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CORRESPONDENT'S REPORT

Of Growing Interest: How Green Is My Mountain?

By KIRK JOHNSON

SKIING at the great resorts of the West is one of those ruddy-cheeked, wind-whistling-through-the-trees activities that tend to make people misty-eyed about the natural world.

But environmentalists have complained for years that most resorts don't share the sentiment. Immense competitive pressures to add new slopes and chairlifts, and the trend toward four-season activities and real-estate development that bring more people, more months of the year, have significantly heightened environmental stresses, they say.



Partly in response to such criticism, in 2000 the industry developed a voluntary environmental program called Sustainable Slopes, which now involves more than 170 resorts in North America. Under the Sustainable Slopes Program, resorts are encouraged to audit themselves under 21 criteria, from water and energy use to waste management and air quality.

But such voluntary environmental efforts have now themselves become a thorny issue for the industry, inviting questions about what is real and what is mere image cultivation.

"They've talked the talk, but they have not walked the walk," said Peter de Leon, a professor of public policy at the University of Colorado in Denver and an author of a sharply critical study of Sustainable Slopes published in August in *Policy Studies Journal*.

Dr. de Leon and his co-author, Jorge Rivera, of George Washington University, concluded that voluntary environmentalism without any outside monitoring was likely to be superficial and inadequate.

"Members appear to be displaying free-riding behavior, expecting to improve their 'green' reputation without actually implementing it," the study said. "Opportunistic ski areas may be expecting to pre-empt more stringent regulatory oversight."

The study, perhaps because its dry academic tone and peer-reviewed pedigree was so different from the usual environmental attack, struck a nerve. The resort industry's trade group, the National Ski Areas Association, published a lengthy rebuttal last month in its own journal, lambasting the report in part for using a source that the industry considers suspect: a citizens' group that grades resorts on environmental issues, but that, like Sustainable Slopes, isn't assessed independently, either.

Professor de Leon said in an interview that the industry critique - especially the point that his study was based on the early days of Sustainable Slopes, when efforts were still ramping up - had inspired him and his partner to take a second look at the program, which they are working on now.

Environmentalists and economists say that genuinely green ski resorts do exist. Sundance in Utah, Mount Bachelor in Oregon and Aspen in Colorado all usually get high marks. Environmentalists say that Aspen in particular has led the industry in areas like environmentally green building construction and energy use reduction. But a green cachet doesn't come cheap - at \$74 for a day pass, Aspen is one of the priciest resorts in the nation. A day at Mount Bachelor costs \$46, while a full day weekend pass at Sundance is \$40.

Resort companies that have often gotten low marks from environmentalists - especially Vail, which operates four ski areas in Colorado and one in Lake Tahoe, Nev. - say that the market itself is now pushing the industry toward better practices with or without programs like Sustainable Slopes. Rising costs are encouraging better efforts in energy, water and waste management, they say. "Financial success and environmental stewardship do not need to be mutually exclusive," said Kelly Ladyga, a spokeswoman for Vail Resorts. "They're intermingled. But we're undertaking these efforts regardless of any study or scorecard."

At Whistler/Blackcomb in British Columbia, resort managers say they have reduced solid waste output by 50 percent over the last six years and are now concentrating on energy savings, with a 20 percent reduction target this year alone.

"It's not only good for the environment, but the business at the same time," said Doug Forseth, the resort's senior vice president for operations.

But economists who study the tourism industry say that many resorts still rely on superficial symbols, like recycling bins and low-flow toilets, without really addressing

the deeper issues of habitat protection and water and air quality.

"Ski area operators are concerned about environmental impacts only to the degree that they might get in trouble with skiers," said Thomas M. Power, chairman of the Economics Department at the University of Montana, in Missoula. Professor Power cautioned against nostalgia about the smaller-scale resorts of the past. He remembers, he said, skiing past the pipe that dumped raw sewage into a creek near one Montana resort in the 60's.

And skiers themselves ultimately dictate what happens at the resorts, environmentalists say. If skiers expect new slopes and chairlifts every year, then expansion - with all its environmental impact - will be the order of the day.

"They vote with their feet," said Ms. Ladyga at Vail. She said that Ski Magazine's readers, for example, had recently ranked Vail as the top resort in North America for the third consecutive year. The failing grades on environmental performance issued earlier this year to three of the company's resorts, including Vail itself, by a group called the Ski Area Citizens' Coalition, an environmental group in Durango, Colo., have drawn only a handful of questions from prospective visitors, Ms. Ladyga said.