

## SNOWMOBILING IN THE 1980'S:

### CONTINUED PROGRESS FOR A MATURE RECREATIONAL ACTIVITY<sup>1</sup>

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In less than two decades, snowmobiling has changed from a novelty to a way of life for some 20,000,000 Canadian and American citizens of all ages. Why has snowmobiling continued to mushroom? Why did the challenges of inadequate safe use areas, public criticism and skepticism and primitive machines fail to doom the activity to a passing fad?

The answer is two-fold. First, through snowmobiling the unique grandeur of winter outdoors is unlocked for North Americans of all ages and of all levels of physical ability.

The second reason for the success of snowmobiling is "power through partnership". A unique array of imaginative and active individuals in government and industry, concerned enthusiasts and tourism officials together have made snowmobiling an integral part of the lifestyle of North American families.

In spite of poor snow in many areas, this past season has been a time of excitement for those connected with snowmobiling. New friends and supporters of the industry and sport appeared in high government posts, in the major media and in the tourism/leisure sector. This new positive face of snowmobiling stands in stark contrast to the image of the sport in the early 1970's.

A good part of this new image is the direct result of the snowmobile community's ongoing commitment to confronting and dispelling myths connected with the activity and speaking out publicly about snowmobiling and the people who enjoy it. The snowmobile story is being told at public hearings, on radio and television talk shows, in tourism campaigns, in newspaper and magazine articles, through letters to the editor and in face-to-face communications with elected and career government officials.

Today's new and quiet snowmobiles make complaints rare except for instances of operator misuse. As a result, snowmobile sound level concerns are yesterday's problem.

### INDUSTRY SALES

The 1978-1979 winter was a notable successful selling season for the snowmobile industry, as retail sales of new snowmobiles climbed to 267,000 units, 18% above the level of the previous year. Key contributing factors included: a new mood of optimism among dealers following the successful 1977-1978 selling season (which saw a 16% sales increase over the winter of 1976-77), an exciting lineup of new snowmobiles in all price categories; good snow conditions in most areas of North America; steady improvements in snowmobile use opportunities; and new positive media treatment. The sales increase was most vigorous in the United States, which saw a 24% jump.

Unfortunately, our sales report for the selling season just concluded is not quite so rosy. Because of a record absence of snow in our prime marketing areas, our sales are below last year. I know this phenomenon of poor snow conditions is one our skiing friends would also like to see disappear forever. The long-term prognosis for snowmobiling is excellent, however.

As we look to a new decade of snowmobiling activity, the snowmobile industry expects that we will see outstanding opportunities. Demographic information and analysis of societal trends lead us to conclude that exciting, novel, flexible and outdoor recreational activities will experience continued growth in the 1980's. Latent interest in the sport participation in snowmobiling is likely to increase substantially over the next five years.

In fact, study after study demonstrates that snowmobiling activity has increased sharply. At the same time, the sport is experiencing a curious decline in visibility in

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populated snowbelt regions. This reduced visibility of snowmobiles is not the result of decreased activity; rather, it is a consequence of a new trail networks which take snowmobilers to the scenic natural areas they seek and away from populated areas with potential environmental and social conflicts.

#### SNOWMOBILE TOURISM GROWS

Progress in expanding snowmobile tourism opportunities continues at a fast clip. A fine example of the new prevailing attitude towards winter tourism is found in the theme selected by Minnesota for its promotional campaign last season:

"If God meant for people to vacation in warm climates, why did He make winter in Minnesota so much fun?"

New promotional campaigns featuring snowmobiling are now being mounted in a large number of jurisdictions including Michigan, Manitoba, South Dakota, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, and by the Canadian Government Office of Tourism. The latter's campaign included full color advertisements placed in major North American magazines lengthy, well-written articles which have been picked up across the U.S. and Canada. One of the articles began:

"Canada is a snowmobiler's paradise. From coast to snowy coast, thousands of Canadians and winter visitors are hitting the trails, making this one of Canada's fastest growing sports."

#### THE FUTURE OF SNOWMOBILING

Two factors central to the long-term health of the snowmobile industry and sport are access to trails and other use areas; and availability of energy.

