gas emissions, atmospheric particulates, and the destruction of fragile environments. *The Economist* (a nice little publication nearly on par with *Backcountry*) dubbed coal "Environmental Enemy No. 1," and here's why:

The mining process ravages sensitive ecosystems. In southern Appalachia, a form of strip mining descriptively known as "mountaintop removal" is ripping the tops off some of the world's most ecologically diverse mountain landscapes. And let's not forget about the enormous Chuitna coal strip mine proposed by Snowbird Ski Resort owner, Richard "Dick" Bass, at the Alaskan headwaters of one of the richest salmon

fisheries in the world. How does a ski resort owner reconcile a vested interest in protecting winter with the obvious environmental cancer of strip mining coal? Ask Dick.

As if the effects of mining weren't enough, the combustion of fossil fuels, coal not least among them, is the leading source of carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) emissions in the U.S. CO<sub>2</sub> increases the amount of solar radiation reflected back to Earth, directly warming the planet. Unfortunately, half of the total electricity used in this country comes from burning coal, and China alone is building coal-burning power plants at the rate of one new facility every four *days*. Gulp.

Saving winter starts with decreasing our dependency on coal. Find out what you can do at [ilovemountains.org](http://ilovemountains.org), and send Dick Bass a message at [nobasscoal.org](http://nobasscoal.org).—*Tyler Cohen*



FOE

# METHANE

A Gas-tastrophe

**WHAT DO COWS** and melting permafrost have in common? Both are emitting large volumes of methane—a potent greenhouse gas that traps 20 times more atmospheric heat than CO<sub>2</sub>. If you're a lover of snow, methane—and the heat it traps—is a foe of the most insidious kind.

Since 1750, atmospheric concentrations of methane have increased 150%. Fossil fuel production, agriculture (cow burps represent 28% of all human-related methane emissions in the U.S.), and waste management all produce methane, but the gas also occurs naturally in wetlands and oceans.

Recently, however, scientists have discovered a troubling trend in areas of the Siberian Arctic, where melting permafrost on the ocean floor is releasing an estimated eight million tons of methane per year. Worse, atmospheric methane levels in the Arctic are three times higher than any other period in the last 400,000 years. It's a compounding methane explosion: rising temperatures melt permafrost, releasing methane that traps more heat in the atmosphere, which accelerates permafrost thawing...you get the idea.

So, do belching bovines and percolating permafrost spell the end of winter? Not necessarily. Cows will always burp, but with more efficient livestock production, the amounts of methane they release can be minimized. And methane released from permafrost is still a small percentage of the global total. No one knows how long Arctic ocean permafrost has been releasing methane or how much is normal—only that the amount is on the rise. But, unfortunately, that goes for worldwide methane emissions, too, which cumulatively *could* shorten winter, raise ocean levels, and change winter weather patterns. And that's not just hot air.—*Lydia Johnson*

FRIEND

# FOREST JOBS AND RECREATION ACT

Collaborative compromise

**MONTANA IS CURRENTLY** ground zero in an environmental battle that has been going on for over 30 years. The issue? Wilderness Study Areas (WSAs)—parcels of natural, undeveloped public land larger than 5,000 acres that offer “outstanding opportunities for solitude or primitive and unconfined types of recreation.” Intended to help identify land suitable for wilderness designation, this definition also seems specifically tailored to human-powered backcountry skiers and snowboarders. Starting in 1976, the BLM designated about 25 million acres of land in the western states and Alaska as WSAs.

Fast forward three decades. Some WSAs have been designated as wilderness, while others were released for non-wilderness uses, but more than 12.7 million acres of public land, spread over 545 separate sites, are still classified as WSAs. By law, these lands are managed “to preserve their suitability for designation as wilderness,” thus restricting logging, mining, and motorized

use. This is where Montana Senator Jon Tester's pending Forest Jobs and Recreation Act enters the situation.

The proposed act—constructed with the unlikely collaborative efforts of wilderness advocates, special interest groups and the motorized recreation lobby—would qualify nearly 700,000 acres of Montana's backcountry for wilderness designation (Forest), thousands more for managed motorized use (Recreation), and mandate another 100,000 acres of Montana WSA land for timber harvest (Jobs).

On the surface, it sounds like a true compromise—a critter rarer than honesty in politics—but some special interest groups and motorized recreation advocates claim Tester's proposal is merely a dressed-up wilderness bill. Time will tell, but it appears to be a huge step forward in a decades-old debate, provides an example of collaboration that other states might model, and could protect hundreds of thousands of acres of backcountry ski terrain from development. Go Tester.—*Drew Pogge*



Photo (from left to right): Isaac Lee, Simon Peterson, courtesy Grown Skis.

