

# CONFLICT!

## A Reality Check



Editorial by Art Seamans,  
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**F**or many years now, the leadership of the so-called environmental groups and anti-access organizations have attempted to use social conflict between recreational groups to advance their goal, which is Wilderness designation for as much land as possible. They

have, in some instances, succeeded in thwarting the intent of Executive Orders (EO) 11644 and 11989, which were intended to minimize conflicts among the various uses (not users) of public lands. The result has been many acres and many miles of trails lost to motorized and mechanized, or even equestrians uses.

Irrespective of the way the EO's have been co-opted by these so-called

environmental organizations, social conflict is a real thing. It must be properly managed without allowing those philosophically opposed to vehicle recreation to use it as a tool to leverage their real agenda.

The scholarly definition of recreation conflict is; "interference to a user, who is trying to achieve a goal in a recreation activity and the interference is due to another recreational user's behavior." (Jacob and Schreyer -1980). "Such recreation conflicts involve several major components: the user's motivations or goals in engaging in a recreation activity, the user's activity style, resource dependence by the user, the mode or means of experience, the lifestyle tolerance of other users, and the user's sensitivity to conflict (Wang and Dawson - 7/1/2000).

Without a doubt some users of the public lands feel conflict when they encounter other users whose motivations are different, who participate in different activities, or who are simply utilizing the same resources. Without a doubt some people have a low tolerance for those with dissimilar values and some have a high sensitivity to what they perceive as conflict. That is the human condition and is to be expected. We have a finite amount of public land; what we have now is all we will ever have.



*Rafters splash their way through Upper Bernard Rapid in the Wild Snake River.*

—photo supplied by Art Seamans

Congress has already settled part of that question by designating 106,498,016 acres as Wilderness where all motorized and mechanized recreation is prohibited forever. Many tens of millions of acres are also logically placed off-limits to certain uses because of other resource concerns, such as key wildlife winter range. Other lands are simply unsuitable or undesirable for certain recreation pursuits. So now we have displaced most of the recreational use into a much smaller world.

### MANAGING CONFLICT

Conflict is an integral part of the human condition. We first experience it when we leave the warm confines of our mother's womb to be greeted with a stout slap on our behinds. From then on it is downhill—establishing ownership of toys other children covet with a loud "MINE!" Competing in school, sports and jobs to establish our position in society is as natural as breathing. When our space, possessions, status or security are challenged, we bristle and defend, sometimes with words and sometimes with actions.

In managing outdoor recreation and responding to assertions of conflict, managers need to objectively determine the seriousness of the alleged conflicts, and allocate the existing recreation opportunity in a balanced and fair manner, in accordance with the land managing agency's broad mandate under law.

There is real conflict and there is manufactured conflict. Land managers must learn to tell the difference. Comments demanding exclusive use because of alleged conflict are to be expected and must be objectively analyzed in the public land planning processes. Sadly, managers themselves sometimes jump on the conflict bandwagon, driven by their own biases or by striving to be peacemakers.

Management decisions driven by the desire to alleviate someone's perception of conflict often backfire. Those alleging conflict, or are simply intolerant of other users, most often are rewarded with exclusive use. Exclusive use necessitates regulation, creating a need for enforcement and thus creating real conflict. The land managers now find themselves with a legal obligation to arrest people who are engaged in an activity that was once legal and appropriate, and subject them to serious civil and criminal penalties.



Major rapids, like Rush Creek in this photo, provide commercial powerboat passengers with a thrill that will last a lifetime.

—photo supplied by Art Seamans

### TEACHING INTOLERANCE: WINTER WILDLANDS ALLIANCE:

The Winter Wildlands Alliance (WWA), a foundation funded organization dedicated to exclusive use of human-powered snowsports on public lands, is noted for its skills and success in manufacturing conflict.

Indeed, at a WWA "advocacy skills

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conference” in Boise, Idaho, Dale Neubauer of the Central Oregon Backcountry Skiers stated their position succinctly: “Shared use is an antiquated philosophy and it doesn't work”. “Motorized and non-motorized can't share.” “The solution is to close to motorized use.” Kathie Rivers, a Ketchum attorney, encouraged activists to document conflicts. Other presenters taught ways to monitor user conflict and resource damage to make their case to the agencies.

Wilderness advocacy groups are actively teaching the concept of manufacturing or artificially-elevating social conflict. Indeed, some of these groups produce “citizen handbooks” that teaches their supporters how to gain exclusive use by alleging “conflict.”

### HELLS CANYON: A CASE STUDY OF CONFLICT MISMANAGEMENT

Liz Close, Director of Recreation for the Intermountain Region of the Forest Service participated in the WWA conference and is quoted on the WWA web site as saying; “Unlike the days when conflicts meant mining vs. recreation, what we're facing are conflicts within recreational use.” Most certainly her comments reflect the view of most land managing agencies today.

But how much of the conflict is real and how much is contrived, fueled by activist workshops such as the one in which Ms. Close participated? If there really are significant conflict issues, how should the agencies respond? The story of Hells Canyon's Snake River, a world-class powerboating waterway in Idaho provides an interesting example of how not to solve the conflict conundrum.

During the “collaborative” process initiated by the Forest Service to develop a river recreation management plan, the idea surfaced to have exclusive use for floaters one week and powerboaters the

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next. That option was considered dead on arrival by all involved stakeholders. No one was willing to give up half of his or her boating season! The results would have been disastrous for both floaters and powerboaters. All stakeholders decided that, faced with this option, they could get along quite nicely.

