

Statement of George Smith of Mount Vernon

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Christmas week, I saw a couple of anglers trolling the open water on Minnehonk Lake behind my house. Normally, the lake would be covered by ice fishermen by January, but there was not a single ice shack on the lake this winter and very few ice anglers. Normally smelt dealers would be very busy beginning in December and right through to the end of March. The ice fishermen would buy their smelts from my neighbor, and have lunch at the local café or country store. Not this year.

My wife Linda and I were at a lodge in Rangeley early in February, for our weekly travel column. We were the only guests, although they'd had a couple from out of state early in the week. They went home 3 days early because there was nothing to do. The failure of Saddleback to open for skiing certainly hurt, but so too did the lack of ice and snow. This lodge includes a restaurant where, in a normal winter, customers would snowmobile across Rangeley Lake and up to the lodge for dinner. Not this winter, when the lack of snow, and dangerous ice conditions, closed that trail to the lodge.

To prepare for this conference, I talked to two leaders of the tourism and outdoor industry in western and northern Maine: Mike Boutin of Northwoods Outfitters in Greenville and Russell Walters of Northern Outdoors in the Forks. When I asked how the mild winter had impacted their businesses, both immediately uttered the same word: devastating.

Northwoods Outfitters sells retail and rental outdoor equipment, and offers guided trips of all kinds. Mike said his snowmobile rentals were down 70%, and his ice anglers 50%. From retail sales to rental of cross country skis, his business got clobbered. We talked for about an hour, and not a single car went by his downtown Greenville business in that time. Roads are already muddy and closing early up there, which will also hurt, and he canceled trips for many customers over the last two months, giving them full refunds. He said it's been a devastating winter for everyone in Greenville, including the lodges.

Northern Outdoors offers rental camps and rooms in the lodge, guided trips including rafting, and has a wonderful restaurant and brewery. Russell said his number of winter customers decreased by 35%, his second worst winter ever. Business at the restaurant and brewery, which Russ said is a "huge part of their winter business" was down 70%.

The year 2012 was the worst ever at Northern Outdoors, another unusual winter, and the fact that he's suffered two bad winters out of the last five has led Russ to plan a reduction in advertising and staff for next winter. He'll try to make up some of that lost business in the fall.

Another business in the Forks, Back Country Expeditions, is going out of business. I fear many businesses will follow, unable to make up for this terrible winter. All over western, northern, and eastern Maine, those who depend on ice, snow, and outdoor winter activities, were, well, devastated this winter.

On May 1, Down East Books will publish a book I wrote about Maine sporting camps. It's a sad story, really. We've gone from over 300 sporting camps to about 3 dozen of the traditional camps with a lodge serving food and cabins for sleeping. Many went out of business when the traditional outdoor activities – especially deer hunting and fishing – deteriorated. And those that survived often did so by staying open in the winter and catering to cross country skiers and snowmobilers. I haven't dared to ask some of them how they did this winter. You can guess.

Don Kleiner of the Maine Professional Guides Association told legislators last week that 14 of the 16 sporting camps in Washington County are for sale. Dreadful news, for sure. And a dreadful, devastating winter.