



safe to eat

not safe to eat



Winds of Change

As the world heats up, are North American resorts really going green — or simply whitewashing winter's salvation for more market share?

By Lisa Richardson

Illustration by Jasmine Gardner

Greenland is melting. The Eiger is crumbling. Glaciers are receding like the hairline of a man with alopecia.

Global warming jeopardizes the world's mountainfolk, putting skiers and snowboarders at the top of the endangered species list. Higher latitudes and higher elevations are the hot spots for the carbon-emission-impact meltdown, and the international ski resort community is responding to the peril with a Cold War-style arms race. A race in which missiles are replaced by stockpiles of biodiesel, wind energy credits and solar panels.

Consider Vail Resort in Colorado. In 1998, a "direct action" by the Earth Liberation Front was undertaken in response to Vail's expansion and alleged destruction of wildlife habitat. Eight buildings were torched on the mountain, causing \$12 million worth of damage. This action was widely heralded as the alarm that woke the ski industry's sleeping environmental conscience. At the time, Vail had just received a D-grade in Applied Environmental Studies by the Ski Area Citizens Coalition. Fast forward to August 2006, with the resort announcing it has switched to wind energy, and Vail's image has spun 180 degrees.

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SKIERS ARE PROFILED BY PSYCHOGRAPHERS AS BEING CONSUMERS WHO CONSIDER THE ENVIRONMENT A HIGHER POLICY PRIORITY THAN JOE AVERAGE. SO, THE GREEN GLOBE TRIP PLANNING, GREEN RESORT GUIDES AND GOLDEN EAGLE AWARDS WOULD SEEM TO GIVE GREENER RESORTS A COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE. BUT DO THEY ACTUALLY MEAN ANYTHING?



Solar energy provides the electricity for the ski patrol hut at Colorado's Aspen Mountain, one of North America's leading ski resorts when it comes to acquiring green power.

Vail announced plans to offset 100 per cent of its energy use at the company's five ski areas, 10 hotels and 125 retail stores, by purchasing nearly 152,000-megawatt hours of wind energy credits. (See sidebar on pg. 26 for a definition of "wind energy credits.") The resort is also offering free lift tickets to people who personally purchase wind credits for their homes. Just like that, the former enviro-duds have remade themselves as heroes in the war on greenhouse gases; they are now the second largest corporate purchaser of wind power in the United States, after Whole Foods.

They've taken a green leaf out of Aspen's book. As North America's top eco-ski resort and four-time recipient of the National Ski Areas Association's Golden Eagle Award for Overall Environmental Excellence, Aspen, Colorado, has credentials greener than any of its competitors. Not only is 100 per cent of Aspen's electricity use offset by the purchase of wind energy credits, their snowcats use a 20 per cent blend of biodiesel. Trail maps are installed on chairlift safety bars, reducing the need for paper maps. Free parking is offered to hybrid car owners. The

restaurant at the luxury hotel, The Little Nell, advocates Slow Food, an international movement that opposes fast food in favour of conscious dining, sustainable seafood and purchasing food from local farmers. The ski patrol hut is solar-powered. Annual sustainability reports are issued. Between 2000 and 2004, the company cut its greenhouse gas emissions by 10 per cent.

While Aspen sets the bar, other resorts are buying in. According to the National Ski Areas Association, 35 US resorts are purchasing green power. Mammoth Mountain in California and The Canyons in Utah use solar energy to power their lift shacks and small outlying buildings. Mountain resort communities like Telluride and Park City are signing Climate Protection Agreements, picking up the dropped Kyoto ball by setting their own carbon-emission reduction targets.

But the Fat Man of the greening arsenal is owned by Massachusetts resort Jiminy Peak, which in March 2006, signed an agreement with General Electric for a 1.5 megawatt wind turbine to power the resort. The turbine, which will be installed on the hill in the summer of 2007, will generate 4.6 million

kilowatt hours annually, not only powering the resort, but dumping power back into the grid.

This ski resort green movement is not just US-based. The Ski Club of Great Britain maintains a Green Resort Guide database geared at helping winter holiday seekers make trip decisions in favour of resorts like France's Les Gets, which has solar-powered ski lifts, additive-free snowmaking and bio-diesel groomers; the Trois Vallees featuring organic toilets, habitat creation for endangered species and biodiesel in all company vehicles; or Tux in Austria where meltwater from the glacier generates electricity for renewable hydro.

Travellers can also turn to Green Globe for trip-planning advice. The international accreditation scheme for ecologically and socially sustainable tourism gives the nod to Australian ski resort Falls Creek for becoming a plastic bag-free zone. Falls Creek's global warming contingency plan doesn't stop there—they're also snow-farming, adding four kilometres of snow fences to stockpile the white stuff when the big storms hit.

How Does Your Ski Hill Rate for Green Credibility?

