

Why Ski Areas Don't Belong in National Parks

Ben Gadd, 2009

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Downhill skiing. Healthy outdoor fun, right?

Yes, it's fun. You ride the lift up and you come swooping down. It's a rush. You do it over and over, all day long.

But is it really healthy? Not if you get hurt at it. Nor is downhill skiing healthy for the places in which it is practiced. They get hurt, too. That's mainly what I'm going to talk about here.

Suppose that you are a ski-area developer. Suppose that you build a new ski area in the Alberta Rockies. Here's what would happen to the place you pick for it—which could not be, for reasons that will become obvious, in one of the mountain national parks.

Yet there are already three ski areas in Banff National Park and one in Jasper National Park. All of them got started long before anyone realized how dangerous they would eventually become.

1. First you build a road into the wilds. Since the best definition of wilderness is “roadless area,” building that road means the end of that patch of wilderness. For this reason, building roads is no longer allowed in wilderness parts of Canadian national parks.
2. Then you cut down some of the forest to make the runs, the lift lines, and the clearings required for the lodge, the other buildings and the parking lots. This is logging, which is generally prohibited in national parks.¹
3. You bring in the bulldozers to make the landscape smoother, blasting outcrops and digging out boulders. You have to create flat places on the mountainside for the buildings and parking lots. All this is landscape modification, which is also generally prohibited in national parks.
4. You install ski lifts. These require towers and long spans of cables dotted with chairs and gondolas. Electrical power is brought in, requiring further forest-cutting along the powerline right-of-way, then the installation of poles and cable. This is all industrial-type visual pollution, which is not supposed to be seen in national parks.
5. You put up one or more permanent structures—the ski lodge, maintenance facilities, equipment storage sheds, etc.—in what was once wilderness. This is no longer allowed in those parts of national parks still zoned as wilderness.

¹ I say “generally” because we are seeing more and more logging in the mountain parks. Carried out by Parks Canada itself, most of this is tree-thinning done in the name of fire prevention, pine-beetle “control” and—get this—“ecological restoration.” New ski runs in the existing national-parks ski areas are clear-cut, too, of course. The logs from all this activity are sold to mills eager to receive them, and the money goes to Parks Canada, a clear conflict of interest.

6. You bring in trucks, snow-cats, snowmobiles and other motorized equipment required to pack down the runs and keep the ski area going. Inevitably there are fuel spills, lubricant spills, antifreeze spills, hydraulic spills. None of this is allowed in national parks.
7. You open the gates and invite the skiers into your ski area. They come by the thousands every morning, filling the highways leading to the park and spreading exhaust that lingers in winter's temperature inversions. This is air pollution, which isn't supposed to be generated in national parks.
8. The public lines up at the ticket wickets and pays you money for the right to ride your lifts. You like this. You want more skiers at those wickets, and more money from each of them. However, the profit motive is not part of the mandate for national parks.
9. Each morning you switch on the lifts, using electricity that, in most cases, comes from a power plant that burns coal. The burning produces carbon dioxide, which contributes to global warming. It also produces acidic sulphur compounds, tiny particles of ash and other air pollutants. The national parks are supposed to be exemplary in reducing greenhouse gases and protecting the atmosphere.
10. Thousands of skiers and snow-boarders ride the lifts and head down the runs, moving fast, churning up the snow, making a lot of noise and generally ensuring that the ski area is human territory. Few wild creatures hang around for long. Nor do they like to cross the busy runs to get from one part of their range to another. Your ski area has forced them to leave their homes, and it also hinders their movement across the landscape. Habitat loss and the imposition of barriers to wildlife are not supposed to occur in national parks. Neither are people supposed to be concentrated in wilderness zones.
11. Of course, some species do just fine at your ski area. Ravens and coyotes, for example, scavenge food dropped and thrown away by the skiers. They are also very good at picking through the many discarded snack-food wrappers, drink containers and potato-chip bags they find blowing around the parking lots. These animals are attracted to the artificial feeding situation you have created, consuming calories that aren't particularly good for them. They get into scrapes with people. For these reasons, feeding animals is not allowed in national parks. Neither is littering.
12. All those skiers and snowboarders have to go to the bathroom at least once during their day of fun on the slopes. Men and boys often urinate in the woods beside the runs, polluting them, while women and girls prefer to use the ski-lodge restrooms. Human waste is difficult to dispose of in the cold, high-mountain environment in which the ski area is built. As a result, the watershed below the ski area is likely to become polluted with sewage. This is unlawful everywhere in Canada.
13. People get hurt at your ski area. They break their legs; they break their wrists; they run into trees; they run into each other. Sometimes they die. The accident rate is especially high on the weekends, when the slopes are crowded. The government is publicly concerned about this, so it has set a carrying capacity for each national-park ski area, beyond which more skiers are not supposed to be allowed on the runs. But

you, like other ski area operators in the parks, routinely ignore these limits. The government does nothing about it, except to increase the limit when you ask them to do so. Nor does the government really seem to care how many times a day the ambulance heads up to the ski area. Yet each delivery to hospital runs up the medical and socioeconomic costs of this sport, never mind the personal suffering of the injured skiers and the impact on their families.

