Making Meaning out of Mountains

The Political Ecology of Skiing

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For my wife, Kumi, for her generosity and support.

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Introduction

The Attractive Economy of Skiing

<div style="text-align: right">**1**</div>

Skiing brings to mind images of snowy mountains, sunshine, and athletic men and women having fun. In the classic film *White Christmas,* the ski resort is synonymous with the magic of winter, about which Bing Crosby croons. Ernest Hemingway, icon of literary masculinity, was an avid skier, as was Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Through mass media images of resorts in the European Alps and American Rockies, skiing remains linked to images of celebrity and luxury. Skiing, however, is not only for the rich and famous. A 1990 survey of ski market trends notes that a third of Canadian households own downhill or cross-country ski equipment, highlighting the importance of the sport to Canadian social life.[1] The cover of a book titled *How to Be a Canadian* shows a rosy-cheeked young woman with skis and red-knit sweater posed against a mountain background.[2] These images depict skiing as a benign form of human-nature interaction that is far removed from the world of politics. However, skiing should be examined within the context of ecopolitics, a perspective that joins together the microsocial and macrosocial dimensions of environmentalism. These include environmental values, environmentally friendly behaviours, and environmentalist identities, as well as environmental movement political action and debates over ecological sustainability.

Skiing, as a recreational form of interaction with mountain environments, connects humans and non-human nature. Skiing also intersects

with First Nations activism, global climate change, mass media represen-
tations of nature, and (partially) global flows of tourism and migration.
At its core, skiing is marked by an ecopolitical ambiguity. Although the
ski industry positions itself as an exemplar of "sustainable development,"
environmental groups and First Nations protesters accuse it of spreading
into wilderness areas and displacing valuable wildlife habitat. Skiers
value the sport precisely because it brings them into embodied relation-
ships with mountainous nature, yet many are also concerned about
skiing's negative environmental impacts. Social and historical studies of
skiing and snowboarding rarely touch on environmental issues, and this
book addresses that gap by examining how playful interactions with
mountain environments are part of our "political ecology," where nature,
politics, economics, and culture intersect.[3]

In British Columbia, nature has been valued primarily as a source
of raw materials for capitalist production. Forestry, mining, and fishing
make up a staples economy that dominated the province in the past
and continues to inform the present. Environmental conflict over for-
estry practices and the protection of old-growth forests was a major
element of BC politics in the 1980s and 1990s. There were repeated
protests, blockades, and instances of civil disobedience in the Carmanah
Valley, Walbran Valley, Clayoquot Sound, Elaho Valley, Great Bear
Rainforest, and Slocan Valley. The Clayoquot Sound protests of 1993
focused international environmental concern on the province. Van-
couver media termed this period the "War in the Woods," while NDP
premier Glen Clark called environmental protesters "enemies of British
Columbia" for questioning the ecological legitimacy of provincial
forestry practices.

Similar environmental movement campaigns around ski resort ex-
pansion and new development likewise produced civil disobedience and
mobilized thousands of people through letter writing, petitions, and
protests, but these conflicts were generally sporadic and local in scale.
For the most part, skiing is seen as a benign mode of interaction with
mountain environments, a so-called attractive development that reinfor-
ces images of rural British Columbia as a space that is more natural than
social, where wilderness is as important a resource as lumber or minerals.[4]
This renaturalized rural landscape is disengaged from the traditional

staples economy and re-embedded in an economy of global tourism. The symbolic value of the landscape becomes as important as the value of the material resources it contains. Shifts from extractive to attractive development are often assumed to be environmentally beneficent, but there are environmental ambiguities and points of tension inherent in the attractive economy.

The 2010 Winter Olympics, the ongoing development of new ski resorts, and the provincial government's plans to increase the accessibility of the province's backcountry are only a few signs of the importance of the attractive economy in British Columbia. Skiing is an important part of this tourist economy. Since the 1970s, the province has seen "the development of Whistler [into] a truly world-class destination, and the advent of several fine regional destinations in the interior of the province."[5] Whistler Blackcomb, Big White, and Whitewater are only a few of the downhill ski resorts that draw locals and tourists into the mountains every winter. Backcountry skiing and cross-country skiing are also available across the province. Canada's oldest and largest heli-ski company, Canadian Mountain Holidays, is based in British Columbia, and Cypress Mountain, a short distance from downtown Vancouver, boasts that it is the most popular cross-country ski destination in Canada.

Four main themes structure my discussion of skiing in the pages that follow. First, the meaning of the skiing landscape is not a fixed thing. It is actively constructed by a variety of social actors. The ski industry draws upon images of the mountainous sublime to link skiing and nature. Environmental and First Nations groups, by contrast, challenge the ecological and social legitimacy of skiing. Environmentalists argue that skiing transforms pre-existing wilderness and wildlife landscapes into cultural spaces for mass tourism. Similarly, First Nations protesters argue that new skiing development infringes on contested territories. The development and expansion of ski resorts often brings these divergent meanings into conflict with each other. I touch on several examples of this, including Jumbo Pass (in southeastern British Columbia near the town of Invermere) and Sun Peaks (near the city of Kamloops). Cultural constructions of skiing landscapes have political effects, as they determine who controls mountain environments and who belongs in these "contested natures."[6]

Second, skiing is not only a social activity, where the non-human environment serves as a scenic background or set of symbols. It entails material interactions between human skiers, mountains, weather systems, trees, and animals. Skiers' experiences of mountain environments are also mediated by the skis, boots, and specialized outdoor clothing required to participate in the sport. Machines are used to shape the physical landscape to make it more appealing to skiers. Chairlifts carry skiers up mountains; cars, buses, and airplanes connect local skiing landscapes to nearby urban areas and broader networks of tourist travel. A long-standing debate in the environmental social sciences pits environmental "realists" against environmental "constructionists."[7] In very simple terms, environmental realism assumes the existence of a physical environment outside the social realm, which can be accurately known through environmental science. By contrast, environmental constructionism emphasizes the ways in which environmental knowledge is always mediated by systems of discourse. From this perspective, the claims of environmental scientists, environmentalists, and others should be analyzed as social constructions rather than taken as unproblematic accounts of the environment. I circumvent the divide between realism and constructionism by exploring how humans and non-humans "co-construct" skiing as a practice that is mediated by discourse but which is fundamentally about embodied interactions between skiers and non-human nature. Rather than speaking of skiing as a site where nature and society meet, I find more productive to examine how skiing produces mountain environments as hybrid "actor networks," "naturecultures," or "technonatures."[8]

