

Stepping Out in the Swan Range

Sustained Satisfaction – Part I

By Keith Hammer

September 13, 2007, Lakeshore Country Journal

A friend and I recently arrived a half-hour late for a potluck with fresh salsa in hand and a good excuse. We were a bit late, we explained, because we first had to plant a garden and then wait patiently for the tomatoes to ripen so we could make the salsa. There were no complaints from the other potluckers as they dug in with corn chips.

I am similarly fortunate to have hiking companions who, when they do complain about my warped sense of time and distance, generally do so with teasing affection. They'll look over my shoulder as I read a map and ask "How many Keith units left to go?" Or see a sign along the trail noting distances in kilometers with a "k" and quip "Look, someone else uses Keith units too!"

Faced with others' doubt in my ability to estimate mileage, and not caring much about mileage anyway, I last winter began experimenting with a way to answer my critics; by measuring and calculating what I call the Satisfaction Quotient. SQ is simply the result of dividing the time necessary to climb up a mountain by the time taken to get back down it. I've found generally the higher the SQ, the more satisfied I feel at the end of the day!

This notion of a Satisfaction Quotient emerged on a February Tuesday of inverted weather following a good dumping of fresh snow. It was foggy in the Flathead valley, but I knew the sun would be shining up above on the deep powder freshly laid on Infinity Ridge (so named by an enthusiastic companion who once, to my twisted delight, incorrectly anticipated that each of several false summits was the 7,000-foot summit itself).

On that February Tuesday, I was elated as the higher I climbed the deeper, colder and drier the snow became. As I struggled through thigh-deep snow to climb straight up the ridge, I began wishing I'd brought a friend along to help break trail – and for some pleasant company of course!

My trusty climbing skins and I finally emerged above the inversion's cloudbank just as it was beginning to break apart and rise with the day's warming. The birds were already up there, hanging out in the alpine fir and spruce, flitting about and chatting away.

I'd been climbing for about four and a half hours, so I decided to turn around at the second false summit rather than push on to the peak. I wanted to make the ski back

down before the warm February sun turned the fresh powder, which breaks a fall, into Sierra concrete, which instead breaks a leg.

I hung out long enough to have a snack and watch the departing clouds frame Peters Ridge with a beauty that took what little I had left of my breath away! Then I enjoyed a few nice turns on the more open ridge before entering the dense forest and remaining hour of testy pinball descent.

Having before made the entire trip all the way to the peak and back in less than four and a half hours, last February's struggle nonetheless was perhaps my most satisfying, even though it ended short of the summit and its grand views of Wildcat Lake and the distant peaks of Glacier National Park. At $4.5/1 = 4.5$, it had a high Satisfaction Quotient!

I used to be an avid alpine skier and taught downhill ski lessons, but I gave it up due to the expense, the driving, the crowds, the waiting in lift lines, what we now call a high carbon footprint, and the fact that it had simply become boring in its homogeneity. I estimate the SQ of a typical alpine lift ride and run would be somewhere in the neighborhood of one or less - not that one should strive to shorten downhill time anywhere in order to increase the SQ, which in the final analysis I must admit is too easily manipulated to truly measure sustainable satisfaction.

I recently saw an ad for a powdered fruit and vegetable drink that, when added to water, avoids the need to "prod, squeeze, pick, wash, store, chop, cook, and eat." I much prefer homemade salsa, thank you very much, even if it does make me late for an appointment to share it with friends. And I'll gladly turn down the chairlift, car, ATV, or snowmobile ride that gets me to the top of the mountain more quickly than my own two feet, which have faithfully and quietly led me to cross paths with deer, elk, pine marten, lynx, mountain lion, wolverine, and grizzly bear for most of my 53 years.

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.

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A few nice turns on the shoulder of Infinity Ridge is but a bonus to the sights, sounds and smells of the hours-long climb up. Keith Hammer photo.