- 14.** You aren't content to put up with vagaries of the weather, and you want to open earlier in the season than nature would otherwise allow, so you make artificial snow. You take water from streams that are already at low-flow in the winter, endangering aquatic life. This is against the law anywhere in Canada. You dig trenches and lay pipes and hoses to carry the water to the slopes—more disturbance—and you build concrete platforms for snow-making “guns” that roar so loudly you can't make yourself heard within 30 m of them. This is noise pollution, which is not supposed to happen in national parks.
- 15.** Your employees operate special machines that pack down the snow, flattening the fragile layer at the base. The thousands of small rodents that would otherwise live in that layer all winter are unable to do so. Fewer rodents means fewer weasels to eat them, fewer owls to eat the weasels, and so on. You are further wrecking wildlife habitat and impoverishing the area's ecosystem. Harming ecological integrity is not allowed in national parks.
- 16.** Sometimes nature provides too much snow, and then you have the risk of avalanches killing your patrons. So you make the snow slide at times when no skiers are present. You do this by blasting the slopes with explosives. The noise is even louder than the snow-making guns, so it carries for many kilometres, upsetting wildlife and humans alike. In ski areas that use military artillery to start avalanches, the surfaces where the shells hit are damaged, and fragments of exploded charges litter the area. All of this is completely out of character with what national parks are supposed to do: protect landscapes and give wild animals secure homes. One can safely assume that back-country dynamiting and cannon-firing are ticketable offences in national parks.
- 17.** At the end of the day, when the lifts are shut down, most of the skiers leave at about the same time. They clog the roads leading from your ski area. The skiers are tired, and some of them are intoxicated. Night comes early in the skiing months, and the roads are often slippery. This is an evil combination. It produces nasty accidents. Parks Canada should not be encouraging traffic congestion and highway fatalities.
- 18.** Some skiers stay at or near your ski area overnight, in a national-park town that was a quiet place in winter before the ski area was built. That pre-ski era was all to the good, as far as park operations and wildlife protection were concerned. But now the town is busy in winter as well as in summer. Human disturbance of wildlife now occurs year-round. This compromises the survival of sensitive and threatened species, protection of which is supposed to be paramount in a national park.
- 19.** Overnighting skiers have an evening meal and eat breakfast the next morning. Natural gas is burned to cook the food. Heat and electrical power are used to wash the dishes, and garbage and sewage are generated. The skiers sleep in hotel rooms, with linens to wash the next day. More power is used to light the rooms and run the

TV sets. More natural gas is burned to keep the rooms warm in the cold Canadian winter. Heavy-duty cleaning chemicals are used to disinfect the bathrooms, generating toxic sewage. None of this is appropriate in a World Heritage Site, which is what the four interlocking Rockies national parks, plus three adjoining provincial parks, comprise.

20. Many of the skiers go out on the town after dinner, seeking après-ski entertainment. They find it. They drink alcohol, producing objectionable behavior, bar fights and impaired driving. Drunks go shouting along the streets late at night, disturbing the residents. Young people hired to work in the restaurants, bars and hotels like to party, too. The town is not as agreeable as it once was, and it requires heavier law enforcement. Yet towns in national parks are traditionally supposed to supply only essential services.
21. A substantial portion of the money spent by people attracted to your ski area goes to other businesses, which makes them good friends of yours. Those businesses want more skiers, just as you do. Together you promote the ski area worldwide. You make package deals with hotels, airlines, charter-bus companies and travel agencies, attracting many more paying customers. Government tourism departments are on your side, and they help pay for your advertising. It's easy to get the impression that the national park is there mainly to serve visitors to commercial resorts and ski areas such as yours. But there is nothing in the Canada National Parks Act or policy documents that makes in-park commerce a priority.
22. However, it is a priority for you. So you pester the park to expand your ski area. You want more runs, more lifts, more parking spaces and a bigger day lodge. You want overnight accommodation "on the hill." Environmentalists object, and Parks Canada's regulations cause delays, but as time goes by you get most of what you want, even though wilderness protection is supposed to take precedence over human fun in the parks.
23. Not content with your growing winter income, you figure out ways to get people up to the ski area in summer. They can ride the lifts for sight-seeing. They can hike in alpine meadows once frequented by grizzly bears and careen down the ski runs on mountain bikes. Weedy, high-calorie vegetation grows in those ski runs. The displaced bears are attracted to them. Suddenly the national park has a new kind of human/wildlife conflict to deal with.
24. Your ski area has now become large enough and busy enough to contribute substantially to the economy of the whole region, which finds itself dependent on lift-generated dollars all year round.² The conflict between national-park principles and the profit motive spreads and escalates. The damage accrues. Non-skiing park visitors and conservationists become increasingly upset. Opinion polls show that most Canadians would rather see the wilderness protected than more of it given up