Third, skiing is a site of power relations between humans and non-human nature. There is a tension between interpretations of skiing as a form of sustainable development and skiing as an environmental problem. The ski industry presents itself as a pro-environmental steward of mountain environments. By adopting habitat management programs, eco-efficiency standards, and new technologies, the ski industry appears to be engaged in a project of "ecological modernization" aimed at achieving sustainability within the existing economic and political framework of consumer capitalism.[9] Skiers similarly value their sport because it allows them to engage in embodied relationships with mountainous

nature. However, social movement groups highlight the negative environmental impacts of skiing's relationship with non-human nature. Skiers' reflections on the ecopolitics of their sport also illuminate several ecological ironies.[10] These are gaps between the ski industry's use of pro-environmental discourse and its negative ecological impacts. These include wildlife displacement; energy use to power chairlifts; or the intimate connections between skiing, car use, and global climate change. A Foucauldian theoretical framework highlights the power relations that work through playful interactions with mountainous nature. The ecopolitics of skiing plays out within the microsocial environmental subjectivities of skiers, as well as through larger-scale relations of biopower between the ski industry and non-human nature.[11]

Finally, skiing is not only about having fun in the snow. It is also characterized by flows of power based on gender, ethnicity, class, and other social factors. These are relations of power that operate through everyday interaction, rather than through grand acts of exclusion or repression. These relations of power often pass unnoticed or are taken for granted. For example, ski industry discourse links images of the mountainous sublime to normalized whiteness and masculinity. This produces gendered and racialized versions of the skiing landscape. Participation in skiing is also influenced by gendered norms and expectations, which privilege a "guys' style" that is more aggressive and oriented toward risk-taking. Skiing villages like Whistler Blackcomb are also constructed as sites of rustic luxury. An analysis of social power relations within skiing builds upon prior research on how outdoor sports such as skiing, mountaineering, and surfing are shaped by the dynamics of gender, ethnicity, and class.[12] Analyzing how flows of power oriented around gender, class, and racialization work through skiing allows us to see which social groups are positioned as the natural inhabitants and legitimate managers of mountain environments. As certain traits are particularly valorized within skiing (e.g., risk-seeking, youthful masculinity), the experience of those who do not meet these criteria may be devalued and marginalized.

In the end, of course, this is a study of skiing in British Columbia. My findings are broadly consistent with other research on skiing in western North America, such as Coleman's history of skiing in Colorado

and Rothman's discussion of the growth of ski resorts in the western United States, but may be less applicable to eastern North America or other regions of the globe.[13]

Since its inception in the 1970s, environmental sociology has been concerned with environmental movements, the spread of environmental values, and social conflicts over access to natural resources. Despite Dunlap and Catton's early assertion that wildland recreation should be a key research area, recreational forms of land use have generally received less attention.[14] At the same time, the sociology of sport has examined outdoor recreation through snowboarding, rock climbing, mountaineering, and windsurfing. This work typically examines how outdoor sport is shaped by gender, class, or ethnicity, while bracketing out the role played by non-human nature in constituting outdoor recreation.[15] The separation of environmental sociology from the sociology of sport produces a double lacuna: the marginalization of sport in environmental sociology and the marginalization of non-human nature in the sociology of sport. An analysis of the political ecology of skiing highlights the salience of outdoor sport for environmental sociology, as well as the importance of non-humans for the sociology of sport. It encourages further research and theoretical dialogue across these two areas of inquiry.

The Social Context of Skiing in British Columbia

This study combines textual analysis, interviews, and field observation. Skier interviews were conducted in two areas of British Columbia: the Vancouver to Whistler corridor and the Nelson region, in southeastern British Columbia. Field observation was similarly split between the Whistler Blackcomb ski resort, near Vancouver, and the Whitewater resort, near Nelson. Different as they are, these two regions and resorts present rich contrasts.

The Vancouver-Whistler Region

More than half the skiers in British Columbia live in Vancouver, the largest city in the province.[16] The city is also a gateway for tourists to Whistler Blackcomb, the flagship resort of the BC ski industry that

accounted for 6.1 million skier days during the winter of 2003/2004. Three smaller ski hills – Cypress Mountain, Mount Seymour, and Grouse Mountain – are located in close proximity to Vancouver.

Whistler Blackcomb operates more than two hundred ski runs over 3,307 hectares of skiable terrain on Whistler Mountain, with an elevation of 2,182 metres, and on Blackcomb, with an elevation of 2,284 metres.[17] The longest runs exceed eleven kilometres in length. On average, Pacific weather systems bring over ten metres of snow a year to the resort. A substantial infrastructure has been built up, including thirty-eight chairlifts and gondolas, with a combined capacity to move up to sixty-five thousand skiers per hour. There are also seventeen lodges and restaurants spread over the two mountains. Whistler Village sits in the valley below the two peaks. Indicating the status of Whistler Blackcomb as a place of tourism and consumerism, the village contains several hotels, including high-end luxury hotels like the Fairmont Chateau Whistler. The village also has several cafés, bars, restaurants, tourist memorabilia shops, clothing stores, and sports gear stores. The cost of lift tickets is relatively high. Day passes for the 2009/2010 ski season cost as much as $91; season passes cost up to $1,500 (early bird passes were available for $1,100). Whistler Blackcomb also hosted several events during the 2010 Olympics, cementing its reputation as a global skiing destination.