FRIEND

# ECO-CHIC

Outdoor industry greening

**O**UTDOOR INDUSTRY manufacturers are going green, but that doesn't mean you have to grow a beard, wear wool and deodorize with patchouli—unless you want to. Instead, advances in materials technology and more efficient manufacturing practices are helping to wean outdoor companies off fossil fuels, and produce more durable products. Here are a few examples.

1.) SCARPA's new T1, T2 Eco and Tornado Eco boots are made with Pebax Rnew, a compound derived from castor plant seeds that all but eliminates petroleum from the mold and has even better thermal consistency than traditional Pebax. The best part? It skis great.

2.) Ski manufacturers like Black Diamond, Dynafit, and K2 are replacing maple, aspen,

and poplar wood cores with paulownia—a quick-growing and highly renewable wood. Other companies, like Movement, Moment, Jones and Arbor are taking it a step further by using FSC-certified sustainably harvested wood cores. Wagner Custom and Venture Snowboards create their products in entirely wind- and solar-powered factories.

3.) Not to be outdone by the hard-goods makers, Patagonia's Common Threads program recycles and reuses Capilene and other fabrics. Colorado-based Cocona Fabrics uses recycled coconut shells to spin high-performance technical materials, which are then used by apparel makers like Mammut, Marmot and Sierra Designs. Sportswear manufacturer Champion even makes a Cocona bra—grass skirt optional.—*Tyler Cohen*



FOE

# SKI DUBAI

Dome in the desert

**A**RTIFICIAL SNOW DOMES, specifically Ski Dubai in the hot and sandy United Arab Emirates, couldn't be further from the backcountry. But as if that weren't enough, these egregious exemplars of excess and hubris are some of the most energy-consuming buildings on the planet—threatening environments in which cold and snow are natural.

It's estimated that the energy required to keep Ski Dubai's 400-meter-long indoor run covered with snow is equal to 3,500 barrels of oil per day. That's the carbon equivalent of 3,000,000 miles of driving. In fact, you and 500 of your closest friends (a full third of Ski Dubai's total daily skier capacity) could get on a Boeing 747 and fly from Dubai to Zurich, Switzerland to ski real mountains

on real snow and burn just about the same amount of oil used in one day of Ski Dubai operations. Perhaps worst of all? Ski domes are increasingly popular, with more than 40 operating from China to the Netherlands. The U.S. could be home to two such environmental abscesses by 2012. Where, you might ask? Why, New Jersey and Las Vegas, of course.—*Drew Pogge*



FRIEND

# GREEN BEER

Not just for St. Patty's Day

**A**S BREWERIES TAP into environmentally friendly practices, green beer is flowing like wine all across the country. By using organic ingredients, recycling factory waste, powering facilities with renewable energy and minimizing packaging, eco-breweries are generating a buzz—and not just after one too many.

Fort Collins, Colorado-based New Belgium crafts Mothership Wit entirely from organic ingredients, and nearly 90% of their brewing byproducts are reused in order to divert factory waste from landfills. Sierra Nevada Brewing Co. has plastered the roof of their Chico, California factory with enough solar panels to power their plant and provide electricity back to the California grid. Alaska Brewing, located in Juneau, uses a giant mash press to reduce their yearly water usage by one million gallons. And Lyons, Colorado-based Oskar Blues serves up all their beers in pack-friendly cans, which, besides being handy and recyclable, cut down on the amount of fuel required for shipping by 35%. Other popular backcountry-friendly brewskis include Wolaver's Organic, Dogfish Head, and Long Trail. So kick back, raise your glass and drink to green beer.—*Tyler Cohen*

FOE

# RED DUST

Corn killer

**T**HE RED-TINGED DUST settling annually over Western Colorado's snowpack is a scourge on spring skiing and riding. Like a dirty blanket draped over the mountains, it rides like a bad clutch: Stop. Go. Stop. Go. But dust blown from the Colorado Plateau over the western Colorado mountains is impacting more than spring skiing and high country aesthetics. It also increases avalanche hazard and accelerates snowmelt, which threatens water supplies in places far removed from ski towns. And no one knows how to stop it.

