



## 20 YEARS

of Human-Powered Adventure In Antarctica

*Read more on page 8*

*Photo Courtesy Ice Axe Expeditions*

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## SPEAKING UP FOR WINTER RECREATION:

**Winter Wildlands Alliance Weighs in on New National Forest Plans in Alaska, California, Colorado, Idaho and Montana**

*By Hilary Eisen, Policy Director*

Recently the Inyo National Forest, on the east side of California's Sierra Nevada Mountains, published a final environmental impact statement (FEIS) and draft record of decision (draft ROD, or draft plan) for its revised forest plan. If you remember way back to 2016, we were talking about crafting a vision for the future of this forest as well as two others in the Sierra Nevada. At that time, the Inyo, along with the Sierra and Sequoia National Forests, had published a draft EIS and was looking for feedback to guide the development of the forest plan.

The draft comment period is one of the key moments where people can provide input to influence the revised plan. Scores of skiers commented and your input made a difference.

Although we're still waiting to see what the

Sierra and Sequoia draft plans look like — the Forest Service is still working on those — we're stoked on the Inyo plan. The Forest Service incorporated many of the management approaches Winter Wildlands Alliance and our Outdoor Alliance partners advocated for. The draft plan identifies high-value recreation areas, includes lots of guidance for how to sustainably manage recreation, and includes a winter-specific Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (ROS). The winter ROS is important because it lays the groundwork for winter travel planning by identifying where motorized use is, and is not, suitable on the forest.

However, we did identify some mapping errors within the winter ROS along with other concerns with what is proposed in the draft plan. In order to try and fix these errors before the plan is finalized, we filed an objection in early October. The "objection process" is the final opportunity to comment on the plan, open to those who have previously commented. Objections have to relate specifically to issues you raised in previous comments, and have to include a remedy that would solve the objection.

The Regional Forester is now reviewing all of the objections to the Inyo plan, and will issue a response to each one. They may or may not decide to change anything in the draft plan in response to the objections, but usually there are at least some changes made between

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# The Backcountry Film Festival Celebrates Another Year

By Melinda Quick, Backcountry Film Festival Manager

Another year, another Backcountry Film Festival fully stocked with films telling stories of all sorts of human-powered winter adventures! We were more than stoked to present the 14th Annual Winter Wildlands Alliance Backcountry Film Festival to the world beginning with a sold-out-to-the-rafters screening in our hometown of Boise, Idaho, on November 3. From there we began this season's tour from Antarctica to Alaska at over 100 locations. A tradition in many backcountry communities, the Backcountry Film Festival is a high-energy gathering of winter recreationists across the globe, raising money to support local boots-on-the-ground stewardship initiatives.

Offering ten short films this season that tell stories of diversity and inclusion, adventure and action, education and emotion, the Backcountry Film Festival is also excited to

present two exclusive Festival cuts. First, a Festival cut of Teton Gravity Research's Ode to Muir, featuring Jeremy Jones (Jones Snowboards and Protect Our Winters) and two-time Olympian snowboarder Elena Hight on their human-powered journey through California's John Muir Wilderness. Second, a Festival cut of Abandoned, a film that follows a crew of backcountry skiers as they set out to explore Colorado's lost ski areas (specifically Berthoud Pass) in hopes of finding adventure amongst the ruins. Donated by backcountry filmmakers, athletes and outdoor industry brands, our 2018-19 production highlights the heart and soul of winter human-powered recreation.

Thank you to the tour hosts, local partners, and tour attendees for your work to share and support the Backcountry Film Festival in your community. Tour hosts

range from nonprofit groups, youth engagement programs, avalanche centers, local gear shops, and university outdoor programs. We see our tour hosts as local backcountry heroes, bringing their community together and raising funds to preserve and protect the winter backcountry experience. You can view the calendar at our website: [backcountryfilmfestival.org](http://backcountryfilmfestival.org)

The generous support from our sponsors, members, hosts and attendees makes the Backcountry Film Festival possible. Your support allows us to grow and strengthen the human-powered backcountry community. Thank you for your continued support and involvement for the past fourteen years, we look forward to all of the adventures together this winter and all the winters to come. Keep Winter Wild!



