

The downhill battle: Ski slopes in peril CNN.com March 19, 2007 Monday 10:59 AM EST

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SECTION: TRAVEL

When the aspen Ski Company launched its environment division -- a kind of green management team, think tank and consultancy -- it was the first of its kind in the ski industry: an in-house watchdog to prevent the resort from gorging on energy and trampling its fragile ecosystem. Ten years later, the division's director, Auden Schendler, spends at least as much time thinking about saving Aspen as he does about saving its environment. Both, it turns out, are highly vulnerable to climate change.

"I'm not concerned about all the snow going away in the year 2100," says Schendler's longtime boss, Pat O'Donnell, who just stepped down as Aspen's CEO. The real threat is less dramatic, and more immediate.

Most American ski resorts pull in as much as a quarter of their earnings during Christmas vacation. And December snow packs and freezes into a thick floor of ice that can sustain man-made flurries when spring comes. But powder, natural or man-made, only piles up nicely when the weather stays between 18 and 24 degrees at night. An increase in temperature means steeper snowmaking costs and a shorter season -- both money-losing prospects for resorts.

Since the 1950s, temperatures across the American West have climbed an average of 1.4 degrees -- and a majority of scientists believe that warming will continue and accelerate. "I talked to my head of snowmaking and asked, 'What happens if I take away a degree and a half?'" O'Donnell recalls. "His answer was, 'Holy s###.'"

That realization has spread across the U.S. ski industry since the early part of this decade. Dozens of resorts, including Aspen's Rocky Mountain neighbor, Vail, and Mammoth Mountain in California's Sierra Nevada (even more vulnerable than the Rockies, according to climate models), have copied Aspen's example and opened their own environment divisions.

Once wary of Aspen's activism, the National Ski Areas Association has partnered with the Natural Resources Defense Council to lobby Congress on behalf of climate-change legislation, and produced public service announcements for its members. Even some smaller mountains are investing in green projects. Last year, Jiminy Peak, in Massachusetts, built a \$3.9 million wind turbine on the mountain, and Sugar Bowl, near Lake Tahoe, became the first resort to offset all of its emissions with green-energy purchases. More than 20 mountains, including Aspen, had followed by the start of this ski season.

To be sure, ski resorts, although resource hogs, barely register as contributors to climate change compared with heavy industry or the world's half billion cars and trucks. Conservation on the slopes can only accomplish so much. Schendler believes, in fact, that it may be off the mountain where ski companies can do the greatest good. That means lobbying for new legislation; presenting the threat to ski business as an early warning of harmful climate change (one that is easier to grasp than slushy polar caps or migrating butterflies); and turning mountains into labs to experiment with the kinds of green innovations bigger industries could adopt.

"My mandate to Auden was to become an activist," O'Donnell says. "We have to get involved at the state and national level. Otherwise, we'll be sitting around with a squeaky-clean record, and we'll say, 'We did everything.' And we'll be bankrupt, because of climate change."

"Historically, the ski industry was perceived as environmentally benign," says Schendler, who previously worked as an analyst at the Rocky Mountain Institute, an environmentalist think tank. Still, by the 1990s, skiing and snowboarding had become big business. Resorts cleared forest for expansions and drew more power from the grid every year. When O'Donnell came to Aspen from Patagonia in 1994, he figured the company had an obligation to its natural surroundings. And if the bigger resorts around the Rockies continued their sprawling development, Aspen might flourish as a boutique, back-to-nature alternative.

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Aspen's green experiment started small, in 1997, with a beefed-up recycling program and an employee-run charitable foundation to fund environmental projects. That probably would have been enough to give Aspen's brand a progressive sheen. But the company soon turned its attention to trickier, costlier issues, like power and water conservation. Aspen tried little things, like building half-pipes in the summer, out of dirt, instead of in the winter, out of a small mountain of man-made snow, saving both power and water. "More and more resorts are adopting that technique," Schendler says.