Skis – or "Norwegian snowshoes" as they were then called – began to appear in the mountains around Vancouver in the 1920s. As in Colorado and California, skiing was introduced to the Coast Mountains by Norwegian immigrants. In a history of Hollyburn Mountain (the present home of Cypress ski resort), Francis Mansbridge writes,

> Until the early years of the past century, snowshoeing was the traditional Canadian way of navigating the winter wilderness, conjuring up images of *coureurs du bois* in colourful garb singing rousing French-Canadian folk songs. But once the Scandinavians began arriving, skiing, at this time a new sport in Canada, and particularly suited to the mountainous terrain of British Columbia, took hold. Attracted to BC by work in logging and mining, Scandinavians brought with them both their skis and their philosophy of sport and camaraderie.[18]

Skiing gained popularity with Vancouverites, who travelled to Hollyburn and other peaks in the North Shore Mountains, often as members of outdoor clubs. During this period, recreational skiing was frequently a form of relief from mining and forestry work. Kaare Hesgeth, an early skier in the Hollyburn area, sums up this relationship when he says, "Mining is our bread, and skiing our soul."[19] Although many skiers saw their sport as compatible with forestry or mining, tensions between recreational and extractive uses of the Coast Mountains emerged early on. For example, skiers were prominent among those who rallied in Vancouver in 1939 to call on the provincial government to protect the recreational landscape of the North Shore Mountains from logging.

Skiers gradually moved northward in their exploration and use of the Coast Mountains. Garibaldi Chalet was opened by Norwegian immigrants in 1946 as the first private ski lodge in British Columbia. The lodge was located at the base of Mount Garibaldi in what is now Garibaldi Provincial Park. It was not until 1960 that skiing came to London Mountain, which was renamed Whistler Mountain after the marmots (that make a high-pitched whistling sound) that live in alpine areas of the Coast Mountains. Garibaldi Lifts Ltd. began development in the area in 1960, and Whistler ski hill officially opened in February 1965. This began a rapid process of transforming the small rural community into a global skiing destination. In 1974, Whistler was serving up to five thousand skiers per day. Although the Roundhouse Lodge provided shelter and a place to eat lunch, services were still relatively undeveloped. In the 1960s and 1970s, there were two distinct cultures at Whistler. The business-oriented resort developers and tourism boosters shared the skiing landscape with a subculture of squatters who inhabited makeshift cabins and who combined their love of skiing with a back-to-the-land ethos and counterculture political values.[20]

Skiing and tourism continued to develop in the 1980s. Blackcomb Mountain opened in 1980, and new hotels, stores, and restaurants were built in Whistler Village. Between 1986 and 1991, the full-time population of Whistler Village doubled to 4,460. This growth was symptomatic of larger trends toward attractive development in British Columbia. In 1986, the city of Vancouver hosted a category II world exhibition (Expo '86), which has been seen as a turning point that "asserted the province's

entry onto the world stage."[21] As historian Jean Barman writes, "The attributes of natural beauty and opportunities for outdoor recreation that exist in abundance across the province became increasingly valued around the world, heightening British Columbia's appeal as a holiday destination."[22] Intrawest was one of the companies that took advantage of the bourgeoning attractive economy by purchasing Whistler Mountain in 1986 in its first move into the ski industry.

Whistler Blackcomb became a global tourism destination during the 1990s. In the 1996/1997 ski season, there were 1.74 million skier visits, making the resort the most popular in North America.[23] Intrawest took over the operation of Blackcomb Mountain in 1996. During the same period, possibilities for golf, hiking, and mountain biking expanded, and the mountain became increasingly well known as a year-round tourism destination. The process of rapid growth and the globalization of Whistler as a tourist destination changed the feeling of the community. Stephan Vogler, Toshi Kawano, and Bonny Makarevicz describe this process as follows:

> The irony of it all was that the relaxed, laid-back lifestyle of the previous decade proved the most marketable commodity of all: mountain lifestyle, an elixir that could be bottled and sold with the ever-increasing real estate. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s Whistler was the glamorous young starlet of the ski-resort scene. Accolades were heaped upon it year after year in the form of No. 1 rankings in the ski magazines. Movie stars and pop stars came to revel in the buzz of the happening new resort.[24]

Whistler had been transformed over a relatively short period from a small village in a forestry-dependent region into a rural, mountainous version of a "fantasy city," and Whistler Blackcomb led to the reimagination of the Sea to Sky corridor, once dominated by the forest economy, as "sports country."[25] This shift has been accompanied by a growing environmental sensitivity within the region. Whistler Village adopted the Whistler 2020 sustainability plan as well as the Natural Step Framework, both of which link skiing to a project of local sustainability. The Association of Whistler Area Residents for the Environment

(AWARE) seeks to "improve the quality of life in Whistler and surrounding areas, protect and restore the natural heritage and maintain our resources and ecosystems, and achieve environmental sustainability through community education and advocacy."[26] These connections between skiing and ecopolitics echo broader shifts toward environmentalism and outdoor recreation as key components of a distinctive lifestyle of twenty-first-century British Columbians.[27]

Nelson and Whitewater

Whitewater Winter and Ski Resort is located in the subalpine basin below Ymir Mountain (elevation 2,400 metres), in the Selkirk Mountains of southeastern British Columbia. It is approximately seven hundred kilometres east of Vancouver via the mountainous Highway 3. At Whitewater, two old two-seat chairlifts move skiers up the north (Summit) and south (Silver King) sides of the Ymir basin, where forty-six runs encompass 478 hectares of skiable terrain.[28] The elevation gain from the Whitewater lodge building to the top of the Summit chairlift is only 396 metres, far less than the 1,530-metre elevation gain at Whistler or the 1,609-metre gain at Blackcomb. Whitewater is much smaller than Whistler Blackcomb, but the resort chairlifts are frequently used by skiers to access expansive and popular backcountry skiing routes to Ymir Peak, White Queen, and Five Mile Basin. The average annual snowfall at Whitewater – in excess of thirteen metres per year – is comparable to that at Whistler Blackcomb, but in this Interior location, the snow at Whitewater is often lighter and drier than the heavy, wet snow typical of the Coast Mountains.