PHOTO BY ADAM CLARK

# HARD SCIENCE: Shifting Climate Means Delayed and Diminished Snowpack in the Sierra Nevada

By Hilary Eisen, Policy Director

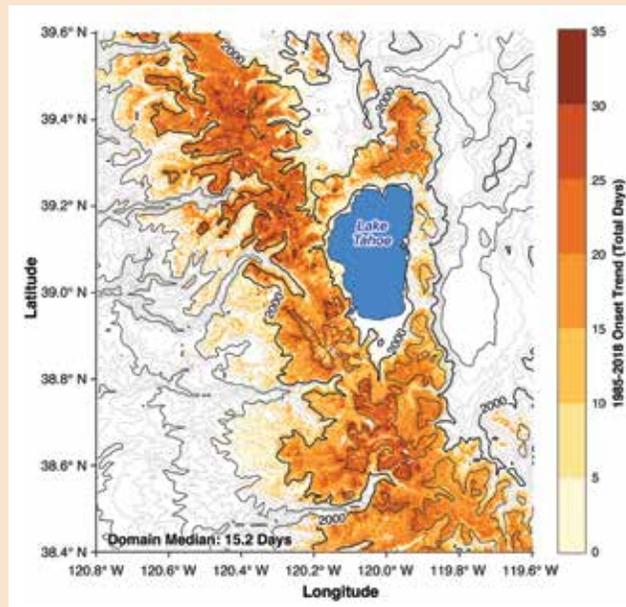
Over the last two years, we've been working with Dr. Benjamin Hatchett, a climate scientist at the Desert Research Institute outside of Reno, Nevada, to study how snow depth can be effectively used as a management tool in winter travel planning. Along the way, we've learned some interesting lingo (like our new favorite word for our old favorite place: the *cryosphere*) and also made some surprising and scary discoveries.

Anybody who's familiar with snowmobiles knows that many of the physical impacts that snowmobile use can have on the environment can be minimized if there's enough snow on the ground to protect soils from compaction or vegetation from damage. The big question is how much snow is enough. Dr. Hatchett has been digging into this question (sometimes literally, digging snow pits!) and working to answer several research questions related to this topic.

Since most of the winter travel planning we're working on right now is in the northern and central Sierra Nevada, that's where Dr. Hatchett's research has been focused. For starters, he looked at how the snowpack has, or hasn't, changed in the Sierra Nevada over the course of time that people have been keeping records of it.

After documenting that the northern Sierra Nevada snow line has risen approximately 1,500 feet in the past decade and examining

## SIERRA NEVADA SNOW LINE GRAPH



**Trend towards later onset of 90 mm of snow water equivalent. Note that the largest trends are found at middle to upper elevations. The average of non-zero trends is 15 days.**

Credit: Ben Hatchett

how snow droughts occur, Dr. Hatchett turned his attention to what this change may mean for winter recreation in the northern Sierra Nevada. After all, if low elevation areas no longer get snow, they're not going to support snow-based winter recreation. This has serious implications for the ski resort industry in the Sierra Nevada as well as for all forms of snow-based backcountry recreation. In addition to providing joy and fitness opportunities for many people, winter recreation is big business in California and elsewhere and it's important to understand how climate change is impacting these activities.

From our perspective, winter travel planning offers an excellent opportunity for the Forest Service to think proactively about winter recreation in an era of less and less snow. To that end, Dr. Hatchett and I recently submitted a paper for publication in the peer-reviewed

journal *The Cryosphere*. Stay tuned to Winter Wildlands Alliance channels for updates.

Most importantly, we found that snow in the northern Sierra Nevada is accumulating later in the year. Some areas that traditionally served as over-snow trailheads no longer, or rarely, get snow today. Across our study area the date at which winter trailheads have enough snow to support over-snow use (which, for a number of reasons, we defined

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## Word of the Season (Impress Your Friends)

# Cryosphere, n.

The parts of Earth's surface where water is in solid form, including areas of snow cover, glaciers, ice, sea ice and frozen ground; the entire region of the natural environment that is below 32°F, especially permanently. From the Greek *krýos* (cold).

"The components of the cryosphere play an important role in the Earth's climate. Snow and ice reflect heat from the sun, helping to regulate our planet's temperature. Because polar regions are some of the most sensitive to climate shifts, the cryosphere may be one of the first places where scientists are able to identify global changes in climate." [NOAA]

# Public Lands in Our Hands: Can We Handle It?

By Tony Ferlisi, WWA Board Member and Executive Director of Mountain Bike the Tetons

One crisp Wyoming fall day, I sat drinking coffee with a dozen Yale graduate students in a neon-lit meeting room. I'd been invited to chat about my experience as a member of the Teton County Wyoming Public Lands Initiative (WPLI), a group of appointed representatives tasked with recommending management prescriptions for two Wilderness Study Areas in Teton County, Wyoming.

One of the questions was: How much do I truly believe in the concept of keeping "Public Lands in Public Hands." The students had attended a heated public meeting earlier in the week. There'd been no compromise, no resolution, and no agreement. They'd seen questionable tactics, self-serving agendas and skewed values. Rather than seeking consensus, participants were totally

The fact is, we've got a unique privilege: we get to participate in the process. We can have meaningful discussions. We can form and cultivate advocacy groups. We can communicate with public officials. We can find economic and social science data to advance our work. We can send emails, make phone calls, have beers, go for a ski tour or a bike ride or go fishing together and have meaningful, difficult conversations. We can build trust and leverage it to do good by the greater community, and by the places, trails and wildlife we all care about. And yes, we can go to public meetings.

