A different point of view

By Tom Dickson



I used to hate snowmobiles. The noise, the exhaust, how they seemed to scare wildlife. And would it really be so hard for snowmobilers to ski or snowshoe through the woods? Don't they need exercise like the rest of us?

Then one winter afternoon I was driving home with my brother-in-law, Kelly. In the distance we could see a small mountain that rose above a vast snow-covered landscape.

"I'd like to cross-country ski up there someday and see that view," I said as we drove past.

"Cross-country ski? I'd like to snowmobile up there and see that view."

We looked at each other.

"I bust my butt all week," Kelly said. "The last thing I want to do on a weekend is more physical labor."

Back then he worked for a medical supply company delivering 90-pound oxygen tanks to the homes of asthmatic seniors.

"I sit on my butt all week at a desk," I replied. "The last thing I want to do on the weekend is more sitting."

We both laughed at what we recognized were simply different approaches to achieving the same thing—reaching the top of a mountain to take in the scenery.

And I came away, as Johnny Cash sang in "A Boy Named Sue," with a different point of view.

In the years since, I've often thought about that conversation and how important it is to look at things from someone else's perspective.

Even so, snowmobiles have been a challenge. I really did dislike them. But I've come around.

For one thing, I understand that labor jobs differ from desk jobs, and how that can influence the way people recreate outdoors. Someone who spends all day in meetings may want to head outside on the weekend and get some exercise. But someone who works at a job site or standing in a factory may need to rest up to survive the coming work week. Both may want to hunt, fish, camp, or see the view from a mountaintop, but they do it differently, maybe with a motorboat instead of a kayak, or a mountain bike rather than an ATV.

Or maybe someone has a bum knee, a sore hip, or a weak heart. Don't they get to enjoy the outdoors along with the able-bodied?

And I get that some people just like zipping around on motorized vehicles—no matter what they do for a living.

What really opened my eyes was learning about all the work snowmobilers do in the off-season to clear trails. One club, the Helena-based Capital Trail Vehicle Association, has chainsawed through downed timber to open hundreds of miles of trails in central Montana. Dozens of other snowmobile and ATV groups have done the same elsewhere in the state. So have trail running groups and mountain biking clubs, all helping open up trails for all of us—no matter how we use them.

I still think a loud two-stroke engine sounds out of place in a quiet winter forest. But more sleds these days are powered by quieter four-stroke engines. Yellowstone National Park now allows only four-stroke sleds.

That restriction was meant to reduce air pollution and disturbance to wildlife. Yet it turns out that snowmobiles actually don't bother deer, elk, bison, and other wild critters nearly as much as you'd think—yet another thing I've learned over the years. In over two dozen studies looking at the effects of ATVs and snowmobiles on big game animals, researchers found that wildlife often become habituated to the noise and presence of motorized vehicles. In fact, a few studies showed that hikers and cross-country skiers cause elk and deer more stress than vehicles do—likely because humans on foot appear more like predators.

It turns out that my fellow skinny-skiers and I may also be raising the cortisol levels of wildlife.

Still, whether they scare wildlife or not, I'd like to see all snowmobiles eventually equipped with four-strokes. Or, better yet, replaced with the electric models now coming on the market—whisper quiet, zero emissions, and 0 to 60 mph in 3 seconds.

I don't do much skiing these days, so I could see myself aboard one of those silent snow rockets.

Maybe my brother-in-law will buy himself an e-snowmobile and let me sit on the back. I'm even game to join him on a traditional snow sled. All these years later, it would be fun to finally get up that mountain and see the view.

Tom Dickson is the previous editor of Montana Outdoors.

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