

Stepping Out in the Swan Range

Sustained Satisfaction – Part II

By Keith Hammer

September 27, 2007, Lakeshore Country Journal

In a time and culture fixated on instant gratification, it is good to know there are public lands where we can pursue a deeper and more sustainable sense of satisfaction. The Swan Range offers many such opportunities and will continue to do so if we make wise choices in how we approach the land.

Twenty years ago, a smooth and enjoyable ski up seven miles of the snowed-in Jewel Basin Road was rewarded with mountainsides of untracked powder and only the occasional snowmobile track or noise. Today, the Jewel Basin Road in winter is a seven-mile washboard of sizeable snow humps churned up by snowmobiles piloted by both skiers and thrill-seeking high-markers wanting quick access to steep slopes. The result most often is a punishing seven-mile ski or snowmobile ride leading to heavily tracked snow in the perhaps prophetically named Noisy Basin.

The pursuit of instant gratification can easily overrun the front-country and drive satisfaction further into the backcountry. The rush to quickly extract the sweet heart from our experience can instead serve to isolate it and sour all that surrounds it - like serving up a pear in a sauce of motor oil rather than its own sweet juices.

Many will argue they don't have the time to access their favorite backcountry spot by foot, snowshoe or ski. They often also insist it is their right and custom to access it by motorcycle, ATV or snowmobile, as though that is how their granddaddy did it.

Other folks are in it for the hike, snowshoe or ski, but want instant gratification by using a motorcycle, ATV or snowmobile to get to the "best part." Finally, there are those that look for the earliest opportunity to abandon their motor vehicle in order to not sour the juices that surround the pear.

Those in the latter category, unfortunately, are left to suffer the consequences of motorized vehicles operated in the backcountry by others. They must often hike in deep ruts the width of a motorcycle tire or endure the shrill whine of snowmobiles rather than bask in the quiet of the outdoors. People moving under the power of their own muscles often go unnoticed in a mountain basin while the smell and sound of motor vehicles does not. It is an inequitable notion of multiple-use "sharing" advanced by those looking to make a buck selling motorized thrill-craft.

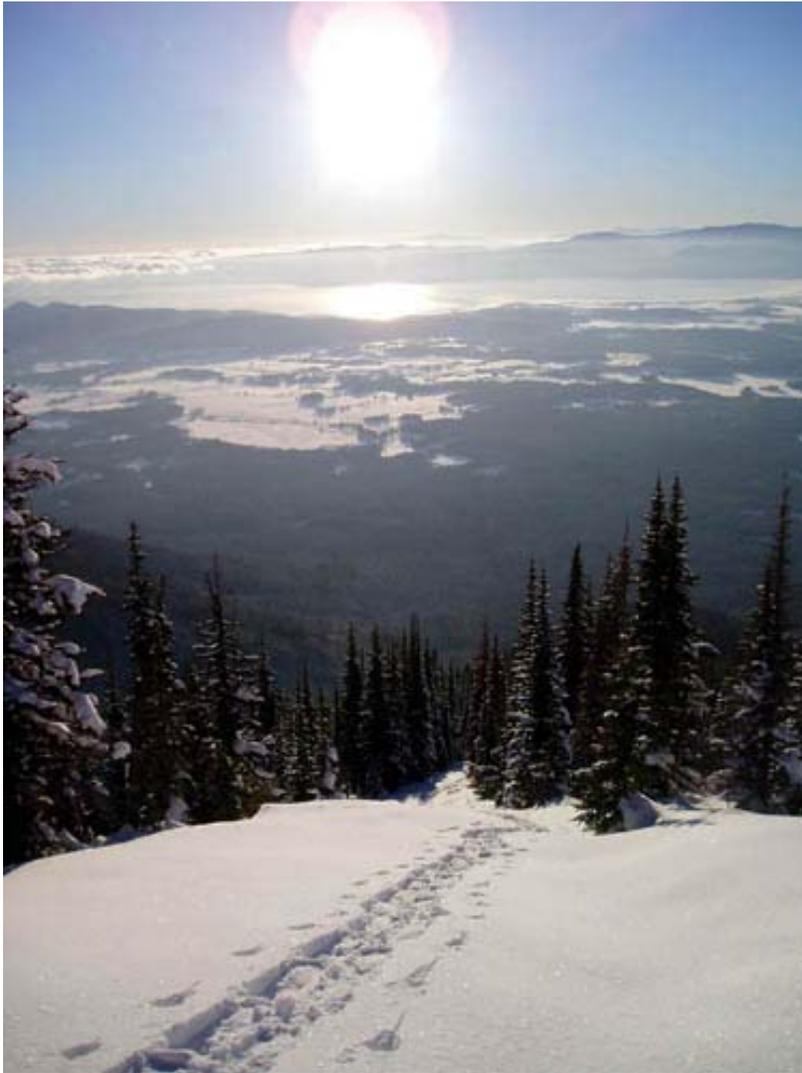
As we come to have more people on the planet, it follows that we each have a responsibility to consume less so there is enough to go around. The same principle

applies to sharing our use of public lands. The less noise we make, the more quiet is left for the next person. The less fossil fuel we consume for cheap thrills, instant gratification and convenience, the more is left to meet essential human needs. By covering less land on foot than we would on motorized thrill-craft, the more peace and security we leave for other humans and wildlife in their native habitat.

Instant gratification or sustained satisfaction? Our personal choices collectively shape public land policy and will determine whether we succeed in safeguarding satisfying recreation opportunities or instead destroy them in our haste to seize them instantly. We can work longer hours to spend \$5,000 – \$12,000 for a motorized play toy and find we no longer have the time to hike, snowshoe and ski, or we can lessen our debt and consumption of fossil fuels, increase our free time, and enjoy the great outdoors in a way that leaves it quiet and unspoiled for others.

Keith Hammer grew up hiking, skiing, camping, hunting, and fishing in the Swan Mountains. He has worked a number of jobs, from Forest Service trail worker to logger to backcountry guide, and currently works as an environmental consultant and head of the nonprofit Swan View Coalition. His column will appear regularly in this paper and will also be archived at www.swanrange.org. Keith can be reached at 406-755-1379 or keith@swanview.org.

- PHOTO ON NEXT PAGE -



The Stairway to Heaven offers a quiet winter route up Mount Aeneas and astounding views of Flathead Lake. Keith Hammer photo.