Whitewater has only one lodge building, which houses a ski shop, cafeteria, pub, clothing store, and daycare. There is no "village" at the base of the ski hill. Hotels, restaurants, cafés, bars, and shops are all located in the nearby town of Nelson, which has a population of approximately ten thousand people. In general, tourism facilities in Nelson do not compare to the high-end luxury hotels or restaurants of Whistler Village. Even though hiking, rock climbing, and mountain biking are all popular in the Nelson region, Whitewater has not developed the summer activities that are incorporated into Whistler Blackcomb as a

"four-season resort." Consistent with the smaller size and less-developed character of Whitewater, access is also more affordable than at Whistler Blackcomb. During the 2009-10 ski season, a full-price day pass cost $57; a season pass cost $700 (with an early bird price of $580).

Skiing in the province's Interior began in the 1880s, well before it emerged in the North Shore Mountains outside Vancouver. Scandinavian miners in the towns of Revelstoke, Kimberley, and Rossland (near Nelson) were the province's first skiers.[29] Nelson was established as part of the silver mining boom in the Interior during the 1880s. The town quickly evolved into a supply centre for the regional mining industry. Two years after its formation in 1932, the Silver King Skiers set up a basic ski lodge and rudimentary rope tow, which was powered by the engine of a Ford.[30] In 1961, the club – then known as the Silver King Ski Club – built a new lodge and rope tow on the site of the abandoned Silver King Mine.

The club began work on a ski hill in the Whitewater area in 1974. The group sought to create a ski hill that would "prevent [the] unnecessary upset of the natural environment" and avoid the "barren *pistes*" characteristic of the European Alps by leaving much of the local forest intact.[31] In 1986, Whitewater resort was bought from the ski club by a group of private Nelson entrepreneurs. Ownership of the resort changed hands again in 1997, when Mike and Shelley Adams became the sole owners. The Adamses managed the resort until 2008, when it was bought by Calgary-based Knee Deep Development, which plans to expand the amount of skiable terrain at Whitewater. The recent sale moves ownership of the resort outside the Nelson area for the first time. Since the 1990s, ski magazine and film coverage has built a reputation for Whitewater as an alternative to the larger resorts.[32] Attempts to create cultural distance between Whitewater and larger resorts like Whistler Blackcomb are captured by its slogan: Pure, Simple and Real.

The attractive economy, based on tourism and outdoor sport, has grown in importance in the West Kootenay region, which also has a strong history of environmental activism. The Valhalla Wilderness Society is widely known for its successful campaigns to protect Valhalla Provincial Park and Goat Range Provincial Park. The Slocan Valley

Watershed Alliance, along with members of the Sinixt First Nation, has protested against clear-cutting in the region and has sought to implement alternative models of ecosystem-based forestry.[33] West Kootenay EcoSociety, based in Nelson, organizes local farmers' markets and car sharing and is also active on land use issues.

Although environmentalism and attractive development coexist in the Nelson area, there are some points of tension. As backcountry skiing and other winter sports become more popular, some environmentalists question the wildlife impacts of increased helicopter, snowmobile, and snowcat traffic (snowcats are large vehicles that travel on treads, used to transport backcountry skiers) in remote alpine environments. Local environmentalists have mobilized against the proposed Jumbo Glacier Resort, planned for the Purcell Mountains northeast of Nelson. For environmentalists, the ski resort risks transforming a wilderness landscape inhabited by grizzly bears and other sensitive wildlife into a place for mass tourism. EcoSociety has also recently mobilized against the planned expansion of skiable terrain at Whitewater, which the group says will compromise caribou and grizzly bear habitat in the area.[34]

The BC Ski Industry as an Economic Network

The structural differences between Whistler Blackcomb and Whitewater ski resorts are well illustrated by network analysis, which describes how members of social networks are connected with each other.[35] Networks can range from small groups of individuals to large-scale relationships, such as those between corporations or nation states. Figure 1.1 is a sociogram (social network diagram) of the ownership relations among key ski resorts in British Columbia. The black circular nodes represent individual ski resorts; the white square nodes represent ownership companies that are tied to more than one resort. Node size reflects the centrality of ownership companies in the network.

As this figure illustrates, the economic network of skiing in British Columbia consists of a few independent star structures, in which several ski resorts have common ownership. A few other resorts are members of small networks, with only one or two ties. The remainder stand alone as isolates within the network. These are privately owned resorts, usually
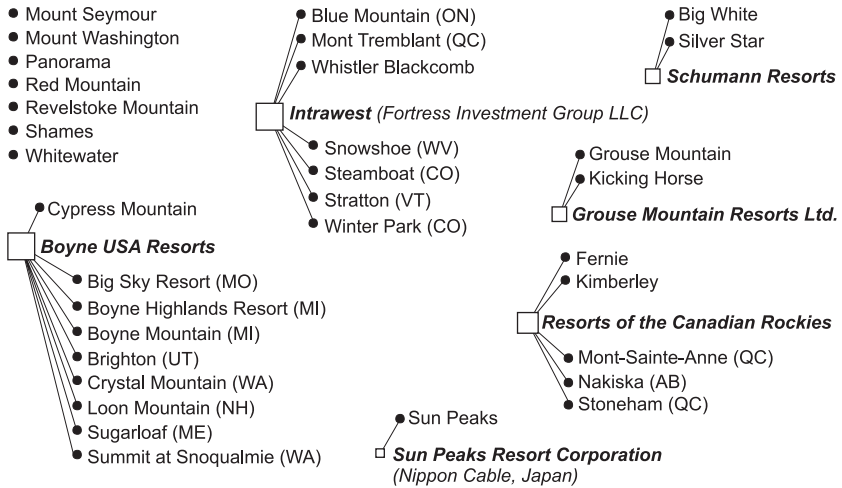
Mount Seymour
Mount Washington
Panorama
Red Mountain
Revelstoke Mountain
Shames
Whitewater