Here's the catch: the process ain't pretty. It can strain relationships and siphon time. It can involve backchannel discussions and bump traditionally collaborative partnerships off the rails. It



Backcountry mountain biking on the Caribou-Targhee National Forest. Photo: Tony Ferlisi

embattled, insisting that compromise was impossible, even arguing to just "let the Forest Service do their job." It caused the students to wonder if the general public, even in what should be the most basic democratic process, should really be responsible for decisions directly impacting management of public lands.

Over the years, I've watched relationships fracture between folks who enjoy the same public landscapes, people who generally share the same values and have even called each other friends. Instead of finding and developing common ground, they fight about whether or not mountain bikes should be allowed in Wilderness. Instead of working toward solutions, they focus on what they see as unbridgeable divides between snowmobilers and backcountry skiers, or between wildlife and recreation. It's black and white, this sandbox or that. And the only time one camp talks to another is when we're rallied to a public meeting on some controversial topic, when it seems like access for one group might threaten that of another.

demands courage, a strong stomach, and an assumption of real social and political risk. The terms "access" and "balance" and "sharing" are often understood in different ways by different people. How much access is ideal? Does balance mean the same to you as it does to me?

We love to go to the Cache Creek Trailhead, hop on our bike and enjoy a lunchtime ride on Ferrin's Trail. But, do we want to involve ourselves in the messy process of deciding the dimensions of the trail, its season of use; the number of cars allowed in the trailhead parking lot? We all have our opinions, but... aren't Bridger-Teton National Forest employees PAID to do that stuff?

Organizations like Winter Wildlands Alliance, IMBA, Mountain Bike the Tetons — the local advocacy organization I manage — and others are built to help us participate in the process. These organizations exist to help us protect the opportunities and experiences that define who we are, including the freedom to



Skiers, snowmobilers, conservationists and other stakeholders working to find common ground on wolverine protection in Idaho.



Local mountain bikers doing backcountry trail stewardship on the Caribou-Targhee National Forest. Photo: Tony Ferlisi

travel under our own power across our public landscapes and waterways, whether along Idaho backcountry singletrack, through a desert river canyon in Utah, or waist-deep Montana powder. These orgs leverage their resources, their social and political capital, their hard-earned trust and our individual participation, to guarantee that these experiences are considered rationally and wholly in land management and planning scenarios. By helping agencies dictate the dimensions of the trail, its season of use, and how many cars are allowed in the trailhead parking lot, they help ensure that the landscapes and waterways where we do our thing remain intact.

Without intact landscapes, there's no possibility for contiguous trails. Without healthy watersheds and waterways, there'd be no cutthroat trout to sling dry flies at. And without us, these orgs have no power or perspective to protect what we love most.

But the deeper we get as individuals, the more likely we are to encounter legitimate impasses — with others and within ourselves. We get tired. We feel beat up. We misinterpret, misread, make assumptions, think we have the right answers. We can lean toward square-peg solutions to round-hole problems. Our pre-work backcountry ski lap might travel right through a zone where we regularly see wintering elk. I love going for quiet trail runs up the Grayback Ridge Trail, just as I love rugged day-long mountain bike rides down it. I love the quiet solitude of a winter ski up on Two Ocean Mountain, but I also get a huge kick out of deep snowmobile pow turns on the southside of Togwotee Pass.

Our personal perspectives will occasionally differ from those of our mountain bike team, our running club, our backcountry ski partner or our snowmobile buddy. They might even differ within our own minds. We're compelled to choose sides, and as a result, might feel threatened, cast aside, and betrayed by friends and partners; even betraying ourselves. How could you advocate for closing this trail to bikes when you ride it all the time? How could you lobby to keep the zone around Two Ocean open to

snowmobiles when you sit on the WWA board? How could you think you know better than me? Or that your thing is more valuable than mine?

The fact is, if we want democracy and publicly-owned lands, we don't have a choice. We have to communicate. Openly, carefully, explicitly. *Hey Tony, I think you're misguided in recommending closing the Grayback Ridge Trail to mountain bikes because...* We have to ask uncomfortable questions. *Why did you say in the newspaper yesterday that wildlife habitat connectivity should be the primary driver of Forest Planning when you're the same person lobbying for 100 miles of new mountain bike trails?*

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**“We have to be willing to step outside our own agendas and help others in achieving their goals as well as our own.”**

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We have to recognize that trust is the fundamental currency in the public process. And trust is often built through disagreement and compromise. That's what collaboration is. We have to be willing to step outside our own agendas and help others in achieving their goals as well as our own. *Did you hear that Friends of the River wrote a letter to the Forest Service supporting the Climber's*

*Alliance proposal for that brand-new trail up to the local crag? We have to be fearless in asking for and offering help and advice. I'm afraid my public comments might be misinformed. Can you tell me what I'm missing before I send them in? Ultimately, if we're to honor this great responsibility of impacting public lands management decisions, we have to not only be open to but actively seek opportunities to leverage our own capital and influence for the gains of others.*

We won't always succeed. Often, we'll fail. Or feel like at best we're treading water all alone at sea, as life boats paddle away. But we have to keep swimming. Someone will stop and pull you on board; someone you might least expect. We have no choice but to work at affecting public policy, at building trust and good faith, acknowledging issues and finding compromise solutions. This is the privilege we have. This is our responsibility. And the beginning of success. This is what Public Lands in Public Hands looks like. And yes, we can handle it.

