

Opinion: New Golden Rule of playing outside

By Christopher Solomon, Outside

Earlier this season, ski tracks appeared on Josies Ridge above Jackson, Wyoming. Ski tracks around Jackson usually aren't news. But the Forest Service closes Josies and other areas to recreationists from December through April to give deer and elk a break from human disturbance during the winter. Signs announce the closures.

One week later, skiers poached Josies again.

When we play in the mountains and forests, we think we're simply having fun. (Leaving no trace! Communing with nature!) But whether we're in closed or open areas, studies show that even Sierra Club-approved activities like hiking, cross-country skiing, and bird watching can negatively affect the environment more than you'd think. Take research in Boulder that discovered a roughly 100-yard "death zone" for songbirds on both sides of a trail, as one scientist put it, pointing to low nesting success and lower populations. Moose increased their movement by 33 percent, burning more energy, after encountering skiers, a study in Scandinavia found. In one not-yet-published survey of 218 studies that looked at the effects of recreation on wildlife, researchers found more evidence for impacts by non-motorized activities than by motorized ones.

Nature once had plenty of elbowroom. Today natural places—those places we like to play in—are increasingly squeezed by climate change and a booming human population.

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