Blue Mountain (ON)
Mont Tremblant (QC)
Whistler Blackcomb

Big White
Silver Star

☐ *Schumann Resorts*

☐ *Intrawest* *(Fortress Investment Group LLC)*

Snowshoe (WV)
Steamboat (CO)
Stratton (VT)
Winter Park (CO)

Grouse Mountain
Kicking Horse

☐ *Grouse Mountain Resorts Ltd.*

Cypress Mountain

☐ *Boyne USA Resorts*

Big Sky Resort (MO)
Boyne Highlands Resort (MI)
Boyne Mountain (MI)
Brighton (UT)
Crystal Mountain (WA)
Loon Mountain (NH)
Sugarloaf (ME)
Summit at Snoqualmie (WA)

Fernie
Kimberley

☐ *Resorts of the Canadian Rockies*

Mont-Sainte-Anne (QC)
Nakiska (AB)
Stoneham (QC)

Sun Peaks

☐ *Sun Peaks Resort Corporation*
(Nippon Cable, Japan)

Figure 1.1   The BC ski industry as an economic network (June 2010)

the property of a single family or private investment company. At a glance, the network structure appears fragmented; this fragmentation is confirmed by network density measures that compare the number of ties in a network with the number of possible ties between all members of the network. The density of the network depicted in the sociogram is 0.138 (on a spectrum ranging from 0 to 1.0), indicating a low level of network cohesion or corporate concentration in the BC ski industry.

Cliques are subsets of nodes within a network. The two largest cliques in this network centre on Intrawest and Boyne Resorts. Whistler Blackcomb is a member of the Intrawest clique, along with Blue Mountain in Ontario, Mont Tremblant in Quebec, and several resorts in the United States. Intrawest was established in 1976 as a "residential and urban real estate firm."[36] The company entered the ski industry when it bought Whistler resort in 1986. Between 1991 and 2002, Intrawest expanded to become one of the largest ski industry companies in North America through the purchase of several resorts in Canada (Ontario, Quebec, and British Columbia) and the United States (Colorado, Vermont, and New Jersey). Intrawest also expanded beyond the ski industry into resort tourism in Florida, Hawaii, and "other exclusive locations around the world."[37] Intrawest remains headquartered in Vancouver, although the

company was bought in 2006 by Fortress Investment Group, an American investment firm based in New York. In the aftermath of the Lehman Brothers debacle, which hit Fortress Investment hard, creditors moved to force an auction of Intrawest properties. Several weeks of uncertainty followed. During this time, Intrawest sold several resort properties to generate capital, including the Panorama resort in southeastern British Columbia. The company also rejected a bid by Vail Resorts for Whistler Blackcomb, described as the crown jewel of the Intrawest properties. A deal was eventually reached with creditors, and Intrawest remains a key organization in the North American skiing economy, though with fewer resort properties.[38]

The second large clique centres on Boyne Resorts. Most of the resorts in this clique are located in the United States. The exception is Cypress Mountain, one of three ski resorts located close to the city of Vancouver. As part of Cypress Provincial Park, the Cypress ski area was managed by the provincial government until 1984. At this point, the ski area was privatized by the Social Credit government and sold to Wayne Booth's company, Cypress Bowl Recreations.[39] Cypress was sold to Boyne Resorts in 2001, marking the company's entry into the Canadian ski industry. Boyne Resorts began with the 1947 creation of Boyne Mountain ski hill in northern Michigan. Since then, Boyne has expanded by buying and developing ski resorts in Maine, New Hampshire, Montana, Utah, and Washington. At present, the company claims that it is the largest privately owned ski and golf corporation in the United States.[40]

A third noteworthy clique centres on Resorts of the Canadian Rockies. Besides Fernie Alpine Resort and Kimberley Alpine Resort, both located in southeastern British Columbia, this clique includes resorts in Alberta and Quebec. The ski hill in Fernie started in 1964 as a "weekend operation for local families."[41] Fernie Snow Valley remained a small, locally run ski hill until 1997, when it was bought by Resorts of the Canadian Rockies, which already owned several resorts in Alberta and Quebec. Charlie Locke, the Albertan owner of Resorts of the Canadian Rockies, expanded the skiable terrain, upgraded the resort infrastructure, and renamed the area Fernie Alpine Resort. Kimberley Alpine Resort was developed by Resorts of the Canadian Rockies in 2000 as part of a push toward attractive development following the demise of the Cominco

mine in the small town of Kimberley. In 2001, after a season of poor snowfall, Resorts of the Canadian Rockies was on the verge of bankruptcy. The company was bailed out by Calgary financier Murray Edwards, who became the majority shareholder in the company. Unlike Intrawest or Boyne, Resorts of the Canadian Rockies defines itself as proudly Canadian, while claiming to be the largest private ski resort operator in North America.[42]

These three cliques are the result of a historical process whereby local ski hills have been bought up by ski industry corporations. This process of corporate concentration is relatively recent, beginning with Intrawest's acquisition of Whistler in 1986 and accelerating throughout the 1990s. Only time will tell whether the recent sale of Intrawest holdings, including Panorama, marks the beginning of the decentralization of ski industry economic networks in British Columbia. However, these three cliques illustrate that the BC ski industry is embedded within broader North American economic networks, involving flows of capital between British Columbia, Alberta, and the United States.

Beyond these cliques, there are several dyadic and triadic clusters. Silver Star and Big White, both located in the Okanagan region of the province, are connected through their common ownership by the Schumann family (which has owned Big White since 1985 and Silver Star since 2001). Grouse Mountain Resorts has ownership ties to the Grouse Mountain resort, near Vancouver, as well as to Kicking Horse Mountain Resort in the Rockies. Sun Peaks is a notable anomaly within this network. Originally called Tod Mountain, the resort was purchased by Sun Peaks Resort Corporation in 1992.[43] Since then, it has undergone a considerable – and contentious – expansion program. It is the only BC resort that has significant ownership ties outside North America, as it is a subsidiary of Nippon Cable, a large Japanese corporation that manufactures chairlift equipment for ski hills and also has ownership ties to several Japanese ski resorts.

