

The Enemy Within

Having been involved in the sport for over 50 years now, we've seen the growth and rapid rise to fame of snowmobiling and are now witness to what could very well be our demise. Over the years we've fought and conquered many battles, from government emissions regulations to rising fuel prices to restrictive land use policies, but these could very well pale in comparison to our current number one enemy – and all we have to do to find it is look in the mirror.

That's right snowmobilers, take a look in the mirror to find the current cause of fear and demise of having places to ride our beloved snowmobiles. We are truly our own worst enemy. We could very well be the main cause of the decline of our sport.

For the past several years we've been warning you and talking about a couple of subjects that are having a negative impact on our sport, both in terms of riding areas but also in the eyes of the general public and our image as a user group in general. Perhaps you know where we're going with this, because we'd like to think those of you reading this are not the problem and that we're preaching to the choir, so to speak.

There are several elephants in the room. Loud exhaust pipes and trespassing on private land are two of them. All one has to do is read some of the colorful commentary on social media to see how so many snowmobilers do not understand the importance of these two subjects to get a glimpse of why it has become such a problem. Many snowmobilers evidently think it is their right to make as much noise as they damn well please, and they think they are doing no harm by cutting across open field and riding outside the groomed portion of a trail when it suits them.

Of course, these riders will use all kinds of logical arguments to support and bolster their positions, claiming riders drinking alcohol is a bigger problem or that riders going too fast kills, but loud pipes and trespassing kills nobody. Sounds pretty convincing on the surface. If we're going to moan and complain, why not moan and complain about behavior that gets riders killed?

We could easily spend our entire efforts in this column talking about the problems so many areas are having with drinking alcohol and riders going too fast. In a single day there were five riders killed in Michigan, and in a single weekend five more died in Wisconsin. Yes, these areas had some really good snow and there were a huge number of riders out putting on miles so the exposure was much greater, thus the argument to educate riders to not drink and ride and to slow down is very important. Too many people are going way too fast for the conditions and distance they can see, losing control of their machine and hitting things or going off a corner and crashing. One day saw three riders getting a medivac helicopter ride in a single county in the U.P. of Michigan, not good.

Clearly common sense wasn't handed out in equal amounts as we continue to have riders crash into each other, with head-on collisions killing both riders. It happens, more often than we would like to admit. Again, going too fast, riding on the WRONG side of the trail, being intoxicated, these are usually the factors in such incidents. Slow down, stay sober, ride right. Pretty simple.

So yes, these kinds of behavior need to be addressed. We feel like we're talking about these safety items and subjects quite often, to the point our readers should be well-educated as to the hazards and risks. Out west the more common cause of death is avalanche, and while we have made great strides in rider education and carrying the right gear the past several years we continue to hear of multiple deaths each year involving experienced riders, those who did take the training, those who were carrying the right gear. While many slides are being avoided, sometimes riders are in the wrong place at the wrong time, or make poor decisions. And sometimes it just gets the best of their judgment and they get caught.

Sometimes referred to as the victimless offenses, we come back to the subjects of loud pipes and trespassing on private land. These two are closing trails and causing snowmobile clubs major headaches in having to re-route trails to less suitable locations – roadsides, road ditches, railroad grades, or worse yet – all out closure. All it takes is one landowner who has been disrespected one too many times to revoke their permission and that trail could forever be closed. Sometimes it takes years to secure a new route, clear the path, sign it and make it a viable option. Sometimes it never does reopen.

Areas where the groomed trail network relies on large amounts of private land are most vulnerable. The land owners do not want to hear the stupid-loud sleds all day long, or all night long. They don't want their horses or cattle exposed to the non-stop barrage. Often times it amounts to knowing when to keep quiet. Like, if you're in a residential area keep your noise down, don't be a damn hot dog. But no, some snowmobilers want to be the tough guy and show off how much noise they can make.

Or, when the trail gets bumpy they ride outside of the groomed trail and onto the fresh snow with no tracks, smooth and virgin. There are often multiple signs indicating this is PRIVATE LAND and to STAY ON TRAIL, but snowmobilers seemingly are not capable of reading English. Really? You know what we mean. They all see and read the signs – and they ignore them. Snowmobilers ignore the signs put up by the hard-working club members, disrespecting the clubs, the trails, the land owners and the sport. Quite frankly, they do not care if that trail is open or closed next year. Idiots? Clearly.

As they say, united we stand - divided we fall. If we, as a user group, don't clean up our act then others will step in and clean it up for us, and it won't be in a good way. Be it the private land owners, increased enforcement, government regulators passing new laws and speed limits, or increased public pressure to get our act together to stop the killing, it will happen. Again, the choice is ours. Speak up and shut down those you ride with who are offenders – drinking, crazy speeding in the wrong place, stupid loud pipes, trespassing. We're being watched and our future depends on how or if we can handle this on our own, or not.

Shared by the American Council of Snowmobile Associations

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