# Winter Wildlands Alliance Welcomes...

## ILYSE SAKAMOTO Program Administrator

**Home Base:** Boise, Idaho

Ilyse comes to Winter Wildlands Alliance from Bogus Basin where she served as Outdoor Education Coordinator, leading Bogus Basin SnowSchool and Mountain Discovery Camp. After graduating from Providence College in Rhode Island, she served two terms with AmeriCorps in Boise and was introduced to environmental education. It was through this work that she started to learn just how crucial it is to recognize the innate relationships we share with nature. Excited to continue her studies on education through nature she enrolled at The University of Edinburgh in Scotland where she studied Outdoor Education. Ilyse says she's humbled to join the Winter Wildlands Alliance team and to be part of such a supportive network that works hard to promote, encourage, and advocate for places where individuals can explore and connect with the natural world. And we're stoked and extremely lucky to have her!



## VASU SOJITRA Ambassador

**Athlete, Adaptive Sports Program Director**

**Home Base:** Bozeman, MT

When Vasu was only nine months old, he was diagnosed with septicemia, resulting in the amputation of one of his legs. Since then, Vasu has not looked back; with the help of his parents, brother, and friends, Vasu has built up the confidence needed to face new challenges with grace, courage, strength, humor, and unwavering determination. Vasu witnessed extreme poverty growing up in India, and has been living most of his life with a "dis"ability. He looks at these experiences as a blessing; they have allowed him to truly home in on his ability to empathize with others. He continues to strengthen this muscle by pursuing his passion of helping others through his work in advocacy for those who face mental and physical limitations. Vasu will continue to inspire others to be a positive influence in their own communities by pushing personal limits, putting others first, and encouraging people to believe in themselves and in their own unique abilities! He has continued to challenge the stigma that goes with being a person with a disability and people of color with his current work as the Adaptive Sports Program Director for Eagle Mount Bozeman, one of the Coordinators for Earthtone Outside<sup>MT</sup>, the first adaptive athlete for The North Face and now as part of the Winter Wildlands Alliance Ambassador Corps.



## JASON HUMMEL Ambassador

**Adventure Photographer, Ski Mountaineer**

**Home Base:** Key Peninsula, Washington

Jason was born and raised in the foothills of Mt. Rainier. His divergence from a conventional life into one of itinerant professional adventure photography began when his best friend passed away in 2004. Afterward, Jason set out with his beloved Nikon FM3A to capture the mountains of the Pacific Northwest, eventually leaving his career as a financial adviser in 2009. Today, with camera version 9.0, Jason is nearing the conclusion of a 20-year project to ski all the named glaciers in Washington State, which he chronicles online at [myadventurecrusade.com](http://myadventurecrusade.com) and in his multi-volume book *Alpine State of Mind*. It's his love letter to his backyard mountains, his way of experiencing home to the fullest of his ability. It's an endeavor that more often leads to stream crossings, slide alder, bushwhacking, and other assorted madness than actual skiing, but that's just the way he likes it.



## SNOWSCHOOL SPOTLIGHT: Embracing the Mystery of Winter

By Kerry McClay, National SnowSchool Director

Despite the many uncertainties in life, one thing we know for sure is that winter is coming. The tilt of the earth's axis as it orbits around the sun ensures that our northern hemisphere will be a little farther away from the sun for the next few months. However, the looming question for many of us is, "what exactly will THIS winter bring?" Will we experience warm drought conditions or find ourselves in the middle of a raging "snowpocalypse?"

In recent years we've seen plenty of both extremes, sometimes only separated by a few hundred miles. Fresh in my mind are 2018 photos from Northern Idaho with smiling SnowSchool students standing in freshly dug snowpits well above their heads. In contrast, and equally fresh in my mind from 2018, was the rainy slush-filled first day of SnowSchool for students in Central Idaho that one 5th grade student enthusiastically proclaimed "The best field trip ever!" That's the beauty of the SnowSchool program — the conditions may vary, but it's always a grand adventure for the students. So, despite the endless possibilities, we're staying ready and flexible to introduce thousands of kids to the wonders of winter this coming season, no matter what version of it we receive!

More, less or average? That's the snowfall question that drives a great deal of current snow science research. Changing climate patterns are rendering historical snowpack trends less relevant to watershed managers and adding question marks around our ability to forecast water supply in the West. It's the past, present and future of winter wrapped into one snowy mystery. To help SnowSchool students explore the mystery and science of our changing mountain snow we've created unique activities like our

Snowpack Prediction Contest, which utilizes live and historical snowpack data from weather stations in the student's own local watershed. Nationally, 2018 participation in this unique science project expanded to engage 76 classrooms, and WWA is aiming to expand participation again in 2019.

