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FIELD-LEVEL CONFLICT MANAGEMENT
IN OUTDOOR RECREATION

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FIELD-LEVEL CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN OUTDOOR RECREATION

By James B. Webb

The San Juan/Rio Grande National forests cover close to four million acres of the most beautiful country on earth. World class attractions include: Cumbres-Toltec and Durango-Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroads; one million acres of wilderness in the Sangre-de-Cristo, La Garita, South San Juan, Weminuche and Lizard Head Wilderness areas; another million acres of back country; three scenic byways; Anasazi archeological sites; thousands of miles of streams and thousands of acres of lakes, outstanding wildlife watching, and elk hunting; and some of the best, if not stable, snow in the world. We are also well known for the mountain biking and four-wheel drive opportunities we have. Let’s not forget the Colorado Trail and Continental Divide National Scenic Trail.

Since the focus of this Panel is field level conflict, I’ll not burden you with an expansive Chamber of Commerce description of the rest of the recreational stuff we are blessed with.

Let’s get conflict on the table. Industrial Recreation is not environmentally benign. In fact it is much more unsettling to wildlife than just about any other activity in the Forest. Heavy road and trail use, motorized or non-motorized, when combined with three months of big game hunting season, keeps the creatures stirred up for most the spring, summer and fall.

Conflict between user groups is the most disconcerting aspect of public land recreation management. There is much too much snobbery, acrimony, and outright hostility in the woods. It seems that everyone feels they are better than everyone else, especially if they enjoy the woods in a different way. I don’t buy it. Are the fly and spin fishermen that much different? Horse packers and llama trekkers both are using beasts of burden. Bow and rifle hunters both have the same end result in mind.
Some will argue that Mountain Bikers and Hikers will never get along. It’s obvious that cross country skiers and snowmobilers are from separate worlds.

Get a grip, enough already!

Learn to peacefully co-exist. Exercise a little tolerance. Find places that you won’t be bothered. Avoid the popular haunts of your worst nightmare. The woods belong to all of us.

That said, I was invited here to speak about the motorized recreation issue. Since Roz McClellan wrote me the letter I could assume the issue has to do with many motorized vehicles running all over the place. If Jerry Abboud or Don Riggles had written the letter I would assume that it was related to the erosion of their opportunities due to road trail and area closures.

Motorized use of National Forests is authorized outside designated Wilderness. Some forests allow motorized vehicles to wander all over the Forest. Others limit motorized vehicles to designated roads and trails. As use has increased it has become obvious that allowing motorized travel everywhere outside Wilderness is not a wise idea. Most motorized users have agreed with that viewpoint and have simply asked that they not be deprived of opportunities on roads and trails.

We are only beginning to understand the relationships of roads and trails to their surroundings. When road and trail densities reach much more than one mile per square mile of country we are noticing impacts on wildlife. Ill designed stream crossings or travel routes immediately adjacent to riparian areas often have deleterious impacts. Some of the most controversial routes have evolved over a long period of time and while the type of use that originated the route has dwindled, motorized use has expanded.
SOME EXAMPLES

Forest Planning. Sets the stage for Travel Management decisions. The Rio Grande NP just finished a revision of their plan. In it we reduced the number of trails available for motorized use outside wilderness by approximately 60 percent. That change did not go unnoticed by the motorized community. In their appeal of the decision they reminded us of our obligations under RS 2477. RS 2477 is part of an 1966 mining law that says that any highways in existence on public domain prior to the reservation of that land for specific purposes are public rights-of-ways. They were right. We needed to coordinate with County Commissioners to determine which alignments may fall under this authority and hence County management.

The Como Lake road is a favorite 4x4 road with a well deserved reputation as one of the most challenging trails in the State if not the country. The last three-quarters of a mile between Como Lake and Blue Lake is mostly above timberline. The Conejos Peak Ranger had planned to close this segment to motorized use. When the County and 4x4 clubs got involved we realized that the road qualified for RS 2477 and negotiations started on how to manage the road for motorized use while protecting the high alpine tundra and keep sediment from filling Como Lake. After an on-site visit the 4x4 clubs agreed to install and maintain water drainage in the road and work on user ethics. The County Commissioners agreed to monitor the situation and close the road to motorized use if the work did not have the desired results.