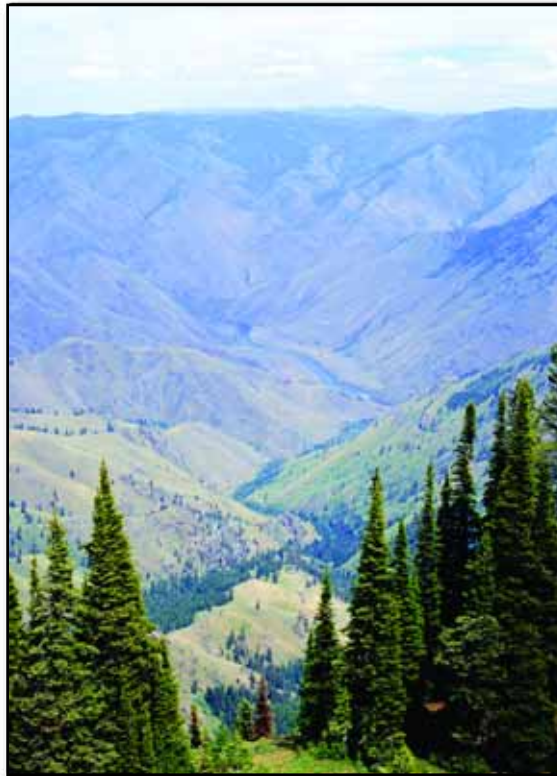
However, some floating groups and wilderness advocacy organizations began to encourage people to write letters to the Forest Service explaining that motorized use was causing conflict and demanding the river be closed to all motorboats. At one point a party of radical private floaters tried to generate incidents by paddling in front of powerboats with cameras running to record the results. While this filming stunt failed, the letters and verbal complaints took their toll. Forest Service planners, influenced by a well organized effort by anti-access organizations, concluded that powerboating was incompatible with other uses. Incredibly, the Forest Service ignored and discarded the recommendations of the "collaborative" process they initiated, and eliminated powerboats from the heart of the canyon for 21 days each summer, nearly half of the peak boating season. Understand that environmental concerns in no way drove this decision. It was based solely on pressure put on the FS by leadership of wilderness advocacy organizations and the desire of the Forest Service to eliminate or reduce social conflict.

The unintended outcome was serious and extends far beyond Hells Canyon. The decision nearly eliminated any and all support for "collaborative planning" from within the Idaho OHV community. Powerboaters justifiably felt betrayed and the Forest Service lost credibility and trust. Furthermore, as a result of this awful planning decision, we now have real anger and conflict on a river where user groups had always coexisted successfully in the past.

#### **A SOLUTION?**

Hells Canyon isn't an isolated case when it comes to rewarding an intolerant minority at the expense of a tolerant

majority or trading serious conflict for what were actually minor dislikes and occasional incidents. In just about every case where non-motorized users have shouted conflict, they have been rewarded by excluding the folks they don't like. They don't always get everything they want, but they do get a substantial part of it and motorized recreation is



*Hells Canyon from Hat Point in Oregon. The Hells Canyon National Recreation Area includes 70 miles of the Snake from Hells Canyon Dam north to the Oregon-Washington State line. —photo supplied by Art Seamans*

squeezed into smaller and smaller areas. The non-motorized users and wilderness advocacy groups never lose anything. By promoting conflict they have everything to gain and nothing to lose. This has become a successful strategy and is being shared with anti-motorized groups all over the country.

The organized OHV community must challenge this. All too often, we face the situation where land management planning boils down to how much motorized and mechanized recreation should give up and how much should be dedicated to exclusive nonmotorized use. This gives us no incentive to participate in collaborative planning processes, except to limit our losses.

Simply put, our adversaries have no reason to compromise.

The way to level this playing field is obvious; both sides must have something to lose. If non-motorized recreation makes its case for conflict and incompatibility, they should stand an equal chance of losing their access. Managers should give serious consideration to saying, "this is a traditional and important snowmobiling area and you have made a compelling case that there is conflict between you and the snowmobilers; you say "motorized and non-motorized uses can't share." The area is, therefore, closed to non-motorized winter recreation." It wouldn't take many decisions like this to bring a real spirit of compromise to the table.

#### **SUMMARY**

Decisions driven by real and substantive resource problems are not at question here

Neither are areas such as designated wilderness where motorized recreation is excluded by law. However, social issues such as conflict, drive many allocation decisions. There is no question that these decisions must be made, but the present methods by which they are made must change. All citizen owners of the public lands must be treated equitably. When striving for compromise all parties must have an equal chance of winning or losing. The public land agencies must be able to manage conflict in the context of its real importance in the given situation. They must also recognize that we don't have enough public lands that offer high quality recreation experiences to give every recreation pursuit its own exclusive access area.

—Art Seamans worked 34 years for the Forest Service, much of that time in recreation, wilderness and river management. He now does staff work with Sandra Mitchell for the Hells Canyon Alliance and Idaho State Snowmobile Association. In his spare time he guides fishermen and tourists in Hells Canyon. Art and his wife Joyce make their home in Lewiston, Idaho. He may be contacted through the BlueRibbon Coalition at: 208-237-1008, email: <brmag@sharetrails.org>. ❖