

## Gale Norton: Parks exist for people to enjoy, even on snowmobiles

**Gale Norton**

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Situated on Minnesota's northern border with Canada, Voyageurs National Park is a remote region that harkens back to when the great north woods were part of our nation's frontier. It is an unlikely place to be the subject of a thoroughly modern debate -- the question of whether we should allow snowmobiles in our national parks.

In late August, however, the Eighth Circuit of the U.S. Court of Appeals ruled that the National Park Service acted within its legal mandate when it decided in 2001 to allow snowmobilers access to 11 bays at Voyageurs. The decision, along with the Park Service's proposal announced recently to allow 720 snowmobiles a day into Yellowstone this winter, is a key part of an ongoing public debate over the appropriateness of snowmobiling in our parks.

The question ultimately revolves around the purpose of national parks. Congress did not create our parks to be free of human imprint. In contrast, Congress has set aside more than 100,000 acres of designated wilderness on federal lands across the country. These are places intended to be so untouched and pristine that you can't even take a bicycle into them. They provide a wonderful opportunity for those who want to see no vestige of civilization.

Our parks have a different purpose. Congress specifically intended people to have access to parks so that everyone can enjoy these treasures in a way consistent with their protection and conservation.

At a park like Yellowstone, this means that thousands of cars, motorcycles, buses and recreational vehicles travel along park roads each year. For many visitors, this is the only way they will ever be able to see such icons as Old Faithful and Yellowstone Falls.

These vehicles have an effect on the park and its wildlife. In fact, at Yellowstone, they are involved in collisions that cause the death of one large animal a day on average. However, it would be absurd to suggest we prohibit family cars in our national parks. The purpose of our parks is not to avoid human impacts but to manage them so people can have access while ensuring the park and its wildlife are conserved.

In creating Voyageurs in 1975, Congress stipulated in the park's charter that snowmobiling would be allowed. The Park Service plan allows snowmobiles on select trails that are not heavily traveled in winter. The interior forest of the 218,000-acre park is off-limits.

At Yellowstone, snowmobilers would only be allowed on established roads that are used by cars in summer. They will be required to use the latest generation of cleaner and quieter machines. They will have to travel with professional guides to ensure they remain on the roads and avoid conflicts with wildlife.

While there are some who would prefer to turn our national parks into wilderness areas, the Park Service's approach reflects the purpose of our parks as established by Congress. We are allowing access under strict guidelines to visitors who enjoy snowmobiling while respecting the enjoyment of other visitors and protecting our park resources.

This is the right approach to snowmobiling in our national parks.

***Gale Norton is U.S. secretary of the interior.***

