



The Slippery Slope of Voluntary Environmentalism

A study of the ski industry underscores the idea that corporations need encouragement to do what's best for the environment.

By Deborah Asbrand
September 8, 2004

Voluntary environmentalism promotes the idea that companies become more enthusiastic recyclers and re-users when their adherence to such policies comes willingly.

But voluntarily going green continues to have limited corporate appeal—even among the snowy slopes of the ski industry, according to a new study. The report, published in *Policy Studies Journal*, found that among ski areas in the western United States, where the industry is a major environmental player, many of the guidelines in a so-called "sustainable slopes" program are not being followed by the ski areas that have endorsed them.

Launched in 2000 by the National Ski Areas Association (NSAA), an industry trade group, the sustainable slopes program is a set of guidelines designed to promote the environmentally sound management of ski areas' planning and management. For example, one principle reads, "Optimize efficiency and effectiveness of water use in snowmaking operations;" suggested options include "using appropriate technology and equipment to optimize efficiency."

The study found that among the 175 association members that have endorsed the program—just over half of the 326 members in total—many were not following the program's principles. Most damaging, according to the study, is the absence of mandatory regulations. The sustainable slopes program lacks important mechanisms such as third-party oversight, penalties for poor performance, and standards for ranking environmental efficiency that have led to the success of other volunteer initiatives.

That's not an unusual finding for self-regulated programs, says the study's co-author Jorge Rivera, an assistant professor in the department of strategic management and public policy at George Washington University. Most of the 200 voluntary programs created since the early 1990s lack specific standards and independent monitoring, according to the study. "Not surprisingly, they suffer from opportunistic behavior by some corporations who enroll but don't do anything," says Rivera.

Indeed, among the findings by Rivera and co-author Peter de Leon, a professor of public policy at the University of Colorado, is that participation in the program by the western ski areas they studied might be doing more environmental harm than good. Using raw data compiled by the Ski Area Citizens' Coalition, an environmental organization, the researchers found that ski resorts that took part in the sustainable slopes program were more likely than nonparticipants to be guilty of poor environmental performance.

The NSAA disputes the survey findings. President Michael Berry says the study "doesn't contain any actual evidence of wrongdoing" on the part of ski resorts. The researchers, he maintains, "were inherently biased against our work because it's voluntary." The study sharpens the point, first raised by environmentalists several years ago, that behind ski areas' pristine white slopes is an industry that makes heavy use of energy, land, and water to operate ski lifts and snowmaking equipment, and to provide food, beverages, and lodging to its clientele. Moreover, resort expansion requiring the taking of additional natural land has incensed environmentalists. Rivera adds that 90 percent of the ski areas studied are located in national forests and are thus subsidized by tax dollars.

The ski industry has produced pockets of environmental success. Even minus mandatory regulations, some ski areas have made inroads by employing innovative environmental technologies. Mt. Hood Meadows Ski Resort in Oregon uses renewable energy to power several chairlifts, as do other ski areas such as Utah's Deer Valley and Park City. Several resorts have converted to shuttle buses that run on biodiesel fuel, which produces lower emissions than conventional petroleum-based diesel and gasoline. Aspen Skiing Company opened a micro-hydro power plant in July that puts its snowmaking system to use in the summer months to produce electricity. The system generates power by funneling the spring runoff through the underground pipes and then through a turbine.

The most consistently successful examples of voluntary environmentalism, however, involve regulation and external oversight. Both the manufacturing and chemical industries have seen widespread success with voluntary programs that use performance indicators and verification procedures to demonstrate compliance. Moreover, some companies are using their compliance as a marketing tool to reach green-minded consumers. Giant retailer The Home Depot, for example, heavily promotes its requirement that all wood sold in its stores is certified by the Forest Stewardship Council, an international organization that guarantees the timber has been managed and harvested under strict guidelines.

Given that demographic studies routinely find skiers to be affluent and educated, a sector that dovetails with the highest awareness of environmental issues, Rivera suspects the ski areas are missing a similar marketing opportunity. "The ski areas know their clientele is interested in environmentalism and are relatively sophisticated compared to the average consumer," says Kirk Mills, a pollution prevention engineer for the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment's Sustainability Program. Mills is among those the NSAA has asked to review the sustainable slopes program. He favors the application of "more objective measures" to the program.

Rivera believes that with the addition of standards and sanctions, the sustainable slopes program could become a positive force for change within the industry. The program was a good start when it was launched in 2000, he says. "The problem is they haven't changed it, and we are now in 2004."

NSAA president Berry points out that programs like the Forest Stewardship Council's SmartWood initiative have been around much longer than the sustainable slopes program. "There are some superior models out there we're looking at hard at," says Berry, "and our intent is to move in that direction."

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