Several BC ski resorts are privately owned, often by investment groups based outside the province. They are isolated nodes within this network. Whitewater Winter Resort is one of these. Red Mountain, located in southeastern British Columbia near the town of Rossland, was established in 1947. It has been owned since 2004 by a San Diego investment

group.[44] Panorama, located near the East Kootenay town of Invermere, was owned by Intrawest until 2010 but was sold to an independent group of investors with ties to the region. Mount Seymour ski resort, located in the North Shore Mountains near Vancouver, has been privately owned by the Wood family since 1984.[45] Other isolates in this network include Mount Washington Alpine Resort on Vancouver Island, Revelstoke Mountain Resort, and Shames Mountain Ski Area in the northern part of the province.

Network analysis highlights several characteristics of the BC industry. First, processes of corporate concentration accelerated during the 1990s, but the ski industry is not marked by a high level of economic cohesion. Second, there is a marked divide within the ski industry. The majority of resorts are isolated nodes or members of dyadic or triadic clusters. A smaller number are parts of larger national and continental economic networks. If the globalization of ownership networks is a nascent phenomenon, as sociologist William K. Carroll suggests, the BC ski industry is not yet a major part of this process.[46] For the most part, BC resorts exist within regional, national, and continental economic networks. Finally, in structural terms, Whistler Blackcomb is a central resort in the BC ski industry. Even with the recent restructuring of Intrawest, it remains part of one of the largest cliques in the industry, which is defined by economic ties that span North America. Whitewater, by contrast, is an isolate within this network.

The BC ski industry is also linked to global networks of "tourism mobilities."[47] Tourist flows to the province are strongest from the United States and the rest of Canada. To a large degree, skiing tourism is a continental social phenomenon. Through tourism, however, British Columbia is also connected with the United Kingdom, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand. Local and continental ski resort ownership ties are coupled with continental and global flows of skier tourism. Just as Whistler is more firmly integrated into a North American economic network than is Whitewater, so is it more deeply intertwined with (partially) global tourist flows. Whistler is accessible from Vancouver International Airport and is second only to downtown Vancouver for tourism accommodation revenue in the province, but Whitewater is distant from

any major international airport and it attracts relatively few skier-tourists.[48] Whistler is a central nodal point in a (partially) global network of skier-tourist flows, whereas Whitewater is on the periphery.

Skiing, Authenticity, and Sustainability

The Waning Authenticity of Skiing

Histories of skiing frequently suggest that the sport has lost authenticity during the twentieth century. In *From Skisport to Skiing,* the historian E. John B. Allen describes the modernization and disenchantment of skiing as it evolved from a mode of transportation imported to North America by Norwegian immigrants.[49] In his view, the Norwegian ideal of *idræt,* the belief that skiing develops a strong sense of morality, character, and personal well-being, was an important component of "skisport" as a pre-modern social practice. Described as "a life philosophy," it holds the promise of a "regenerating effect on individual body [sic], soul ... and even nation."[50] Skisport (a form of cross-country skiing) prevailed in North America until the twentieth century, when an Austrian style of alpine skiing using a fixed-heel binding and a parallel posture grew in popularity. Endurance-testing cross-country ski races gave way to skiing competitions that emphasized jumping and short downhill races that some see as negating the spirit of *idræt*. The "heady lure of the thrill of speed" came to dominate the sport, and a way of life was translated into "merely a leisure time amusement" as mechanized ski hills and formal competition displaced the more supposedly authentic engagement with nature represented by *idræt*.[51]

According to Hal Rothman, an historian of tourism development in the American West, ski resorts are part of a twentieth-century trend toward the development of tourist landscapes, including Las Vegas casinos, California theme parks, Rocky Mountain ski resorts, and ersatz Old West towns across the western United States. In the process, "places evolved into caricatures of their original identities ... Tourism did not really destroy; it created the new, promised fresh myths, responded to the poignant pleas of a changing culture, in the process making towns that looked the same ... but felt different."[52]

According to Annie Coleman's account, skis first appeared in Colorado in the 1890s as a utilitarian technology used by mailmen to travel between remote mountain towns. Recreational skiing began soon afterward in the Aspen area. For many people, the sport offered escape from industrial modernity and the opportunity to interact with wild nature: "Skiers could enter a landscape that felt wild and natural – they could gain access to something fundamental, pristine, and authentic – and they did it during a century when 'nature' grew both increasingly appealing and elusive."[53] The sport embodied a "natural" freedom that many felt was disappearing from the modernist, industrial landscape of early-twentieth-century America.

In Coleman's view, modern skiing abandoned the desire for authentic connections with non-human nature. Postwar affluence and increased car ownership made tourist travel to ski resorts accessible to a larger segment of the American population. Ski resorts also became increasingly technologized in places, through the ongoing development of chairlift and snow-making technologies. Changes to ski design and lift technology made it easier to ascend and descend the mountain. This broadened the appeal of skiing and transformed skiers' relationships to mountain landscapes. As Coleman writes, "Presenting an empty, pristine, wild, and natural landscape paradoxically became a business, with mechanization not just a necessity but a boon."[54] Images of nature are still associated with skiing, but technology mediates, ever more significantly, skiers' embodied interactions with mountain environments. Contemporary ski resorts are themed, artificial environments, much like Disneyland, and may be thought of as rural, mountainous versions of the fantasy city dedicated to consumerism and "riskless risks."[55]

The increased mechanization of skiing and the parallel development of mountain towns for a "tourist gaze" has prompted environmentalist critiques of the sport.[56] The Earth Liberation Front's arson at Vail resort – where a chairlift, patrol lodge, and restaurant were set on fire in response to the resort's planned expansion into lynx habitat – is the most dramatic example of ski development protest.[57] Pressure from environmentalists has led to a stricter regulatory regime on public lands leased by the ski industry and has highlighted the question of skiing's relationship with environmental sustainability.