Closing roads in Saguache County has been a source of controversy for a number of years. A 1908 County map showed about 60 old trails or wagon roads that probably qualified for RS 2477 designation. Several are in the Sangre-de-Cristo Wilderness. Most have been upgraded over the years and are in constant use. We proposed to close a number of trails that were used by the motorized community that also qualified for RS 2477. The County is currently working its way through the decision making process on these controversial trails. They have agreed to adopt and then vacate the trails in the
Wilderness. The County is currently working its way through the decision making process on these controversial trails. They have agreed to adopt and then vacate the trails in the Wilderness. They will look at the rest of the alignments and decide what to do on a case-by-case basis. They plan to be sensitive to resource needs as they make their decisions. Motorized advocates have promised to work with the Counties to do whatever work is needed to harden or relocate portions of trails that are causing problems.

Over the years some deals have been made, only to be forgotten over time. Motorized users fought the designation of the South San Juan wilderness because they had enjoyed it on snowmobiles and tote-goats for years. They withdrew their vehement resistance when a deal was made to allow continued motorized use of the Pole Creek area in exchange for the designation of the South San Juan. Time has passed and the players have changed. Now there is a significant thrust to remove all motorized use from the Pole Creek Area. It’s no wonder there is paranoia among the various user groups.

One of the brighter spots on the horizon is the effort to improve consistency in Travel Management on all public lands in the State. State and federal agencies are working together to provide consistent signing, maps and information to the public. This effort will make it much easier to be a responsible user of your public lands. A large stakeholders meeting will occur this summer to get ideas and make decisions on how best to accomplish our goals. We will not deal with site-specific allocations at this meeting. Your participation is encouraged.

ATVs are a much-discussed conveyance. Folks either love them or hate them. They are the current leading edge of motorized travel on public lands. Snowmobiles are getting lighter and more powerful. They are able to travel further faster into more hazardous terrain. Without substantial improvement in avalanche and survival awareness we are destined to lose many more snowmobilers in the future.
The next phenomenon to hit the hills will be the gyro-copters. These contraptions are getting affordable. They can take off and land in very limited space. They will change the way many people view and use the woods. Are we prepared for them? Should we regulate them in some way? Will they change the setting and experience one has when out and about?

In closing I'd like to tell a story about Cumbres Pass, a very popular snowmobiling and cross-country skiing destination. Snowmobiling started there in the late 1960s and has grown steadily since then. Cross-country skiing has also seen an increase in activity but not at the same pace as snowmobiling. About ten years ago a Yurt was placed on Neff Mountain. Skiers liked it and soon another Yurt was added. There are now four Yurts in the Cumbres Pass area. As the two types of winter use evolved so did the tension. A semi voluntary separation was agreed to which called for the skiers to use the area west of the highway and the snowmobilers to use the east side of the highway. Neither group is entirely satisfied.

The wife and I went down to Cumbres one weekend to see what the fuss was all about. There were over 300 vehicles with snowmobile trailers crammed into every wide spot and parking area. There were also approximately 60 vehicles that appeared to belong to skiers. We found a place to park and went skiing on the west side of the road. We climbed a ridge, made some turns and finally settled in for some lunch on an overlook. The day was a joy. We did not see anyone else. We did not hear a snowmobile as we ate lunch. It was on the east side of the highway about five miles away on an open ridge. As we drove home we wondered what’s the big deal. Why do people seem to have trouble tolerating one another? If we could have a wonderful day of skiing while others enjoyed snowmobiling why was it so difficult for other folks to find the same experience?

This winter I spent five days in the Weminuche Wilderness on skis. We went from Rio Gande Reservoir, over Weminuche Pass and came out at Vallecito Reservoir. We never
saw a soul or a human track. There are places to go to get away from motorized use. There are also mile upon mile of roads and trails to ride the latest technological aid to mobility. So I'm having trouble understanding what the "Motorized Recreation Issue" is.