##### Land and Trails

If participation in snowmobiling is to increase in the 1980's at a continuing fast rate, all segments of the snowmobile community must continue to coordinate their efforts to expand opportunities for safe and fun outdoor winter activity. The snowmobile community has a stake in countless public land use planning activities as well as federal legislation on such issues as Wilderness. In the latter case, the snowmobile community finds itself, along with a myriad of other recreational groups, sorely neglected. Its interests lie neither with vocal commodity producers nor vocal preservationist interests, yet those two antagonists receive the prepon-

derance of attention from elected officials.

Providing land areas for snowmobiling is but the first step in meeting current and future snowmobiler needs. Just as important is the need to maintain and expand government programs to fund the construction and grooming of snowmobile trails and the construction and maintenance of parking areas, warming shelters, and other facilities that are essential to safe enjoyment of snowmobiling and the growth of the sport.

Acceptance of the desirability of snowmobile trails and responsibility for their creation and maintenance is now evident throughout government agencies in snowbelt North America. Slowly but surely, the traditional view that outdoor recreation ends with the coming of snow is being displaced by a sense that winter offers the opportunity to enjoy unique fun and beauty outdoors. This changed perspective will be extremely helpful over the next decade, and should boost the current total of 90,000 miles of marked and maintained public trails for snowmobilers across North America.

Without appropriate levels of funding, adequate, safe and enjoyable trails cannot exist. Without suitable funding, snowmobile program enforcement and youthful operator training programs cannot aid in assuring that the sport is safe for North American family members of all ages.

To support trail development and maintenance, the snowmobile community has been active in promoting the benefits of a good trails program paid for with snowmobiling-generated revenues. Organized snowmobilers have criticized governments for failing to protect the safety of citizens where there are insufficient safe, well maintained trails and applauded governments that build and groom safe use areas and trails. Tourism professionals with an interest in winter have added a "commercial interest" voice, urging trails and facilities to support their quest for winter tourist dollars. These efforts have worked exceedingly well in expanding spending for snowmobile trails during the past decade.

Yet tight government budgets in the coming decade will pose a challenge to all recreational activities, including snowmobiling. "Earmarking" of funds -- especially snowmobile registration fees and gasoline taxes on snowmobile fuel -- will prove more difficult in the days ahead. Annual campaigns to maintain and boost snowmobile trail program budgets will be increasingly important in the 1980's.

One important factor greatly aiding the

expansion of snowmobile trails is the snowmobile itself. Today's snowmobiles are remarkably quiet -- operating at a level 94% below their counterparts of ten years before. New snowmobiles are certified independently as emitting no more than 78 dBA under a full-throttle acceleration test and no more than 73 dBA at a constant speed of 15 mph. But even those figures are deceptive. U.S. Forest Service researcher Robin Harrison, a mechanical engineer, reported recently:

"Snowmobiles almost always emit less noise under actual operating conditions than under certification conditions...even trying as hard as we could...we could not make any of the snowmobiles come up to 78 dB(A).

"...The results I have described, along with...other data, are incorporated in the noise pollution prediction method developed by the Forest Service...(U)nder the absolute stillest, most quiet background conditions that I have ever recorded, the method estimates that these new snowmobiles would be barely audible, to a very carefully listening listener, only a very small percentage of the time, at 3000 feet...Bear in mind that the ambient sound level I am describing is less than 20 dB(A)--an extremely unusual situation. Under the more usual conditions found in a wildland or outdoor recreation situation, with the ambient reading in the 30 dB(A) range, snowmobiles would probably not be detected beyond one-fourth of that distance...(U)nder conditions of a developed winter campground, which included some typical campground sounds ...at distances beyond 400 feet, the snowmobile was only barely detectable above the normal campground noise."

Improvements in the machine go beyond sound levels. Today's snowmobiles are dependable, easy to operate and safe for family members of all ages. Virtually every major safety-related component meets a rigid voluntary standard. Moreover, an independent testing company provides the public with certification that these standards are met. Every snowmobile being produced for sale in North America is currently covered by this program.