Sustainable Development and Skiing

One definition of sustainability is "the notion that an aspect of the environment or practice can be managed into the foreseeable future."[58] This sounds relatively simple, yet attempts to translate the principle of sustainability into policy and practice have often been contested. While paying limited attention to environmental criteria, weak versions of sustainability privilege ongoing economic growth. Strong models of sustainability, by contrast, emphasize the need to make ecological considerations central to economic policy. Strong models of sustainability require the inclusion of social justice as a key component of development and stress the need to redefine development so that it is not synonymous with economic growth.[59] The notion of sustainability may be linked to struggles for ecological well-being and social justice. However, as Laurie Adkin notes, the language of sustainability is easily – and more often – linked to projects of eco-capitalism that incorporate environmental concerns only to the degree that they fit into the ongoing operation of consumer capitalism. Several critics reject the language of sustainability altogether, arguing that ecological well-being is inherently incompatible with the growth logic of economic development. For example, Timothy Luke uses the term "sustainable degradation" to describe the reality of the economic and political policies that emerge from demands for sustainable development.[60] Bearing in mind the inherent limitations of sustainability as a contested and slippery concept, we might speak of a practice as either absolutely or relatively sustainable in the strong sense. In an absolute sense, skiing can continue indefinitely without destroying its ecological basis, or it cannot. Alternatively, we might consider how sustainable skiing is relative to other recreational (mountain biking, hiking) or industrial (mining, logging) uses of the same landscape. In previous work that addresses the ecopolitics of skiing, a division emerges between work that supports the notion that skiing can be a relatively sustainable form of interaction with non-human nature and work that is more pessimistic.

Although John Fry acknowledges the environmental ambiguities inherent in the modern "Disney-World-full-service ski village," he is generally positive about the environmental dimensions of skiing. He writes, "Among the foremost reasons that people give for wanting to

ski is the desire to be in a natural environment and to enjoy the moun-tain scenery."[61] Beyond an interest in skiing as a way of enjoying the outdoors, many skiers also hold memberships to environmental groups. The ski industry trade publication *Ski Area Management* has published research that documents this connection between skiing and environ-mentalism. Fry uses survey data on ski industry workers, skiers, and environmentalists to compare environmental values among these groups. A large majority (85 percent) of skiers see skiing as an environ-mentally friendly/compatible sport, whereas a minority of environment-alists (39 percent) express this opinion. Despite this gap, the two groups share several beliefs: that real estate development is a particularly harm-ful component of ski area development, that existing ski areas should expand instead of new areas being developed, and that water manage-ment in ski areas should prioritize wildlife needs rather than snow-making. David Rockland uses survey data to compare skiers with the general public on their commitments to environmental values. He concludes that skiers rank at least as high as the general public. Neither the public nor skiers tend to see skiing as an environmental problem, especially in comparison with other forms of outdoor recreation (such as golf and powerboating).[62]

   Ski resorts in the European Alps have been criticized by local com-munities and environmental groups to a greater degree than elsewhere. Environmental concern typically centres on soil erosion and pollution of the mountain environment. Otmar Weiss and his colleagues use survey research to examine the relationship between skiing and environmental values in Austria, where skiing is the national sport. Although skiing accounts for half of the country's tourism, environmental organizations target its impact on alpine ecosystems and the urbanization of natural areas that results from resort development. In this research, skiers score relatively high on environmental values scales. Skiers appear to prefer green tourism, yet they also demand all the bells and whistles of a mod-ern ski resort. The authors conclude that the ski industry should pursue an ecotourism strategy by integrating environmental values into its operations. Simon Hudson similarly argues that an environmentally responsible ski industry would look to trends in tourism that consider

the "environmental track record of both holiday company and destination when booking a holiday."[63]

Despite several authors describing a convergence between skiing and environmental values, the sport produces its own ecological impacts, including water withdrawal for snow-making, erosion from ski runs, loss of wildlife habitat, and impacts on vegetation. The ski industry causes environmental damage, but it has the potential to mitigate its impacts through "eco-efficiency" and improved management practices. David Chernushenko suggests several courses of action, including limiting new development to address animal habitat destruction, improving ski hill design to reduce impacts on soil and vegetation, limiting snow-making, and using more efficient technology to conserve water and energy. Bob Sachs argues that the American ski industry has been a leader in greening tourism through voluntary initiatives like the Sustainable Slopes Program (SSP), which sets out environmental guidelines for participating ski resorts.[64]

Whereas Sachs offers a positive assessment of the Sustainable Slopes Program, Jorge Rivera, Peter de Leon, and Charles Koerber are critical, asserting there is no correlation between SSP participation and environmental performance.[65] Under the SSP, the ski industry has adopted strategies that are the easiest to implement and that are most visible to the public. As Rivera and de Leon write, "Ski areas enrolled in the SSP program appear to be displaying rather opportunistic behavior expecting to improve their 'green' reputation without actually implementing SSP's [sic] beyond compliance environmental management principles and practices."[66] Ski resorts that sign on to the program are less likely than non-signatories to address issues of growth management, animal habitat loss, or pollution from ski operations.

Hal Clifford's *Downhill Slide* is a particularly damning critique of claims to environmental sustainability within skiing.[67] According to Clifford, a subculture that valued wilderness as an important part of the skiing experience has been displaced by Disneyesque simulations of wilderness at resorts like Whistler Blackcomb, Aspen, and Vail. The increasingly simulated experience of nature through skiing is connected, for Clifford, with skiing's impacts on wildlife through habitat

fragmentation, as well as roadkill from increased highway traffic. Soil erosion, pollution, deforestation, energy use, and water use are also among the litany of environmental problems Clifford associates with ski resort operations.

