

SKIERS WANT MORE... LESS... AND A CHANGE

by Andy Spielman

In Europe, skier visits increased annually from the 2000/1 season until the 2007/8 season. In the USA, the same trend is evident; the 2007/8 season was easily the best on record, with an estimated 60.5 million skier visits. In China, projections are for massive growth in skier visits, and even the nearly 200 ski areas are often characterized as inadequate to serve the growing hunger for skiing and snowboarding. New resorts are in the process of construction in eastern Europe, central Asia, South America, and the USA, and facilities are being expanded almost everywhere.

Consumers are demanding different types of skiing experiences, and resorts are reacting by expanding their offerings. Technology has played a role in consumers' demands. For example, increased uphill capacity means more downhill in a day. The result is that a guest can ski more of the resort in a single day.

Advances in equipment have also enabled people to ski better. Consequently, there is more demand for intermediate and advanced skiing with more off-piste adventure-type skiing, as well as – the once unheard of – lift-served backcountry skiing. Of course, the ever-growing number of snowboarders want, and perhaps need, additional terrain parks. These have to be better than the terrain parks at the resort down the road, and they require large acreages. Although there's nothing new about the need for a reliable snowpack to operate a ski area, snowmaking facilities are more common and

are no longer found only at lower elevation ski areas.

But skiers aren't just demanding more. In some important ways, they want less. Concerns over global climate change and carbon emissions have resulted in efforts to use less energy and cleaner energy sources. So, as wind and solar facilities increasingly dot the world's landscapes, the ski industry is looking at these opportunities too, including installing wind turbines, purchasing renewable energy credits, and using state-of-the-art batteries to store solar energy.

People everywhere want a balance between recreation and conservation. Ski area managers do too, and understand well that the two can go together. Operators increasingly design terrain and facilities to complement natural conditions. Although sustainable developments may be in demand, they are also a practical reality, indeed a necessity, in remote alpine environments.

Meeting the public's demands brings challenges worldwide, particularly in the area of environmental review and government approvals. The ski industry can, and has, met these challenges head on. Whether it's a review under the US national environmental policy act, the EU's environmental impact assessment directive, Chile's environmental impact assessment system, or China's new environmental impact assessment law, the goal is to meet the test by demonstrating that developed recreation will complement the natural environment – a goal that is already long-shared by the ski industry.

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