



# MECHANIZED TRUCE AT TOGWOTEE

## HIGH-RANGE ZONE SOLVES CONFLICT THE WYOMING WAY

IT IS NO SECRET THAT THE BACKCOUNTRY HAS DRAWN A CROWD. FROM Tahoe to the Tetons, the competition for untracked has grown more intense. Open boundaries, evolution in snowmobile technology and a proliferation of mechanized operations have decreed that once-coveted spots are stealth no more. This explosion in access has left upsurging user-groups—who all desire the same prime terrain—fighting each other for elbowroom. As a result of this recreational rivalry, conflict and contention have emerged as unfortunate byproducts in an environment where play should take priority.

Yet on Togwotee Pass—an hour removed from Jackson Hole's off-piste circus—peaceful coexistence reigns. For the past decade, high-horsepower slednecks, money-shot-seeking pros and the quiet touring crowd have kept conflict to a minimum in terrain straddling the Continental Divide. The secret, which seems plain to both immigrants and natives of the Equality State, is a homegrown approach that blends mutual respect, open-range compromise and a sheer vastness of space. This established truce has allowed a new cat-skiing operation to slide into the mix on a preexisting permit, and carve out a sweet 750-acre niche on Angle Mountain.

Adding one more mode to the milieu without disruption is a prime illustration of how this formula has successfully served to keep the peace above 8,500 feet. This multi-use reality is even more miraculous considering the volume of two-stroke visitation. Togwotee Mountain Lodge, which serves as the regional epicenter of snow-machine activity, sends out 8,000 guided snowmobilers annually from a single location. Total mechanized day-use traffic is estimated at three times that amount. Yet, with 1.2 million sled-legal acres, an adjoining NOLS-friendly wilderness and four Nordic refuges that were voluntarily ceded by snowmobile operators, use is dispersed into distinct zones without any mandated closures. At the center of this sits Togwotee Mountain Lodge, which launched the cat-skiing outfit to diversify its thriving winter resort business and has set a leading example in diffusing turf skirmishes between the vested parties.

Jeff Golightly, TML general manager, sees proactive compromise as the only reasonable way to keep access issues from boiling over. "I think the people here

know that lawsuits just seem to be rampant and, if we don't make some voluntary concessions, the result is going to be involuntary closures or non-closures," he says. "It has been a more sensible approach because the alternative to not being sensible has some pretty nasty consequences."

Jamie Weeks, lead guide for the new cat op, says TML was able to reserve the slopes of Angle for cat skiers merely through dialogue with commercial guides. Weeks, who has a decade-long history in the Togwotee backcountry, was amazed by the complete absence of poached cat terrain during season one. He says, however, that this method of sensible resolution is endemic to the region. He points to a Nordic compromise, which cleared trails around Brooks Lake Lodge specifically for cross-country skiers, as setting a successful precedent. "There isn't a lot of population up here," he says. "So the people tend to know each other and they work it out themselves. I think that is Wyoming in general."

Golightly, who is proficient on both snowboard and snowmachine, agrees that an extension of this inclusive attitude is the main factor that allowed a smooth introduction for the cat in its inaugural season. Yet he has also seen cross-pollination between skiers and snowmobilers—and the mutual respect that has been earned—as playing a critical role in breaking down stereotypes during the last decade. In fact, he says the genesis of the cat-op was seeing so many pro skiers and snowboarders using sleds for access to the area. "There were tons of pro skiers up here spending a lot of time snowmobile skiing," he recalls. "They were renting our sleds and accessing the area and we realized there was something out there. They weren't just up here to sightsee."

John Layshock, one of the first lensmen to popularize the area, has been capturing pro skiers, snowboarders and slednecks in Togwotee's craggy photogenic terrain since 1996. He has seen the sports blend together and find mutual progression in the naturally integrated environment. "I don't draw a line between them so much as I just consider it all winter recreation. They are all one and the same—just with different price points," he says. "They are really mutually friendly and are all progressing in the same terrain. To me, Togwotee, with all the different things going on, is like a big, happy family."