Last season there were nine measurable dust "events" from Oct. 2009 to May 2010. The majority took place in April (4) and May (3)—prime spring season. Dust storms are unpredictable, and they have only been recorded since about 2004, which is when the Center for Snow and Avalanche Studies (CSAS) in Silverton, Colorado opened its doors.

CSAS Director Chris Landry is at the forefront of dust-on-snow research. He

says the dust comes from various parts of the Colorado Plateau at large; an area encompassing parts of Utah, Arizona, New Mexico and Colorado, defined by desert and 100-plus years of soil degradation.

Landry says there is "no question" that dust plays a role in wet and dry avalanche processes, but no one has defined or adequately researched exactly how. For now, it's up to backcountry skiers and riders to judge how dust is impacting snowpack stability in the field. It's just one more variable in the avalanche puzzle.

The dust also absorbs solar radiation, which accelerates spring snowmelt and causes peak runoff to occur weeks earlier than usual. And since Colorado's snow feeds the water demands of cities and agricultural areas up to 1,400 miles away, water managers are scrambling for answers. Meanwhile, spring skiers are scrambling to get their spring days in before the slopes go red.—*Mike Horn*



Photo (left to right): Isaac Lee, Scott DW Smith, courtesy Gallatin Valley SAR, Belinda Hankins Miller

FRIEND

# SEARCH + RESCUE

Friends in high places

**YOU'VE GOT A BROKEN NECK,** it's getting dark, and the temperature is dropping. What happens now, when the worst case scenario is finally realized? Though we always preach self-sufficiency and responsibility in the backcountry, for most people there's only one answer in a situation like this one: Call Search and Rescue.

In the backcountry, we're fortunate there's *anyone* to call. It's mostly unpaid volunteers who deploy when something goes wrong in the deep and nasty. Many are backcountry skiers and climbers themselves, uniquely equipped with the skills and gear to reach places the police and Forest Service cannot.

So why *do* some of our fellow skiers and climbers put themselves in danger, drop their lives at the buzz of a pager to rescue someone they may or may not know, and do so for FREE? *Backcountry* posed this question to SAR volunteers for a feature story last year ("Next of Kin," Jan. 2010), and the universal answer was, "It could be one of our own."

Chris Haver is a member of Crested



Butte, Colorado Search and Rescue, and an avid backcountry skier. When he's on a backcountry rescue mission, he looks at the situation from both perspectives, and learns from what he sees.

"One of the great benefits of being part of the team and going out on missions is a realization of what can go wrong," Haver

says. "Not every incident can be avoided, but with a little preparation, each can be handled in a manner that makes the best of a bad situation."

And sometimes, according to Haver, that means finding a new backcountry stash to explore—after the rescue is completed, of course.—*Mike Horn*

FOE

# VIDEO GAMES

Crisis behind the controller

**A** MERICA'S YOUTH ARE FAT. They're fat because they're not skiing. And they're not skiing because they're playing video games and watching TV. Sure, video games and TV are easy targets, and no, correlation doesn't guarantee causation, but when you look at the issue of childhood weight-gain, it can seem like a pretty clear cause-and-effect relationship. Here are the facts.

According to the Center for Disease Control (CDC), childhood obesity has tripled in the last thirty years. Today, nearly one in three American youths is overweight or obese, and these aren't just cute kids with chubby cheeks and Cheez Doodle-coated fingers. They're fat *and* unhealthy, with high blood pressure, bad cholesterol, asthma, and an astronomical risk of diabetes and heart disease later in life—not the traits of burgeoning backcountry explorers.

Why so fat? Possibly because they spend their leisure time sitting around rather

than being active—and we're not just talking about skiing. In 2008, the Pew Research Center conducted a study in which they found that 97% of teens (ages 12 to 17) play video games. Almost 50% play video games daily. In addition to that, the CDC found that 67% of kids watch at least two hours of television per day, with 27% watching four or more hours. Added up, the average American child spends more than 7.5 hours a day watching TV and movies, using cell phones and computers, and playing video games. How much time does that leave for exploring the outdoors, by skis or otherwise?

Backcountry skiing has many rewards, fitness not least among them. In order for today's kids to experience the sport we love, they need to put down the controller, turn off



the TV, and get outside. For more information on childhood obesity, and for tips on helping kids become more active, check out [lets-move.gov](http://lets-move.gov).—*Tyler Cohen*

## TALK TO US!

If you think we should know about a white issue in your area, be a friend of the backcountry and send a note to [drew@holpublications.com](mailto:drew@holpublications.com), subject line "White Issues."