

High Country News

FOR PEOPLE WHO CARE ABOUT THE WEST

The energy we take for granted is becoming scarce

Randy Udall | OPINION | ESSAY | Mar 17, 2008 | *Web Exclusive*

A modern snowmobile is more powerful than any machine that existed on the planet 200 years ago. In an hour you can be 20 miles from the nearest road, high-marking a corniced ridge. But if the engine breaks or you run out of gas, how quickly the tables can turn. One minute you are omnipotent, devouring space, living like a god. In the next you are frightened, shivering like a dog.

The Inuit understood cold, and how to survive it. For centuries, they lived on Arctic shores, heating their igloos with seal oil. If there was no seal oil, they ate their meat raw. In contrast, we modern people have become dangerously cavalier about this thing we call winter, perhaps because we live inside a civilization that is one big bonfire.

Energy consumption in the United States is approximately 1 million British Thermal Units per person per day, nearly twice what it is in Europe or Japan. That means we each use the equivalent of 100 pounds of coal, or eight gallons of gasoline, or one lightning bolt's worth of energy per day. With energy so abundant, our physical survival rarely depends on saving it. But winter sometimes introduces a new calculus.

In the Rockies, winter is the big dog, the main event, and this year it returned with a vengeance. Two kids get out of a car at Colorado's Wolf Creek Ski Area, ride the chair lift to the top, duck a boundary rope, and are never seen again. A Utah couple photographing wild horses gets stuck in a snowdrift and vanishes. An ER doc and his nurse fiancée go missing at Taos. Three snowmobilers disappear north of Vail.

Stranded in the snow, we face a thermal IQ test, our own personal reality show. At 98.6 degrees F we are sentient; at 86 degrees, we are dead. "Stay calm, stay put, stay dry, don't sweat, dig a snow cave," the experts advise.

Great advice -- but counterintuitive. Stay put? Panic says to flee. Dig a snow cave? If cold is the threat, isn't snow the enemy? The thought of finding shelter in the belly of the beast -- tunneling in like a bear or a weasel -- seems almost un-American.

Short of energy, the American bias is not to conserve energy but to find something else to burn: Witness the current natural gas boom in Wyoming and Colorado. But a blizzard teaches that conserving heat is the key to survival. A snow shovel is the means of salvation, not fire-starter.

Maybe we Americans are better at saving energy than we think. The Utah couple spent nine days and nights in their Dodge Dakota, practicing radical energy conservation, using the engine sparingly to stay warm. When they were out of gas and down to one granola bar, they fashioned a pair of snowshoes out of the seat cushions (something they recalled seeing on TV), and began walking. At night they huddled under trees, using carburetor cleaner to start campfires. Three days later, a snowplow driver found them, in good shape. Their relatives said it was a miracle. But they were saved by their heat sense.

As for the other lost adventurers, an exhaustive search failed to find the two missing snowboarders at Wolf Creek Ski Area, and they are presumed dead. The three missing snowmobilers north of Vail had a saw and a shovel. After three days, a Black Hawk helicopter rescued two of them. They were found near tree line, incoherent with cold. Their friend had died earlier of hypothermia.

The Taos ER doc and his bride-to-be were lost in a whiteout, but they dug a snow cave, lining it with pine branches. For three nights they shivered, which is how life keeps death at bay. When the storm finally broke, a Black Hawk rescued them.

Emerging energy realities suggest that we Americans will need to save energy with a vengeance in the decades ahead. So perhaps it's good for us to spend time outside in the cold. If you go, be prepared. The fundamentals of winter survival have not changed in a thousand years, but technology has. Lost in a blizzard, stranded near treeline without a shovel, you might have one final lifeline: Open the cell phone and hope you have service. If you do, you can SOS the sheriff, text 911.

Thumbs stiff, night falling, what might you type?

"The gods are stranded. The apes are freezing. Send new chariots."

Randy Udall is a contributor to Writers on the Range, a service of High Country News (hcn.org). He lives in Carbondale, Colorado, where for 13 years he directed the Community Office for Resource Efficiency.

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