#### Gasoline Availability

Also critical to the future of the sport of snowmobiling is the continued availability of gasoline to power the machines. Since 1973, the snowmobile community has fought for -- and succeeded to date in securing -- equitable treatment of snowmobiling in energy policy decisions.

Beginning with the Arab oil embargo in 1973, the need for snowmobile community vigil-

ance on energy issues has been made clear repeatedly. The U.S. House of Representatives considered a 20% excise tax on snowmobiles, boats and private aircraft in 1975 and rejected it. During the winter of 1978, the U.S. Congress contemplated imposing mandatory energy conservation measures on various vehicles used for recreation and chose not to do so. During 1979, the U.S. Congress considered and defeated a discriminatory gas rationing plan.

The next several years may bring similar misguided energy-related challenges to snowmobiling. In both Canada and the U.S., pressure will be exerted by the federal governments to force conservation of energy, especially gasoline. Pricing policies, allocation systems and perhaps even rationing programs will be utilized.

We feel quite confident that any proposals narrowly targeted at snowmobiling or other motorized recreation activities will be ultimately rejected both on grounds of fairness and on the political ramifications from a strong and unified snowmobiler community. Our belief is based upon the minuscule amount of gasoline used by each snowmobiler, and by all snowmobiles collectively.

The average snowmobile uses some .89 gallon per hour. The sport, collectively, consumes 12/100ths of 1% of all gasoline used in the United States. These consumption figures, based upon federal contractors' work, have been widely acknowledged. The Council on Environmental Quality published the report "Off Road Vehicles on Public Land" in May 1979. That report concluded:

"ORV and snowmobile use represents such a small fraction of the nation's energy consumption that even if they were entirely eliminated, the energy saved would probably not be worth the effort."

That conclusion was further reinforced on the floor of the U.S. Senate by fifteen Senators in a colloquy on snowmobiling last July. These Senators, Democrats and Republicans, from the east and from the west and representing all points on the ideological spectrum, pledged their efforts to assure fairness in federal policies affecting snowmobiling and to assure the availability of gasoline and the scenic natural areas on which the sport depends. A few quotes follow:

from the Honorable Max Baucus, U.S. Senator from Montana --

"When we start creating priorities among various users of energy, we run the risk of making serious mistakes...I simply pose the

question of what kind of a society would we have if we allowed no energy use for recreation? Either indoor or outdoor? I believe that recreation -- leisure time activity -- is very important to our form of society, to our mental and physical health. Therefore, when we plan for energy uses, I urge ample and due consideration to be given to the use of energy in recreation."

from the Honorable Jake Garn, U.S.  
Senator from Utah --

"Whether it is the energy to allow a worker to get to his job, or to allow a Pennsylvania family to travel to the West by automobile to see our national parks, or the energy needed by snowmobilers to overcome the barriers of freezing temperatures and deep snow, we need to take the steps now which will assure its availability."

from the Honorable Donald Riegle, Jr.,  
U.S. Senator from Michigan --

"Snowmobiles use very little gasoline, accounting for barely 12/100 of 1 percent of our national consumption. I don't think that anyone in the recreation industry would quarrel with the need to conserve fuel, and to restrict use during severe supply shortages, such as those that would trigger rationing. My point is that any rationing plan must be constructed in an equitable manner, so that all forms of travel are impacted in an equal fashion."

#### SUMMARY

Compared to its first two decades, snowmobiling's third decade should prove clearly positive and less volatile. As snowmobile trail networks continue to grow so, too, will the network of resorts and support facilities serving the snowmobiling public. Happily, evidence today suggests that actions by government, by snowmobiler associations, by governmental and private tourism organizations and by the snowmobile industry are well underway to continue to make snowmobiling a popular element of the North American winter recreational scene.

Moreover, by working with the nordic ski community, government officials at various levels, tourism interests and others, the snowmobile community believes it can help make winter outdoors more fun for Americans of all ages -- offering a safe, exciting and healthful alternative to sedentary, indoor winter lifestyles.