² As I have said before, downhill skiing is crack cocaine to the economies of mountain communities. Ski areas are cheap to start up, and the sudden gush of off-season money is addictive. Many a small, pleasant mountain town has become hooked on downhill skiing. The resulting boom wrecks the place. Consider Aspen, Vail, Breckenridge, Crested Butte and Telluride, once charming little towns in Colorado that have been commercialized beyond recognition by downhill skiing.

for downhill skiing. But you, the person who started all this, disagree. That's because downhill skiing is making you rich.

25. Because you are rich, you can afford to make substantial contributions to whatever political party is in power, and you can help to fund lobbyists for the ski industry. When you call your MP, you find that he or she is delighted to make your acquaintance. The MP who runs Parks Canada is a particularly good friend. That person is a politician, dependent for re-election on campaign contributions from you. Also, part of the take at your ski area goes to Parks Canada in the form of royalty payments. The national park needs that money, and needs it badly because the agency is grossly underfunded. So the MP who runs Parks Canada makes a point of telling all and sundry that downhill skiing is considered appropriate in national parks, and that, to quote from a current Parks Canada document on ski areas, they "add to the visitor experience by providing a popular winter activity, which is the cornerstone of winter tourism in mountain national parks and contributes to their unique cultural heritage."³

Downhill skiing as "cultural heritage"? I don't think so.

However, *uphill* skiing can lay claim here. Skiers who head into the back country under their own steam, and I am one of them, are inheritors of an adventurous mountain culture that has been passed along in the Canadian Rockies since the 1930s. It is all about humans feeling small and humble as they cross huge icefields. It is about crevasses and camaraderie and whiteouts and long ascents with a pack on your back, your lungs full of clean mountain air and your heart singing amid the unbelievable beauty around you. No ski area is required. Or desired.

For the downhill crowd, skiing is about speed and style and little else. Yet it brings on everything in points one through twenty-five above. If this is culture, it sure ain't a heritage the national parks can be proud of.

Obviously, the federal government should never have allowed downhill skiing to get started in the mountain parks. Like trail-motorcycling, like snowmobiling, like road-building, logging, mining and a host of other wilderness-wrecking activities that started small and got out of control before they were stopped, mechanized skiing should have ended in the parks long ago.

Impossible to close a ski area in a national park, you say? Not at all. In at least three American national parks—Rocky Mountain National Park in Colorado, Yellowstone National Park in Wyoming and Mt. Rainier National Park in Washington state—this has actually happened.

Hidden Valley ski area in Rocky Mountain National Park was closed in 1992, when long-standing subsidies were withdrawn and no private backer was interested in risking the sort of investment needed to make the place competitive with other ski areas in Colorado. The park jumped at the chance to close the area. Capping development and disallowing improvements in Canadian national-park ski areas would likewise make them less attractive to skiers as the years went by, less profitable and thus easier to close.

Undine ski area in Yellowstone was closed in 1993, mainly for environmental reasons. This required a fair bit of resolve on the part of the United States Park Service

³ *Marmot Basin Ski Area Site Guidelines for Development and Use*, Parks Canada 2009, viewable at px.gc.ca/eng/pn-np/ab/jasper/plan/plan8/b.aspx.

and the Department of the Interior. We need that sort of willpower in the Canadian parks service.

A small ski area at Paradise on Mt. Rainier closed long ago, in the early 1970s according to a park spokesperson, because it couldn't compete with the growing commercial areas nearby. If the Mt. Rainier concessionaire and the government had been as intent on expansion as their Canadian equivalents have been, Paradise would probably still be operating. But at Mt. Rainier mechanized skiing died early and quietly, before it could grow into a monster of the size and menace that Parks Canada now has to deal with in Banff and Jasper.

Rest in peace, Paradise. Rest in peace, Undine and Hidden Valley. All four ski areas in the Canadian mountain parks—Sunshine, Norquay, Lake Louise and Marmot Basin—ought to be next.

And in future, we would do well to apply the inverse of that old saying, “If you build it, they will come.” To protect the parks from downhill skiing, the slogan should be, “If you don't build it, they won't come.”