Also in 2019, WWA hopes to further an ongoing collaboration with NASA snow scientists to create a new capacity for students to collect valuable snow and climate data to aid NASA researchers. Look for additional updates as winter approaches!

The flexibility of the SnowSchool program to adapt to the variability of winter nationwide has helped the program continually expand to new communities. In September of this year, Winter Wildlands Alliance was invited to present on the SnowSchool program at the annual conference of the North American Association for Environmental Education. The focus of the presentation was SnowSchool's unique snow science curriculum and our success working collaboratively with local organizations to serve youth in diverse communities. Co-presenting with the Northern Idaho Flagship SnowSchool Site (Selkirk Outdoor Leadership and Education), we detailed engaging hands-on snow science activities that can be done almost anywhere and that connect to K-12 science curriculum. This type of ongoing outreach and national exposure helps sustain program growth. Look for further updates on new SnowSchool program locations in 2018-19!

Thank you for helping SnowSchool students nationwide enjoy, explore and embrace the wild mysteries of winter!





## BACKCOUNTRY PARTNER SPOTLIGHT:

### Ice Axe Expeditions Celebrates 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, Founds Impact School for Expeditionary Learning *By Katie Hawkins, Ice Axe Expeditions*

Known for its world-class guides and once-in-a-lifetime international adventures to the remote corners of the globe, Ice Axe Expeditions is an award-winning adventure travel company with a focus on human-powered adventure. This year, owner and lead guide Doug Stoup is celebrating his 20th anniversary of leading clients into Antarctica. Doug is the world's leading polar explorer who first began leading notable international expeditions in the late eighties. In addition to Ice Axe Expedition's Antarctica trips, Doug also leads his clients on other human-powered adventures including backcountry skiing in Norway, in the Andes, and in the mountains of New Zealand, India, Greenland, and Russia. New this year are women-specific trips that are led and run by an all-female guiding team.

Not only does Doug push the limits with his global expeditions, he is also a leading advocate of protecting polar environments and educating today's youth on conservation and climate change. In the course of his career, he has seen polar ice caps melt, wildlife habit diminish, and has had to get creative to offer human-powered adventure experiences to his clients in environments

suffering from the consequences of a warming planet. In recent years, Doug has stepped up his advocacy efforts, joining Winter Wildlands Alliance and Protect Our Winters as an ambassador, conducting speaking engagements on behalf of the environment, and educating his clients and community about the consequences of climate change.

This firsthand experience brought about the formation this year of the Ice Axe Impact School, an experiential expeditionary program designed to mold the leaders of tomorrow into advocates of the environment. It is a partnership between Ice Axe Expeditions and global expedition guide and educator, Brennan Lagasse. Lagasse, also a Winter Wildlands Alliance ambassador, has taught at the high school and collegiate levels, imparting his students with a holistic understanding of sustainability that intersects political, economic, social, cultural and environmental issues.

Courses run by the Ice Axe Impact School are transdisciplinary, hands-on learning experiences. The School will also offer customized educational experiences that

can be tailored to students in high school, college, or those who are simply looking for an out-of-the-box learning adventure. The curriculum can be tailored to meet an individual or institution's needs. The guiding themes of each program include Sustainability, History, Climate Change, Politics, Conservation, Preservation, Community, Place, Science, Nature, Context, Business, Economics, Society, Ecology, Action Research, Athletic Adventure, Biocultural Diversity, Arts, Cross-Cultural Immersion, Civics, Ethics, Journalism, Media, Food, Agriculture, and Service Learning.

The Ice Axe Impact School formally launched operations this past October with a field course in the Brazilian Amazon, working with members of the local Desano tribe. Other courses set for 2018-2019 that also leverage long-term relationships with place-based people in extraordinary environments will include expeditions to Antarctica, Greenland, the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, the California Redwoods, Bhutan, and the Sierra Nevada Mountain Range. There will also be a lobbying trip to Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C.

For more information visit [iceaxeimpactschool.org](http://iceaxeimpactschool.org)

# GRASSROOTS SPOTLIGHT: EL SENDERO BACKCOUNTRY SKI AND SNOWSHOE CLUB — WENATCHEE, WA

*By Gus Bekker, Founder and President*

El Sendero (Spanish for “The Path”) is a human-powered winter recreation club founded in 2004 in the central Washington town of Wenatchee, the geographic center of the state. The club is a non-profit, all volunteer organization which represents winter backcountry recreationists by advocating for the creation, preservation and management of non-motorized recreation areas on public lands in Washington State. Our work ranges from local on-the-ground trail projects to participating in public land planning at the local, state, and national level. El Sendero also supports national policy efforts for responsible stewardship of our cherished winter wildlands and is a grassroots member of the Winter Wildlands Alliance.