In general, skiers adhere to environmental values, and there is a degree of value convergence between skiers and environmentalists. Sachs, Chernushenko, Hudson, and Weiss and his colleagues see skiing from an ecological modernization perspective, asserting that capitalism can be made sustainable through technological innovation and the transformation of organizational cultures that fail to account for the environment. This suggests the need for the "economization of ecology" and an "ecologisation of the economy," without radical structural transformation.[68] Skiing may be relatively sustainable compared with the extractive development of mountain environments through forestry or mining. Accounts that focus on the environmental impacts of the ski industry are important, however, because they illuminate that skiing is not *only* a non-consumptive relationship with mountainous nature. Skiing also requires the continuous *productive* appropriation of non-human nature. In this book, however, I am interested in how the slippery concept of sustainability is used by the ski industry, skiers, the mass media, and social movement groups. Analyzing how discourses of sustainability are mobilized, interpreted, and contested helps us understand how particular social groups become viewed as legitimate users and managers of mountain environments and to comprehend why certain social-environmental practices are deemed appropriate modes of interaction with mountainous nature, while the ecological and social legitimacy of other practices are questioned.

Methodological Overview

This analysis is grounded in a multi-method qualitative approach that combines discourse analysis, interviews, and field observation. I use discourse analysis to examine the cultural meanings of skiing. Building upon Michel Foucault's work, this approach uses qualitative techniques of textual analysis to examine the social uses of language by documenting recurring themes and systematic exclusions and asks who is entitled to speak through a particular discourse and who is marginalized from

representation. It asks how discourse is used – and by whom – to sustain or challenge flows of power.[69] I adopt a broad definition of discourse that encompasses visual images, as well as printed text.

Interviews reveal how skiers interpret their experience. Using quota sampling, I interviewed forty-five skiers in the Vancouver to Whistler and the Nelson regions of British Columbia.[70] Interviewees included alpine (downhill) skiers, snowboarders, and telemark (downhill using a free-heel binding) skiers, but not cross-country skiers. There are three reasons for this. First, alpine skiers, snowboarders, and telemark skiers all use the same mountainous terrain in similar ways. At ski hills, they all ride chairlifts up the mountain and use gravity to move downhill. Cross-country skiers inhabit a completely different recreational landscape. Second, it is often difficult to draw sharp distinctions between ski resort and backcountry skiing in British Columbia. Several ski resorts provide chairlift access to adjacent backcountry touring areas or have a connection to nearby backcountry ski operations (cat-skiing or heli-skiing). Similarly, a significant number of alpine skiers, snowboarders, and telemarkers use both ski hills and the backcountry. Finally, several ski magazines cover both ski resorts and backcountry skiing.

To observe the places about which I write, I conducted eighteen days of unobtrusive field observation, split evenly between Whistler Blackcomb and Whitewater ski resorts, between November 2006 and April 2007. Because of the distance between the resorts, I spent several consecutive weeks in each region and moved back and forth between the two resorts over the course of the ski season. This multi-faceted approach embraces the complexity of skiing as a discursively mediated sporting practice that draws together humans, mountains, technologies, weather, trees, and animals.

The Layout of the Book

The four core chapters of this book examine different dimensions of the ecopolitics of skiing. In Chapter 2, I examine how skiing landscapes are interpreted by diverse social actors: the ski industry, social movement groups, and the mass media. I also look at how these social constructions of the mountain landscape are interpreted by skiers. This analysis is grounded in the literature on the social construction of landscape, which

focuses on the ways that distinct places are given meaning through social interaction.[71] The notion of discourse is important here.

Chapter 3 emphasizes that relations between skiers and mountain environments are not purely discursive by examining how skiing is a site of embodied interaction between humans and non-human nature, including mountains, weather, trees, and animals. These relationships are also mediated through myriad technologies. The work of Bruno Latour and Donna Haraway provides a conceptual tool kit for this analysis. Notions of cyborgs, collectives, and non-human actants (a term used by Latour to describe the active, but not necessarily intentional or conscious presence of non-humans within social life) emphasize that nature is not a tabula rasa that is constituted through human social action but rather is co-constructed by humans and non-humans. Instead of talking about skiing as a meeting point between society and nature as separate spheres, it makes sense to speak of skiing as a "natureculture" that is constituted by humans, non-humans, technologies, and discourse.[72]

Chapter 4 examines skiing as a site of ecopower relations among humans and non-humans. Drawing on Foucault's notion of biopower, I examine strategies used by the ski industry to present itself as a pro-environmental steward of mountain environments.[73] Similarly, skiers' narratives describe how skiing may act as a "technology of the self" that gives shape to environmental awareness and environmentally friendly behaviour.[74] Many skiers demonstrate high levels of environmental concern and commitment to environmentally friendly behaviour. They also engage in critical reflection about the ecological impacts of skiing's biopower relations with non-human nature and question the ecological legitimacy of new resort development.

Chapter 5 examines how skiing is shaped by the social dynamics of gender, class, and racialization. For example, skiing landscapes may be interpreted as spaces of "white culture," where First Nations are selectively visible through periodic outbursts of resistance to new resort development and expansion.[75] Similarly, an aggressive, risk-seeking guys' style of skiing is particularly valorized, which may devalue women's experience and reinforce the "gendered risk regime" of skiing.[76] Finally, skiing landscapes are constructed as places of rustic luxury, where skiing is linked to a West Coast lifestyle that requires economic and cultural

capital.[77] This analysis suggests that power moves through the "capillaries" of skiing, rather than through explicit acts of repression or exclusion.[78]

Just as each panel of a triptych is bound by its own frame, but all three frames are hinged together and lines within one panel bleed out into the adjoining panels, so the separate chapters of this book are interlinked. We can focus our attention on one panel at a time to appreciate particular details. However, by stepping back and considering the work as a whole, we begin to see the larger picture. In the final chapter, I take such a backwards step to examine how the separate parts connect with each other. I also consider how this analysis may inform an ongoing political ecology of skiing, which recognizes and takes responsibility for the environmental ambiguities and tensions within the sport.