

Changes Afoot – Road Trip to Glacier

By Michael Haughey
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Does a vacation need a theme? One needs to be able to answer “what did you do?; or, what did you see?” So our 2007 vacation began with the theme of seeing the glaciers before they melt. We headed to Glacier National Park on a road trip. One side effect of backpacking over the years is wearing the knees out, so this year there would be no backpacking – just day hikes, about 30 to 40 miles of them.

We headed Northward to Billings figuring that would make a good stop on the road. However, there was no room at the Inn. “Montana Days” was in full swing, but from talking to the locals, it just wasn’t enough to fill all the hotels. No, there was something else taking over the places to lay down your head. We learned later that the energy industry – gas and oil exploration and production that is - had gobbled up most of the available hotel rooms. It was booming. It seemed that everywhere you looked on the horizon there was a construction site – clearing off a pad for wells or processing equipment, trucks riding the silhouette of the sunset leaving a trail of dust.

That wasn’t all. There was haze from fire smoke everywhere. Fire is a natural part of the Western landscape, yet ever since the Yellowstone fires they just seem to be bigger and more frequent.

I remember going through Glacier long ago (4 decades ago?) on a family car-trip. That is about all I remember. I imagined that it would be cold, what with all those glaciers. Denver has been in a warm spell, so cold is sounding good. Yet driving across Wyoming and Montana it was anything but cold, in fact getting warmer and warmer as we drove further north.

Getting closer now as we visit Browning, then southwest to East Glacier, and then northeast toward Lower Two Medicine Lake.

Finally after a few days we are approaching Glacier, yet still outside the official Park boundary, and expecting at any minute to enter a magical realm for the heart of our vacation where ice-capped mountains are everywhere and cool mountain streams grace the landscape. And cooler – much cooler. As we traversed the rolling hills and passes on the east side the vista of the valley below opened up. What we saw was certainly not what we expected. Not what I expected. And it was still hot. Instead of the long-anticipated lush green forests with the snow and ice-capped mountain peaks, before us lay a brown blight on the trees for miles and miles, pretty much as far as the eye could see. It looked like the entire forest had rusted. I saw some moths and figured it might be pine

beetles, like the ones devastating forests in Colorado. We later inquired at various ranger stations and it turned out to be a Douglas fir moth that came in this year and essentially exploded after a warm winter. It was nature at its fiercest, adapting to changing conditions, and yet it was depressing.

We finally entered the official Park during the final road to Many Glacier.

With a name like Glacier, I was hoping for some relief from the hot weather in Denver this summer. But it was 99F even in East Glacier, so no such relief. We stayed in the grand Many Glacier hotel on Swiftcurrent Lake, which was not air conditioned and it was hot. It was indeed a grand hotel, and the largest in the Park. One evening brought a very impressive lightening storm that we watched from the porch along with a number of hotel guests.

And where were the glaciers? How long until this is the “Park Formerly Known as Glacier”? Even now the glaciers are a mere wisp of their former grandeur. The rangers expect they will last only a few more years, so if you haven’t seen them yet, don’t delay. The glaciers are, indeed, almost gone and a mere shadow of their former selves – ½ to 1/3 of their former area, 1/3 of their former depth, and melting rapidly.

It was time to get out on foot, up the Swiftcurrent trail toward Swiftcurrent Glacier, sore joints and all. I hoped to finally see a grizzly in the wild and it seemed we were in luck with reports of sightings just ahead on the very trail we were hiking. Another trail nearby was closed due to grizzly activity – just what I was hoping to see. But they need their privacy when feeding, especially with the stress of the warmer weather. We missed the griz on our trail too. We looked around a bit, but no luck. Someone said it charged a young guy, and others said he was embellishing the story. We passed a ranger on our way out who was carrying in a shotgun and going in to check on the bear, so we told him we thought the stories might be exaggerated and he said he was not expecting to have to harm the bear – he’s just required to carry the gun when responding to such reports. We did see a large moose a few hundred yards away in the middle of a pond and a younger one about ten feet away all on that same trail. That was quite a thrill. At the end of our hike, just a few hundred yards from the parking lot, we saw a baby black bear with a crowd of humans watching, and then a ranger came charging up in his pickup truck, got out and shoed off the humans and then the bear. He just charged it yelling like a wild cowboy. I’d like to see him do that with Pooh and Yogi! (see the page “About Us – Philosophy – Bear Stories”). No really, I would. We wanted to chase them (Yogi and Pooh) away, but they were just so big! Not to mention their fight over our food left the ground shaking.

This phase of the journey nearing an end, we headed up the Going to the Sun Road. There are lots of places to stop and watch the big horn sheep, waterfalls, little rodents, and marvel at how quickly the glaciers are melting.

On the way toward Yellowstone, the next stop, we were in a curve on the highway, one lane each way, about 70 miles per hour, and suddenly as a semi-trailer passes going the other way, a car also going the other way is passing the semi and in our lane heading straight for us! The semi is on the left and the shoulder of the road, guardrail, and steep embankment on the right. Without even thinking I had steered onto the shoulder in what seemed like $\frac{1}{2}$ of a second and the car passed on our left missing us by barely an inch and the guard rail by about the same. It happened so quickly I didn't even have time for the usual one-finger salute. Was that driver even awake? There was a double yellow line and passing there should have been suicidal. At this point in my life it seems I have surpassed the allotted 9 lives of a cat.

In Bozeman Montana, at the Food Coop, there are signs of hope for the future. Their solar system has an educational display to explain the process to visitors.

We stop at Signal Mountain Lodge for breakfast and encounter more hope for sustainability. There are bulletin boards near the restrooms talking about all their sustainability initiatives. Quite impressive.

Next stop is Teton National Park. The Teton glaciers are down from a count of 12 ten years ago to 9 today (2007), and they are much smaller.

Even while on vacation, I have to feed my addiction to reading newspapers. The message of sustainability is everywhere – even in newspapers in the outbacks of Montana and Wyoming – along with the influence of the fossil fuel industry. The year 2006 appears to have been the great awakening, that momentous shift where suddenly the world seems to get it – the people anyway. The leaders will follow shortly, we can only hope that happens in time.

On the road home now we pass what seem like endless wisps of diesel smoke and dust on the ridge-tops where pads are constructed for gas wells. Then finally, in the Medicine Bow range, windmills on the horizon and silhouetted against the sky.

Congress is now debating getting 20% of our energy from renewables by 2020. While barely a start, it is good that they are now at least joining the discussion.

Most of us in the energy-conservation and sustainability industry understand that reducing world-wide fossil energy consumption by even 90% in ten years may not be enough. Certainly it is too late to avoid many of the consequences of climate change and global warming. That 90% reduction was probably needed by the end of 1990. Just take a road trip and keep your eyes open. You just can't miss the signs.

Has the sleeping giant awakened soon enough? Lets hope so.

