

On the Path

Uphill Battle for Muscle-Powered Recreation

By Keith Hammer

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The good health news is that there has been an “exponential increase” over the past few years in the number of people choosing to ski, snowshoe or hike uphill on the publicly-owned Big Mountain, even though it is managed by Whitefish Mountain Resort as a downhill ski area in winter. It is good to see more folks opting to undertake a quiet uphill workout even though an estimated 90% of them reportedly hold already-paid-for season passes to ride up the lift instead.

The bad news is that the resort and the Forest Service recently outlawed the after-work uphill winter outings there altogether and restricted daytime uphill outings to a single route. Folks that have come to enjoy their after-work uphill endeavors or full moon outings on public Forest Service land, utilized by the resort under a special use permit, are understandably upset with the new rules.

The Daily Inter Lake quotes the resort’s director of operations and risk management as saying “It used to be that you’d see one or two people hiking the mountain on an average evening [after lifts had closed]. Now, our grooming operators will tell you they see 30 or 40 people on an average night, and many more if it is exceptionally clear or a full moon.” The resort cites dangerous close-encounters between nighttime grooming machines and hikers as the primary reason for outlawing the evening uphill outings.

It would be nice to see some other means of addressing the safety concerns, perhaps by posting clear yield-to-grooming machine signs, so folks could continue to enjoy their after-work outings and not feel they are being punished by a “pay to play” reprisal. As the Big Mountain situation gets worked out it also serves as a reminder of how motor vehicles displace muscle-powered recreation. Sure, folks can choose to snowshoe or ski uphill somewhere there aren’t ski lifts and grooming machines, but that’s precisely how they are displaced.

Several decades ago, most of us skied in Jewel Basin by starting at Foothill Road and skiing over seven miles up the snowed-in Jewel Basin Road, to then climb through “the notch” for a couple good runs in the Picnic and Black Lakes area. It was a dawn-to-dusk endeavor. A few people would use snowmobiles to reach the parking lot at the end of the road. Today, so many snowmobiles use the Jewel Basin Road that it is a continuous wash-board that takes all the fun out of trying to ski it, either going up or coming down.

A similar situation has evolved for those who like to bicycle the Going to the Sun Road in Glacier National Park at night, when there is little car traffic. Folks enjoy summer nighttime rides on the Going to the Sun Road, especially during phases of the moon when there is enough light to make the ride all the more safe and enjoyable. But this too has changed over the past few decades.

Most everyone doing a full-moon bike ride on the Sun Road from the west side used to park their cars near the bottom and enjoy the slow crank up to Logan Pass before whizzing back down to their cars. Today, so many people drive their cars to

Logan Pass and drop off bike riders solely for the cheap thrill of the downhill that one has to worry about significant car traffic in the dead of night. For me it is no longer a relaxing endeavor and I miss the changes in smells and temperature we would encounter as we peddled slowly uphill through the Garden Wall's avalanche chutes in absolute peace and silence.

Similar unnecessary conflicts arise along the Swan Range foothills as folks in big pickup trucks rut up the first miles of snowed-in Forest Service roads like Peters Ridge and Strawberry Lake, ruining the experience for folks wanting to ski or pull their toddlers behind in a sled-trailer. It is the worst face and consequence of "multiple use."

The moral of these stories is to be aware of how our behavior affects those around us and those who come after us, especially as more people choose to enjoy the outdoors. By better respecting both the operation of grooming machines on Big Mountain and the public's expectation to use its lands there "after hours," we could perhaps preserve those wonderful evening outings. And by parking our vehicles when we are tempted to use them in pursuit of cheap thrills, we can instead help preserve opportunities for folks and families to hike, bicycle, ski, and sled in peace, quiet and safety.

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 appears regularly in this paper and is archived at www.swanrange.org. Keith can be reached at 406-755-1379 or keith@swanview.org.



Snowshoeing uphill in the Swan Range. Keith Hammer photo.