Green Globe: Based in Australia, this worldwide benchmarking and certification program to the travel and tourism industry recognizes environmental stewardship. www.greenglobe.org.

Green Resort Guide: This Ski Club of Great Britain initiative aims to provide information about the eco-friendliness of ski resorts and encourages consumers to ski-green, influencing resorts to up the ante. <http://www.skiclub.co.uk/skiclub/resorts/greenresorts/default.asp>

National Ski Areas Association: A trade association formed in 1962 for ski area owners and operators throughout the US. Each year, they present Golden Eagle and Silver Eagle awards for environmental excellence. www.nsaa.org

Sustainable Slopes Program: An Environmental Charter for Ski Areas, prepared by the National Ski Areas Association and adopted by its members in 2000, is a framework for sustainability in their operations.

The Ski Area Citizens Coalition: A group that works to ensure ski area management decisions in resorts of the American west are responsive to the needs of real environmental protection, communities and the skiing public. Their annual Environmental Scorecard is the only non-industry, independent study of ski resorts' green credentials. www.skiareacitizens.com

Skiers are profiled by psychographers as being consumers who consider the environment a higher policy priority than Joe Average. So, the Green Globe trip planning, Green Resort Guides and Golden Eagle awards would seem to give greener resorts a competitive advantage. But do they actually mean anything, or is it all just greenwashing? Is it a glossy layer of enviro-sheen to cover the truth of their detrimental environmental impact? The National Ski Areas Association (NSAA), representing 326 US alpine resorts, got the gong from Green Life, a consumer advocacy group who work to expose corporate greenwashing. Who made their top 10 "Worst Greenwashers" list in 2005? The NSAA for its Sustainable Slopes initiative.

Last year, less than one third of the 177 resorts participating in the voluntary Sustainable Slopes program even completed the self-assessment surveys. Their combined conservation efforts were touted as eliminating the equivalent of 87,000 round-trip flights between New York and San Francisco. Better than nothing. But not actually better than the environmental records of non-participating ski resorts. (cont.)



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What is a Wind Credit?

Energy producers are paid a flat rate to produce electricity. Their hydro, coal or wind-powered electricity pours into the main power grid, with the green and the brown fossil-fuelled power mingling interchangeably. An energy purchaser can't differentiate clean from dirty power. What they can do is buy a wind credit, a renewable energy certificate, or a green purchasing certificate, as a premium, and have a certain amount of green power attributed to them.

This purchase acts as a consumer-paid subsidy to green power developers. A single megawatt hour of wind electricity is more expensive to produce than one from fossil fuel. So wind farms and green power producers sell credits, often through intermediary brokers like Renewable Choice Energy who inked the deal with Vail, to enable them to compete with fossil fuels.

BC consumers wanting to clean their carbon slate can purchase Green Purchasing Certificates from BC Hydro. For each certificate purchased, BC Hydro will ensure an equal amount of green electricity enters the transmission grid. www.bchydro.com/business/gpcerts/gpcerts3621.html

Individuals can also work to neutralize their carbon footprint by offsetting climate-unfriendly purchases, like plane tickets, with donations to groups whose work will balance out the emissions. Visit www.offsetters.ca. Consider it a tax on consumption. After all, a clean conscience doesn't come freely.

Turning wind into wattage. Some of North America's ski resorts are beginning to buy green power, like that generated from wind turbines, to offset their environmental impacts. Only one ski resort has plans for its own wind turbine, Massachusetts' Jiminy Peak.



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From the perspective of watchdog group the Ski Area Citizens Coalition, the overall number of skiers has remained consistent for the past 25 years. At the same time, ski area land use has exploded with condo developments, new restaurants and terrain expansions. These environmental impacts, unlike global warming, are something ski areas actually have direct control over. They are impacts the NSAA's Sustainable Slopes program doesn't even touch. Like Cold War superpowers, ski resorts compete for their share of the skier's powderlust, bragging about terrain expansions, faster

lifts, and now green credibility.

Whistler Blackcomb has enjoyed its fair share of environmental kudos. Environment Officer Kathy Jenkins acknowledges, "There is definitely a competitive nature among ski resorts, and the market is driving more sustainable operations. But beyond market forces, we need to remember that each step has to be with the end goal in mind of preserving nature's cycles—not winning hardware. If we lose sight of the goal, we won't win in the long term."

For their little bit, Whistler Blackcomb installed a wind test station in October 2005.

Neighbouring Squamish also installed meteorological towers on Alice Ridge, and in the Kootenays, anemometers were installed on Record Ridge and Mount Neptune to begin collecting data on wind pressure and velocity over the winter.

So far, there is not a single operating wind turbine in BC, but they're in the works. With resorts south of the border and around the world getting louder about their environmental accomplishments, soon other initiatives across Canada might be coming down the pipe. After all, we've got to keep up with the Joneses.

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