SUSTAINABILITY

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Not every ski area is a loser in light of rising temperatures

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Early indications are that we are in for a warm but wet winter. So what does that mean for our ski areas today and the future?

Continued increases in both day and nighttime temperatures might threaten the livelihood of some ski areas, especially those at lower elevations. This could have a ripple effect on the industry.

Nobody is talking about the end of snow—in Colorado, in California, or in any of the ski resorts in North America. It's all about, whether or not there it will be enough to snow to cover our hills to sustain the business of the resorts.

Obviously rising temperatures are already a real problem for ski area operators at lower elevations.

U.S. temperatures have increased an average 1.3° F to 1.9° F since 1895, with most of that increase since 1970, according to the National Climate Assessment. Nighttime minimum temperatures have been rising, too.

This has already narrowed the windows of opportunity available for snowmaking. Those windows will narrow even more as global temperatures continue to rise.

On the other hand, some ski areas—higher, colder, and with the best snowmaking equipment—may actually thrive in coming decades, picking up business at the expense of resorts in these marginal locations.

Still, even the winners won't escape some of the fallout from rising temperatures. The new-skier/rider population could suffer if smaller ski areas are lost. Such low-elevation ski areas have long developed new skiers and riders and fed them to larger resorts. If those areas go out of business or, at a minimum, face greater challenges, the whole industry can expect to shrink.

Global warming presents a myriad of questions for ski area resorts.

For ski areas barely above sea level, like Whistler, B.C., the warmer temperatures of the future have been entering into current investment decisions, such as the effort to locate infrastructure higher on slopes and making snow on their glacier.

High, interior locations like Colorado's Arapahoe Basin probably will have good snow for decades to come—but rising temperatures will likely reduce the days of powder skiing.

Sun Valley, the first purpose built destination ski resort in North America, turns 80 this year. Sun Valley Makes lots of snow but will they have enough snow 80 years from now to justify a business based on 90 to 120 days of skiing?

As rain increasingly replaces snow, even operators in the highest, coldest locations will face mounting challenges.

Climate change may be driving consolidation, with the geographically dispersed properties of Vail Resorts and Intrawest being the obvious models. One ski area might not be able to withstand three consecutive years of temperatures too warm for good snow. With diversity, there should be relative strength. ■

Horstman Glacier, Blackcomb

The above aerial photo of the Horstman Glacier on Blackcomb from July vividly shows the effects that hot and very dry conditions left on this popular summer skiing attraction.

Instead of gleaming, wide open glacial snowfields that are heavily used by both the public and elite skiers, there is a skinny-looking white and black patch of ski terrain with a t-bar in the middle.

For years, Whistler-Blackcomb managers have monitored the Horstman Glacier and what they are seeing is similar to what is happening to other glaciers around B.C.

Glaciers are retreating at relatively fast rates at this point.

A good snow year can help insulate the glacier from the summer's sun and slow down the melting rate.

Starting this winter, the resort has guns and above-ground piping on the glacier with the hope that the buildup of snow over the winter will help maintain the snow for the summer use — and ultimately slow down the glacier's melting. ■

SUSTAINABLE SLOPES
The environmental charter for ski areas