El Sendero was formed by several individuals who wanted to find like-minded people to backcountry ski and snowshoe with and who were also concerned with the lack of winter recreation management on public lands. The initial group of two contacted the local radio station and placed an ad in the newspaper for a snowshoe excursion to generate interest. Public service announcements on the radio and a timely newspaper article lead some 45 people to form the first club members. El Sendero opened its first winter season with a snowshoe trip that attracted 14 hardy individuals including several grandparents, teenagers, and of course snow loving dogs.

Looking back over El Sendero’s 14-year

history, it has succeeded in achieving many of its initial goals of growing the membership (over 300 today), forming a coalition with other recreation clubs (the Washington Outdoor Alliance), developing relationships with public land managers, and raising awareness about the critical need for winter recreation management on public lands.

Today, El Sendero continues on with many new projects, but is especially focused on being the voice for human powered winter recreationists as National Forests in Washington State begin the process of winter travel planning. El



Sendero continues to host the WWA Backcountry Film Festival (first hosted in 2006) and sees this as a great opportunity to raise awareness, create a community, entertain, and raise funds. El Sendero now has an active and engaged board of directors, sends representatives to meetings as advocates, participates in land use planning efforts statewide, publicly speaks out for human-powered winter recreation, and leads local backcountry ski and snowshoe trips, mostly for beginners, to support the fast growing number of new winter enthusiasts.

Most recently, El Sendero has participated in recreation planning with county government regarding state owned lands in an area known as the Stemilt Basin. This planning process has unfortunately taken many 180-degree turns and twists and was a learning experience working with inexperienced planners and a planning office that ignored the factual data of the winter landscape and misrepresented the non-motorized participants. One bright spot is that El Sendero continues to move forward with plans for its first backcountry ski hut on state-owned land which hopefully will lead the way for a series of such huts in the Wenatchee mountains.

*continued from page 3*

as 90 mm snow-water equivalent (SWE), which is approximately equal to a foot of maritime snow depth) has shifted later by over two weeks.

So, not only is the cryosphere in the northern Sierra shrinking, the snow season is getting shorter. That means both less terrain and less time for winter recreation now as compared to in the past, and there’s every indication that this trend will continue. We found that the amount of early winter precipitation has been falling as snow is declining, consistent with the rise in snow level during storms (meaning more rain than snow at lower elevations), and that dry days are increasing in frequency. All of this is very likely to be exacerbated by continued regional warming.

Recognizing that winter recreation in all its various forms is an important element of the economy and lifestyle for residents and visitors to the northern and central Sierra, drafting winter travel management plans that are adaptive to changing snowpack conditions while minimizing user conflict is a key step towards sustainable winter recreation management. This is a big piece of what we’ve been advocating for with some preliminary successes in draft winter travel plans across the region (see page 10.)

Dr. Hatchett’s snow depth research is ongoing, with work this winter focused on continuing experiments studying snow and soil compaction from snowmobiles traveling over snow of varying depths and citizen-science driven research collecting data on snow accumulation throughout the season at various winter trailheads in the northern Sierra. If you live or recreate in the Sierra Nevada we’d love your help with data collection. For more information, get in touch with me at [heisen@winterwildlands.org](mailto:heisen@winterwildlands.org).



WINTER WILDLANDS ALLIANCE

[winterwildlands.org/join](http://winterwildlands.org/join)

# Two Steps Forward, One Step Back:

## Slip-sliding Toward the Final Stages on Winter Travel Planning in California

By David Page, Advocacy Director

As of this writing from California's Eastern Sierra, with devastating fires raging across the state and a warm late autumn firmly refusing to step aside for winter, we're feeling a bit battle-weary from a long summer in the trenches of winter travel planning. We're also beginning to see some hopeful glimpses of progress. We're not likely to get everything we hoped for on these forests, but we've already achieved some definitive gains that should lay solid groundwork for better winter travel management for the coming decades. And there's still more to come.

### TAHOE

During the public comment period on the Tahoe National Forest's draft plan — the best plan we'd seen up to that point, full of lessons learned, thoughtful solutions and rigorous analysis by Forest Service staff who clearly know and understand the landscape — we continued to work with our local partners, Snowlands Network and Tahoe Backcountry Alliance, to advocate and lend support for a range of specific non-motorized protections, including for a handful of classic ski chutes on the northeast face of Castle Peak, the Pacific Crest Trail corridor, and other cherished front-country ski touring zones.

Meanwhile, rather than take numerous opportunities to work together with us to find compromises and help craft plans that could improve winter recreation management to everyone's benefit, a group of local snowmobilers and broader motorized interests, borrowing tactics now familiar on the national political stage, set out to build an aggressive opposition movement based mostly on willful misinformation

— a movement that is now being exported to other forests undergoing winter travel planning. Tactics have included social media campaigns and videos threatening the end of snowmobiling, nasty social media trolling, more than 2000 form comments submitted

minimization of user conflicts and impacts to natural resources and wildlife.

