

Ski "green" policies genuine?

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A study about ski-industry environmental programs makes us wonder just how "green" the business is.

In an age when skiers and other outdoors enthusiasts are keenly aware of the environment, it's good business for ski areas to adopt "green" practices. In fact, Summit County recently nixed a plan to nearly double the size of Copper Mountain's village because of public opposition.

But a report by two public-policy scholars, Jorge Rivera of George Washington University and Peter de Leon of the University of Colorado at Denver, raises the possibility that for some facilities, the industry's Sustainable Slopes Program is not much more than a marketing ploy.

The analysis strongly suggests that resorts participating in that program - especially publicly traded ones - have poorer environmental records than ski areas that haven't signed on. Moreover, the report says the four-year-old program is ineffective because it has no mandatory policies and no sanctions for non-compliance.

Not all ski areas are faking it. For example, Aspen Ski Co. gets an environmental "A" on a scorecard published by the Ski Area Citizens Coalition. Aspen Ski won high marks for reducing water and energy use, recycling materials and building a hydroelectric plant fed by snow runoff. Of 19 Colorado ski areas, 10 got "D" or "F" grades.

The National Ski Area Association disputes the study by Rivera and De Leon. The voluntary SSP goes "beyond what's required of us by law," said Geraldine Link, the trade group's public policy director. She faulted the authors' use of the citizens' coalition scorecard. Ninety-five percent of the industry doesn't respond to the survey, she said, because "it's a biased and flawed document" by an anti-growth group involved in litigation with ski areas.

Asked why the SSP doesn't have set standards, Link replied that ski areas exist in different areas, with different resources and operating realities. "In the Northwest, they don't make snow," for example, so it "doesn't make sense to impose the same requirements as those in the East or parts of the West."

Jeff Berman of Durango, executive director of Colorado Wild, an environmental group, said the new study is "fundamentally correct." The SSP, he said, is "like the fox guarding the henhouse." Colorado Wild wants the ski industry to provide great recreation without increasing environmental impact, said Berman, an avid skier. The SSP fails to address real estate development and impacts on roadless areas, old-growth forests, endangered species and wetlands, Berman said.

The study is food for thought about about ski areas' environmental stewardship and whether some are hiding behind "green" labels.

Study pans ski areas' green effort

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By Jason Blevins
Denver Post Staff Writer

Two scholars have published a study that blasts the ski industry's efforts at environmental sensitivity as not much more than "green" marketing spin.

The analysis says the National Ski Areas Association's 4-year-old Sustainable Slopes Program is ineffective because it lacks outside oversight and does not require the 175 ski resort operators in the program to follow any specific or mandatory environmental policies.

In fact, professors Jorge Rivera from George Washington University and Peter de Leon from the University of Colorado at Denver found that ski resorts that follow the Sustainable Slopes Program have poorer environmental records than resorts that have not subscribed to the program.

"This finding suggests that SSP members appear to be displaying free-riding behavior expecting to improve their 'green' reputation without actually implementing it," Rivera and de Leon wrote in the study, published in the August issue of Policy Studies Journal.

The National Ski Areas Association launched its Sustainable Slopes Program in mid-2000 as a voluntary charter outlining sweeping environmental principles and guidelines ski resorts could use to improve the industry's tarnished environmental image. Two years earlier, environmental radicals had burned Vail's Two Elk lodge as the resort prepared to expand its slopes. The so-called "green constitution" outlined principles for saving energy and natural resources, protecting wildlife and habitat, and educating guests on the values of environmental stewardship.

"Regulations only help you avoid the worst, and a voluntary program like this can only bring out the best in terms of environmental compliance," said Geraldine Link, public policy director for the National Ski Areas Association, noting that 25 resorts in the environmental program are purchasing green energy at an additional cost "because it's the right thing to do."

"We are also quantifying our impacts so we can use that information in the future. Yes, it's voluntary, but it has a very scientific side. We view the Sustainable Slopes Program as very successful."

The study by Rivera and de Leon, while acknowledging the program's goals, blasts the Sustainable Slopes Program for what it lacks: specific environmental standards with which to gauge success, third-party oversight and sanctions for poor performance.

"It's kind of like telling teenage boys: 'OK, you have to be home by 11, but we won't be checking,'" said de Leon, who is a professor of public policy in the Graduate School of Public Affairs at CU-Denver.

Further hindering the success of the environmental program, Rivera and de Leon say, are publicly traded companies beholden to stockholders more concerned with short-term gains than environmental stewardship.

Also hobbling the industry's environmental efforts is support from the Forest Service and Environmental Protection Agency, the professors say, which elevates the program's unwarranted legitimacy.

Without standards that force resorts to move beyond compliance, the federal government's support "could be tantamount to providing long-term official support to a symbolic self-regulatory scheme that does not appear to effectively improve industrywide environmental protection," the study reads.

The trouble with environmental stewardship in the ski industry is a lack of incentives that could motivate change, said Auden Schendler, environmental affairs director for the privately owned Aspen Skiing Co., which has long preached environmental responsibility. This summer, Schendler unveiled a costly hydroelectric plant at the base of his company's Snowmass ski area, which taps spring runoff and could generate enough energy to power 40 homes a year.

"Voluntary initiatives really don't work," Schendler said. "Federal regulations work. When this program came out, we said, 'Let's at least give this the benefit of the doubt.' Five years down the line, not much has happened. For a lot of these other resort organizations, it's not their fault. They are organizationally challenged, and publicly held companies are much less nimble and the incentives for environmental change really aren't there."

Staff writer Jason Blevins can be reached at 303-820-1374 or jblevins@denverpost.com.

Slopes supporters

These Colorado ski areas endorse the Sustainable Slopes Program.

Arapahoe Basin, Aspen Highlands, Aspen Mountain, Beaver Creek, Breckenridge, Buttermilk Mountain, Copper Mountain, Crested Butte, Durango Mountain Resort, Eldora, Keystone, Loveland, Monarch, Powderhorn, Ski Cooper, Snowmass, SolVista, Steamboat, Sunlight, Telluride, Vail, Winter Park.

Source: National Ski Areas Association