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My Turn: Snowmobiling in an age of climate change

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For the Monitor

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The cold and snowy end of winter has been a boon for New Hampshire's snowmobilers. But it's indeed too good to be true.

In meetings earlier this winter between ecosystem scientists who study climate change at the 8,000-acre Hubbard Brook Experimental Forest in Woodstock and members of the snowmobiling community, the group pondered the future of an industry that relies so heavily on cold air temperatures, sufficient snowfall, soil frost, and frozen lakes and wetlands. Unfortunately, the science of winter climate change puts a grim statistical overlay on the sport's future:

- Since 1955, mean annual winter air temperatures at Hubbard Brook have increased markedly, from 20.3 degrees Fahrenheit to 23.9.
- The duration of snow cover has decreased by 22 days, with snow disappearing 10 days earlier than in the past.
- The type of precipitation has changed significantly, with mixed precipitation (rain/sleet/snow) doubling while the amount falling as snow has been halved.
- At Mirror Lake, where ice-in and ice-out studies began in 1967, there are 33 fewer days of ice cover.

Furthermore, scientists predict that temperatures will continue to rise, leading to more rain-on-snow events; that ice storms and heavy rain events will wreak havoc to trail systems; and that snow droughts or patchy snowstorms will result in snow-starved areas.

None of this was surprising to the snowmobile club members and state land managers who maintain New Hampshire's 7,200 miles of trails. Within their recent memory, the recreational season has been

shortened by 6-8 weeks. State land managers who rely on licensing fees to maintain the trails, in partnership with local clubs working with private landowners, have seen snowmobile registrations plummet in years of low snow.

But don't count out snowmobilers yet. The snowmobiling community has proven resilient in the face of discouraging climate news, using new technologies and practices to adapt its sport to changing conditions.

The evolving sport of snowmobiling now includes: smoother trails, with all rocks and stumps removed, thus allowing trails to be used with only 6-8 inches of snow on the ground, and even less snow later in the season; better sleds that are quieter, more fuel efficient and travel longer distances, sometimes 100-200 miles per day; and improved ways of dealing with water, including oversized culverts and ditches, sturdier bridges, and trails re-routed around waterways prone to thawing or flooding.

The ultimate solution to climate change will rest on humankind reducing its carbon footprint by cutting consumption of fossil fuels.

In our region, keeping forests as forests should also be an important land-use strategy to maintain carbon sinks. We believe the snowmobiling community – acting together with climate scientists, land managers, conservationists and other recreational users of the forest – can act proactively to protect the sport it cherishes, and in so doing raise its profile as stewards of the natural world. We suggest the following:

First, don't squander what has already been accomplished. Protect the trails that have already been built. It would be a tragedy if these hard-won trails were allowed to disappear back into the forest.

Second, work with researchers to monitor changing winter conditions across the landscape in order to determine which sections of trails may be most endangered.

Third, manage trails with climate change in mind – using best management practices – or move them if they are at risk from flooding, erosion or spring thawing.

Fourth, be prepared to try new models. In Maine, the Division of Parks and Public Lands actively encourages year-round, multiuse trails that have been “hardened” against climate change. Nearly 2,600 miles of trails serve a range of recreational users who traditionally didn't share trails, including snowmobilers, ATV users, mountain bikers and horseback riders.

Finally, conduct policy-making for recreation with winter climate change in mind. This should include future forest plans for the White Mountain National Forest and also how wildlife and environmental agencies might alter regulations to encourage best management practices for snowmobile trails.

A healthy, resilient snowmobiling industry can help ensure both the protection of the natural world and its enjoyment by residents, even as climate change rolls inexorably across the winter landscape.

(David Sleeper is executive director of the Hubbard Brook Research Foundation in North Woodstock.)

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