### ELDORADO

The Eldorado National Forest released its final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) and draft winter travel plan in late October. Having previously published a proposed action that not only did not show the same depth of analysis as the Tahoe's but actually reversed historic protections to open many important and longstanding non-motorized areas to snowmobiles, the Eldorado seemed on the same course as the Lassen National

Forest had been two years earlier when it had to scrap its first draft entirely and start over again.

In this new draft, the Eldorado developed a new alternative — Alternative 5 — based on public comments submitted over the summer. This new alternative is the draft plan, and although it has some elements we support — like focusing over-snow vehicle designations in areas that consistently receive snow, requiring at least 12 inches of snow for off-trail snowmobile use, and not designating historic non-motorized areas such as the Van Vleck and Loon Lake areas for motorized use, it still fails to protect other historic non-motorized areas such as the area north of Carson Pass. All of these areas were once protected with special Forest Orders prohibiting motorized use, and we're disappointed that

the draft plan only carries some of these historic protections forward.

In addition, the draft plan backslides on protections for the Pacific Crest Trail. In the draft EIS, the Forest Service had proposed

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**“Rather than work together with us to help craft plans that could improve winter recreation for everyone, a group of local snowmobilers set out to build an aggressive opposition movement.”**

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to the Tahoe NF calling for zero changes to the status quo, and direct political pressure on the highest levels of U.S. Forest Service leadership by members of the Republican Congressional Western Caucus.

We believe the Forest Supervisor and his



staff are working to devise the best possible plan for the forest and for all users, and we expect to see a final environmental impact statement and draft plan in January. We hope and look forward to seeing a plan that remains based in science and the thoughtful

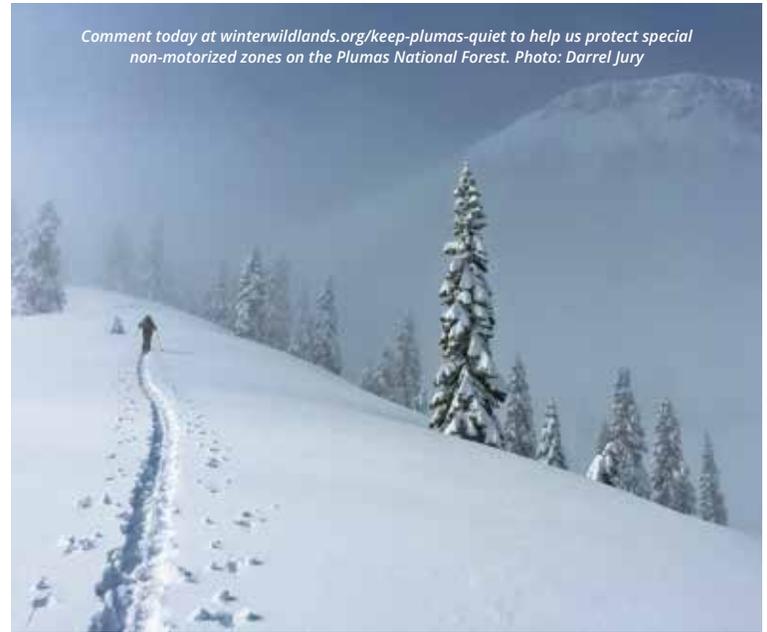
to not designate areas adjacent to the PCT for motorized use, recognizing that snowmobile use conflicts with the Congressional mandate to manage the PCT as a non-motorized trail. In this latest iteration, the Forest Service is proposing to allow motorized use right up to the very edge of the PCT. And, because snowmobiles and other motor vehicles can't travel on the PCT except at designated crossing points, the Eldorado is proposing to designate large portions of the trail as "crossing points." While we agree that it's important to make sure PCT crossing points are safe in all snow conditions, we believe that the Forest Service can and should do a better job of balancing safe OSV access to either side of the trail while protecting the non-motorized experience along the PCT.

We will be filing an objection with the Forest Service's Region 5 office over the Eldorado's draft plan. This is the last step in the planning process on this forest and our last chance to advocate for changes to the plan before it is finalized.

## STANISLAUS

The Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) for the Stanislaus National Forest's new winter travel plan was published on August 24, 2018, with a public comment period that ended October 9. We felt that the forest's "preferred alternative," with some key exceptions, did a decent job of establishing a balanced baseline for winter management that would accommodate the great majority existing snowmobile routes and play areas, and would also provide some limited protections for important non-motorized recreation zones, wildlife, and natural resources. Exceptions included a handful of small and accessible Nordic touring zones along Highways 4 and 108.

