

# The long way to the wilderness *by Morgan Hite*

WHEN I SUMMITTED MOUNT WASHINGTON on the Appalachian Trail in 1982, hiking from Georgia to Maine, I found ... a parking lot, a cafeteria and a lot of people. There was a road to the top of Mount Washington! I usually feel purified, refreshed and enlightened (as well as bone-weary and bug-bitten) when I reach a summit or a remote lake. But here, surrounded by people whose chief concern was to find the washrooms, who had come too quickly and easily from the city, I felt the quality of *place* was ruined. It seemed a shame to allow motorized access to the tops of mountains – or any other sacred place.

Even back then, I could have hiked a non-motorized mountain in the United States. Protected sanctuaries of forest, mountain and desert date back to the 1964 Wilderness Act, which set aside large, unroaded areas in perpetuity. It is good for the soul to hike in and see no signs of motorized vehicles for days.

Not everyone gushes about wilderness areas the way I do. There's plenty of residual ire in the western U.S. over these areas, which are continually under attack by local conservative politicians. The lack of due process back in 1964 when a few well-connected American conservationists slipped the bill through Congress haunts the non-motorized zones. In a saga you can read about in newspapers in Utah or Colorado, people "accidentally" drive bulldozers into them, declare them unlawful and threaten to use legal loopholes to wipe them out. Nothing draws anger like a non-motorized area.

There's no national system of non-motorized areas in Canada, and it is unlikely we can get one as easily as the U.S. did. A 21st-century process north of the border won't see the federal government making decrees without consulting the people. (We don't do that in Canada, right, Prime Minister Harper?) The Canadian way is to consult all the stakeholders, hear all the sides and, after a long process, hopefully come to an agreement that people are prepared to live with for generations.

This is just what's going on where I live in the Bulkley Valley of British Columbia, a mountain-girt locale far to the north of Vancouver (14 hours of driving, if you come in the motorized way). The locally-convened process combines an interest in establishing non-motorized areas with recognition that there are *many* forms of recreation in the backcountry, not just jeeps and hikers. Local horseback riders,

mountain bikers, hikers and quad riders come together at a table with a facilitator. They discuss the values and needs of each group, where they like to go and where they can agree on non-motorized designations.

The process is good – it has to be. Even if you agree with Edward Abbey that the internal combustion engine is of the devil, you probably want to get along with your neighbour. We have a tricky assignment: creating non-motorized spaces and respecting those who see no reason for them.

The Bulkley Valley might be an ideal place for B.C.'s first community-driven Recreation Access Management Plan (RAMP) process. With 600,000 hectares of terrain and only 10,000 residents, plus about 1,000 fishermen who fly in every the fall from the U.S. and Europe for the famous steelhead

angling, there's enough room for everyone. On 10 hikes last summer, none in a designated non-motorized area, I never met anyone who was burning gas (except a helicopter that flew past on one summit). There should be plenty of room to designate separate areas for hikers, mountain bikers, horseback riders and quad riders, as well as some that are only for wildlife habitat.

The outcome looks promising. Jay Gilden, who sits at the table for the local hiking group, says, "The areas in which our interests overlap far exceed our differences. It's a love of the landscape, the enjoyment of going out there."

Nonetheless, building relationship between recreationists of different stripes has all the challenges of building peace in any conflict zone. The skiers and snowmobilers still have bad feelings about the fight they had decades ago over the creation of a provincial non-motorized park. After years of feeling helpless at the noise and smell of the ATVs, and the way quads tear up alpine areas and fragile wetlands, some of the hikers have become confrontational and reactive. The quad riders say the hikers are intolerant and think they own the land. These groups have come to see themselves as different kinds of people, and undoing that is essential to creating a lasting agreement on wilderness areas.

*Morgan Hite is a cartographer and writer, but he's happiest when he's far away from civilization with a few good friends. He's lived in the Bulkley Valley for 17 years.*

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