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Recession stress and Yellowstone's good tidings

By Mark Menlove

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More than a century ago, the naturalist, author and advocate for wilderness preservation John Muir observed: "Thousands of tired, nerve-shaken, over-civilized people are beginning to find out that going to the mountains is going home; that wildness is a necessity."

Today, millions of Americans are "nerve shaken" from the country's snowballing economic crisis. One wonders what Muir would think of today's information-streaming culture and how it batters our peace of mind. What would he advise if he witnessed our e-mail inboxes pinging with "breaking news" about bankruptcies and bailouts or electronic tickertapes showing us every spasm and slide of the financial markets?

I think Muir would urge us, as he did his contemporaries: Take a break, "go home" to the mountains, "get their good tidings." He might repeat his famous assertion: "Nature's peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees...while cares will drop off like autumn leaves."

What I know is that in mid-January I took Muir's advice. It worked wonders. So much that I am moved to share these recommendations with my fellow, recession-weary Americans.

First, go to Yellowstone. My wife and I took our two young children. We stayed in West Yellowstone, Mont., which once billed itself the "Snowmobile Capital of the World." Today, the town is increasingly courting the much larger percentage of Americans who prefer quieter enjoyment of national parks.

We adventured into Yellowstone on a comfortable snowcoach, passing bald eagles and herds of bison. We trekked on skis and snowshoes past steaming hot pools to a beautiful, frozen waterfall. Six weeks of grim economic news later, Yellowstone's magic remains in my kids' imaginations. Our family adventure is still lifting my heart.

Second, be sure to thank the good people of West Yellowstone and the park's other gateway communities for making changes that are benefiting the park and its visitors. Dominated by snowmobiles for more than two decades, Yellowstone became a tragic place overwhelmed by exhaust, noise and traffic that visibly freaked out animals weakened by winter. Many visitors went home more nerve-shaken, not less.

Third, tell your friends about the encouraging recovery that has come about with the quelling influence of commercial guides and a ratcheting down of noise and exhaust allowed from each snowmobile. Even snowmobiles with the lowest emissions, however, remain wildly more polluting and noisier than automobiles. Most of Yellowstone's improvement has come from visitors choosing less-intrusive access.

More visitors are opting to enter Yellowstone on snowcoaches or under their own power on skis and snowshoes, fewer on snowmobiles. The result is a dramatic reduction in the overall number of vehicles -- cleaner air, restoration of quiet and fewer animals caught in traffic. Any visitor who spent time in Yellowstone the past six winters noticed a major difference this winter as the number of snowmobiles dropped further, from about 260 per day to around 150.

Helping Yellowstone's transition to better health are business owners who've invested in modern snowcoaches; retrofitted popular, historic snowcoaches so they're environmentally friendly; hired driver-guides knowledgeable about the park's geology, wildlife and history; equipped snowcoaches with ski racks and stocked their shops with information about boardwalks, trails and other opportunities to experience and learn about Yellowstone.

When I turned the page of my calendar this week, I thought of the date "March 1, 1872" etched in the giant stone arch at Yellowstone's north entrance. On that day, Congress established Yellowstone as the first national park in the world, explaining its purpose would be to protect from "injury" the park's natural "curiosities" and "wonders" and to retain them in "their natural condition" for the enjoyment of future visitors.

This winter, the disruptive presence of snowmobiles in Yellowstone has faded an additional notch or two; the park's

"natural conditions" have been further restored. John Muir gushed: "A thousand Yellowstone wonders are calling, 'Look up and down and round about you!'" Today, we are able to hear those wonders calling more clearly than has been possible for perhaps 25 years. This is a good time for nerve-shaken Americans to find peace in their first national park.

Mark Menlove is executive director of Winter Wildlands Alliance, a nonprofit organization based in Boise, Idaho, that provides a national voice for nordic and backcountry skiers and snowshoers.

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