Other projects were more exotic -- for instance, installing a micro power station that captures runoff water and converts it into clean electricity. Since lifts and snowmaking machinery are tough to run more efficiently, short of buying all-new equipment, Aspen has focused on reducing the environmental footprint of its buildings and vehicles, which account for roughly one-third of the resort's energy use. Today, the mountain spends about \$300,000 annually on a range of green initiatives. (Aspen earns back about \$60,000 a year in energy savings, but other financial benefits -- significant ones, anyway -- are awfully hard to quantify.)

For all of Aspen's progress, no change has been easy. (Lisa Isaacs, Schendler's counterpart at Mammoth Mountain, and one of the top environment directors in the industry, actually developed an ulcer during her first year on the job.)

Take the decision to convert much of Aspen's heavy machinery from gas to cleaner-burning **biodiesel**, which, as far as Schendler knew, had never seen much use in the cold or at high altitudes. It was a hard sell: "You're a vehicle mechanic. You grew up on a ranch and you wear Carhartts so greasy they don't bend. You have a fleet of 20 snowcats that cost a quarter of a million dollars," Schendler says. "I'm a college boy, office guy. I say, 'Let's use **biodiesel** in your snowcats.'" If they break down, the mechanics will be the ones working overtime to fix them. "I've got a slide of one of these guys giving me the finger," Schendler says, laughing.

Aware of how often his activist colleagues fail to appreciate the demands they make on businesses, Schendler decided to push gently. He joined a team of mechanics building a catapult in their spare time for an annual melon-chucking contest. And eventually, he talked them into converting one snowcat for a **biodiesel** test. The very day they did it, Schendler says, a neighboring resort, Arapahoe Basin, called with questions about converting their own snowcats. Now all of Aspen's snowcats run on **biodiesel**. At first, the greener gas cost an extra \$50,000 a year, but a new tax credit covers the difference, and dozens of other mountains have adopted the technology.

A big proponent of transparency, Aspen has opened all of this environmental work to formal scrutiny. The resort asked the U.S. Green Building Council to LEED-certify a new lodge and clubhouse (an expensive, time-consuming process) and Audubon to certify its golf course; it joined the Chicago Climate Exchange, a carbon-trading market, in order to validate its carbon reductions; and it hired auditors to check the resort for ISO 14000 certification, a benchmark of good environmental practice developed by the International Organization for Standardization, in Geneva, Switzerland. Since 1999, Schendler has published a detailed annual report on Aspen's environmental footprint, including gas, water and power consumption, which the resort posts prominently on its Web site.

Ultimately, though, Aspen's activism could mean more for the environment than anything the resort can install or upgrade on its property. "You could eliminate all the emissions in the ski industry, and we could still be out of business by 2100," Schendler says. But a high-profile company like Aspen can have an outsize influence on politics, public opinion and even other industries.

When Senators John McCain and Joe Lieberman proposed sweeping new regulations on greenhouse gases in 2003, Aspen was the first of more than 70 ski resorts to endorse their bill. Aspen then supported a successful state initiative that requires 10 percent of Colorado's energy to be renewable by 2015, and lobbied Congress for a federal version.

In November, the company debuted a series of pointed ads in sports magazines to try to provoke skiers into political action, and published environmentalist strategies on the resort's Web site. "We want to get away from the idea that if you drive a Prius and change some lightbulbs, you're done," Schendler explains. This winter, he convinced Aspen's leadership to file an amicus brief with the U.S. Supreme Court, supporting a lawsuit that would force the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to regulate CO2 emissions as a pollutant. Aspen was one of only a few business interests to file with the plaintiffs, a coalition of state and city governments and environmental nonprofits. "To me, that's the most important thing we've ever done as a ski resort," Schendler says.

Aspen still isn't sure whether, in the short term, any of this is good for business. The company saves money on energy, gets press coverage (ahem), and feels pretty sure that having a social mission is good for hanging onto employees. But some critics still accuse Aspen of pushing an environmental agenda as a way to make more money. Schendler talks

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a lot like a green radical, but he would be thrilled if those critics were right. "If we protect the climate out of greed, that's even better," he says, laughing. "Greed works."

LOAD-DATE: March 19, 2007

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

PUBLICATION-TYPE: Web Publication

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