Of gravest concern to us and to many of our coalition partners was the forest's stated preference to continue to sanction illegal

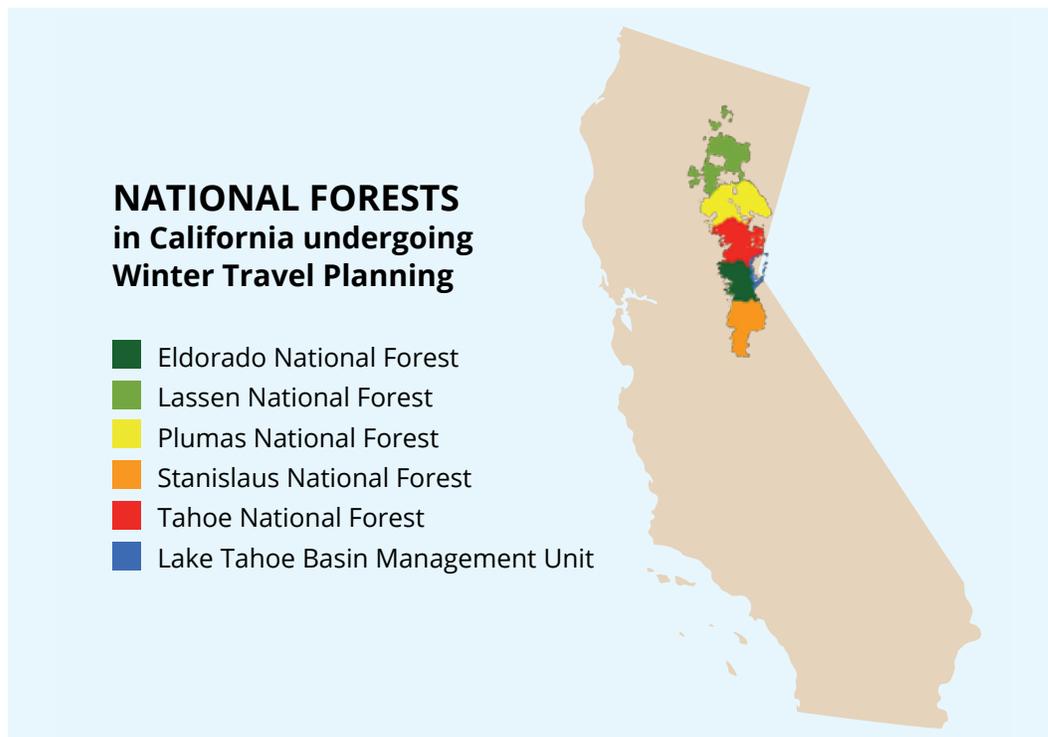


snowmobile trespass into the Pacific Valley and Eagle/Night Near Natural Areas, pristine and sensitive roadless areas that are not only suitable for future Wilderness recommendations but are also prime habitat for the highly-endangered Sierra Nevada Red Fox.

## PLUMAS

The Plumas National Forest published its Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) on October 24, opening a public comment period that will close January 25. We are still in the midst of our deep-dive into the plan, but from what we've seen thus far we have great cause for optimism. In many ways, this is likely to be the best plan we've seen yet. For example, we were pleased to see that the forest's preferred alternative — Alternative 2 — is the first that does not designate for snowmobile use immediately adjacent to the Pacific Crest Trail. It also protects backcountry ski terrain east of Bucks Lake Wilderness, the Bucks Creek Loop Trail, the Historic Lost Sierra Ski Traverse Route, and another backcountry ski zone on Thompson Peak by Susanville.

In our comments, we will be supporting Alternative 2 and also urging that the Forest Service include specific amendments to protect the proposed Middle Feather, Bucks Creek, Chips, Grizzly, & Adams Peak Wilderness Areas, the Lakes Basin Snowshoe and Ski Trails, the Little Jamison Basin, and to stop grooming on 24N33 to help prevent OSV trespass into the Bucks Lake Wilderness. Please visit our website and submit a comment today!  
[winterwildlands.org/keep-plumas-quiet](http://winterwildlands.org/keep-plumas-quiet)





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the draft and final plan because of the objection process. After all of this is finalized, the new Inyo Forest Plan will be complete. We're expecting the final Record of Decision (aka final plan) in late 2018 or early 2019.

Meanwhile, we're also working on new forest plans elsewhere in the West. This past spring, we filed an objection to the Flathead plan, asking that the Forest Service provide a timeline for when it will complete site-specific winter travel planning. Other forests are earlier in the planning process. Over the summer, we commented on the Helena-Lewis & Clark draft EIS. In those comments, we advocated for recommended Wilderness for an area along the Continental Divide where we've been working with skiers to track and document wolverine and lynx, and asked that the Forest Service consider managing a defunct ski area near Helena, MT as a backcountry ski zone.

In Alaska, we recently submitted comments on the Chugach National Forest's draft EIS. In that planning process, we are asking the Chugach to provide better direction for winter recreation management, and also advocating for strong protections for the 2-million acre Nellie Juan-College Fiord Wilderness Study area in the western Prince William Sound. Other forests where we're working on forest planning include the Custer Gallatin in Montana, the Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre and Gunnison (GMUG) in Colorado, and the Sawtooth and Nez Perce-Clearwater in Idaho.



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**Winter Wildlands Alliance** is a national nonprofit organization promoting and preserving winter wildlands and a quality human-powered snowsports experience on public lands.

