

Biodiversity Assessment: SNOWMOBILES in YELLOWSTONE
(Advanced Reading)

Background Info

Yellowstone in Winter: The Role of Snowmobiles and Snowcoaches



When the first motorized, oversnow vehicles began coming to Yellowstone National Park in the mid-20th century, they entered a winter wonderland virtually without people for the park's first 75 years. Until those early snowplanes, snowcats, snowcoaches and snowmobiles arrived, handfuls of hardy winter park keepers and visitors on snowshoes and skis were the only human presence.

The opening of America's first national park to more convenient winter visitation was a sensation—and, eventually, a controversy. Suddenly, many more people could experience the magic of Yellowstone in its most extraordinary season. The growth of mass access to the park in winter came with trade-offs. The early machines were noisier and smokier than today's snowmobiles and snowcoaches. In those early years, however, the number of snow vehicles was so few—and the novelty and opportunity of visiting a “new” winter destination were so great—that the drawbacks appeared minor to most.

Another access alternative—plowing some or all of the park roads in winter—had been promoted by Yellowstone's neighbor communities and other advocates since the 1930s. But park managers felt that option was not desirable or practical when compared with the growing popularity of snowmobiles and coaches. Yellowstone in winter was a different place—and this was a different way to visit it than in summer.



Snowmobiles as we now think of them—one—or two-seaters with handlebars and open cockpits—first arrived at Yellowstone's gates in 1963. By the early 1970s, when the park began to regulate oversnow vehicles, the sport was exploding: Peak sales of half a million machines in 1971 and nearly two million between 1970 and 1973. But strict management of motorized uses in the park did not occur until the early 2000s, when limits on the number of machines, speed zones, nighttime closures and other measures were adopted. In the meantime, management was a challenge. More

people were coming in winter. More of them were aboard snow vehicles. And with a parallel rise in the popularity of human-powered journeys into the winter backcountry, conflicts were inevitable.

For many visitors, the machines were the best and most practical way for everyone, and not only athletic types on skis or snowshoes, to enjoy the vast park and its winter extremes. The “sleds” also were a useful tool for Yellowstone personnel to do their jobs in a daunting work environment. Finally, they were a business opportunity for park “gateway” communities hoping to escape, at last, the feast-and-famine cycle of tourism around the park. Until snow vehicles came, Yellowstone to them was a travel hot spot from spring to fall—and cold as ice through winter.

But for other lovers of the park, motorized oversnow use shattered an almost sacred silence and solitude that had blanketed Yellowstone since it first became a park. To them, the noisy machines threatened wildlife already stressed to the limit by the park’s unforgiving winters. So they raised vocal protests, even as they held their breath against clouds of blue smoke and covered their ears against the machines’ whine.

With time, the technology for both motorized and human-powered winter activity improved. Better cross-country skis and snowshoes and mechanical advances and efficiencies in snowmobiles fed the interest in winter trips into America’s snow-covered backcountry. Yellowstone’s winter use boomed—and the motorized sleds became the principal way to tour and see the park in winter.

In the early 1990s, snowmobile reliability and comfort had improved vastly. But continued use of two-stroke engines, with a dirtier mix of gas and oil, worsened winter air quality as traffic rose. The snowcoach fleet still contained a number of the original Bombardier models, whose engines lacked modern pollution controls. The atmosphere was sometimes crowded and noisy.

Although park management and policy did not allow self-guided snowmobilers to run wild through the park, there were some abuses. Critics reported incursions into roadless parts of Yellowstone from adjacent national forests where snowmobiling was allowed. Some visitors also complained of snowmobilers veering off main park routes to race up cut slopes and roadside high spots, a thrill-seeking practice known as “poaching.” These occurrences were isolated and rare. But they entered the permanent lore of good-vs.-bad in the rising debate. When the Yellowstone conflicts came to a head in the early 1990s, nearly two decades of winter planning—and lawsuits over it—were the result.

Even as differing viewpoints hardened, some of the fundamental conflicts on the ground began to change. With the turn of the new century, more modern snowmobiles with less-polluting, four-stroke engines were becoming commercially available. Commercial snowcoach operators began to add newer vehicles with modern pollution controls. They also began to convert the older fleet with cleaner-burning engines, transmissions and exhaust systems. With the adoption of reduced speed limits, daily caps on snow vehicle numbers, nighttime closures and guided, single-file entry into the park, a stricter regime of snow vehicle management began to take hold. The blue smoke lifted. The piercing whine ended.

And so today, winter recreation in Yellowstone still focuses largely on the managed use of snowmobiles and snowcoaches. As the park and the National Park Service prepare the next winter use plan, snow machines are undoubtedly the primary issue and concern. Although the park has made significant progress, a long-term plan for winter operation is not yet in place.

In the end, three key documents guide the operation and management of Yellowstone: [The 1872 act of Congress](#) that created the park, the [National Park Service Organic Act of 1916](#) that established the agency, and the [Park Service’s Management Policies](#), most recently revised in 2006. All of them express the core duty of the Park Service to protect park resources for public enjoyment now and in the future. The new management blueprint that results from this planning effort must apply those same principles to the day-to-day operations and needs of Yellowstone in winter.