

Stepping Out in the Swan Range

Conserving Fuel and Habitat

By Keith Hammer

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What does the price of diesel and gasoline have to do with the Swan Crest? Read on and find out!

As I write this, the price of diesel fuel has reached \$4 per gallon, the price of gasoline follows close behind, and independent truckers are talking strike. Such strikes before have rendered grocery store shelves and gasoline tanks empty within days, underscoring America's dependence on oil for its most basic of needs, including the truckers' need to turn a profit hauling things like groceries and gasoline.

Simultaneously, the conversion of food crops like corn to bio-fuels is partially responsible for increasing grocery prices as less food is produced and more acres are instead devoted to lessening our dependence on fossil fuels. In short, America's insatiable appetite for fuel to run its machines and heat its buildings is coming back to bite the hand that feeds them. In short, human habitat as well as wildlife habitat is being threatened by our habits of consumption.

Times like these remind us of the importance of growing as much of our food as we can as close to our homes as possible, lessening both the need for fuel to haul it and the need to convert food crop acres to bio-fuel crop acres. One doesn't need to delve into the debate on global warming to see the wisdom of conserving fuel in order to also conserve our human habitat and pocketbooks.

Similarly, tough economic times remind us of the importance of conserving public wildlands close to home, both for the wild game they offer through lawful hunting seasons and the opportunities they provide for nearby peace, quiet and solitude. Man does not live by bread alone and it is essential that we conserve opportunities for outdoors spiritual rejuvenation that don't require a tank full of fuel to reach.

The more we minimize our use of motor vehicles in our pursuit of recreation, the more fuel we have to meet other essential human needs. Hiking, snowshoeing and backcountry skiing not only consume no motor fuels while on the trail, they need no big pickup truck and trailer to haul motorcycles, 4-wheelers and snowmobiles to the trailhead – a simple passenger car or bicycle will do.

The fewer trails where motorized use is allowed, the less motor fuel will be consumed on them and the less impacts there will be to soils and wildlife. The closer non-motorized trailheads are to home, the less fuel spent by those seeking quiet, non-motorized recreation and healthy exercise. Indeed, problems are compounded when trails are used by motorized vehicles, forcing people to go elsewhere and drive longer distances in pursuit of a bit of peace and quiet in the woods.

The Spotted Bear and Swan Lake Ranger Districts are taking a step in the right direction by proposing to close several trails on the southern Swan Crest to motorized vehicles. Their Environmental Assessment shows that closing the interconnecting Napa Ridge, Bruce Ridge, and Alpine Trail #7 south of Crevice Lakes will increase security for big game and grizzly bear while also conserving quiet habitat for humans. While the

EA does not address the issue of motor fuel consumption, it does note that getting motorcycles off these trails will reduce trail damage and maintenance needs and make it easier to manage the area for its pristine alpine qualities.

I urge folks to support this proposal by emailing the Forest Service at comments-northern-flathead-spotted-bear@fs.fed.us, by calling 406-387-3800, or by writing to Debbie Mucklow, Spotted Bear District Ranger, PO Box 190340, Hungry Horse, MT 59919. Oral or written comments are due by May 8, 2008. The Forest Service proposal can be viewed at http://www.fs.fed.us/r1/flathead/nepa/trav_mngmt.shtml.

If there is a reported upside to high fuel prices, it is a hoped-for reduction in the number of sled dog teams, mountain bikers and pedestrians getting run over by snowmobiles along Alaska's Iditarod Trail, where gas prices in remote areas have reached \$7 a gallon and are resulting in less snowmobiling. So reports Craig Medred of the Anchorage Daily News.

We need not wait for such tragedy or economic hardship, however, to make wise decisions regarding the future of our public lands and our children. Global warming need be neither real nor human-caused for it to make good economic and moral sense to reduce our consumption of fuel whenever possible.

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.



Hikers conserve fuel, peace and quiet near Warrior Mountain, along a stretch of historic Alpine Trail #7 proposed for closure to motor vehicles. Photo by Keith Hammer.