



Understanding the Approaches Taken by Southern Ontario Private Ski Clubs to Address Sustainability and Climate Change



Jarid Palter | Supervisor: Brett Caraway

Background & Introduction

Private ski clubs are a unique structure of ski resort operating in southern Ontario. Requiring an initiation fee to join, an individual or family that makes this contribution becomes a member (part owner). This gives them the ability to vote on certain decisions related to club operations and planning for the future. High initiation fees require prospective members to be serious about skiing prior to joining. In recent years climate change has caused some to call the longevity of the sport in regions such as southern Ontario into question¹. With invested interests, members of southern Ontario private ski clubs may be looking to better understand what is at stake. However, much of the current research around ski tourism focuses on ski areas which are structured as for-profit operations. Consequently, this research project looks to close the gap in ski-tourism research by focusing on private ski clubs.

Research Objectives

This research project looks to close the gap in ski-tourism research by focusing on private ski clubs. The aim of this study is to better understand how southern Ontario private ski clubs are approaching the topics of sustainability and climate change.

The research questions used to guide this study are as follows:

1. What are the approaches taken by southern Ontario private ski clubs to address sustainability and climate change?
2. How do various stakeholders and operating structures shape these approaches?

Methodology

Representatives of 8 out of 10 southern Ontario's private ski clubs participated in semi-structured interviews. Representatives included general managers, an operations member, and a board member. Due to COVID-19 these interviews were conducted through Zoom video conferencing software and recorded at participants consent. The recordings were then transcribed.

In phase 1 the transcripts were analyzed using NVivo12 to highlight interesting themes or recurring ideas. The phase 1 codes were reviewed to better define them, and like groups were combined to finalize categories. The transcripts were reviewed again highlighting any discussion which fell within the finalized categories.



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Findings

- **Resource Efficiency:** All clubs are making efforts to be as efficient as possible from energy use to water use & from lodge fixtures to snowmaking equipment
- **Climate Changes:** All clubs mentioned that the weather they experience has been warmer than past years shortening their snowmaking windows
- **Climate Resiliency:** Two clubs have assessed their climate resiliency into the future finding they can maintain operations the next few decades, snowmaking is crucial to climate resiliency
- **Snowmaking Reliance:** All clubs are 100% reliant on snowmaking
- **Future Investments:** The main priority investment for ski clubs was snowmaking automation, other future investments included renovation & new builds of club buildings, new chairlifts & new vehicles/machinery
- **Diversification:** All clubs mentioned expanding the offering of other activities to engage member's with a "do everything" attitude, some indicated expansion beyond the winter season to include spring, fall and even summer activities
- **Environmental Management:** All clubs engage in active forest management, most have developed some form of storm/meltwater management to help prevent erosion
- **Waste Management:** All clubs have garbage and recycling, only two mentioned active compost programs
- **Geographical & Structural Differences:** Private ski clubs do not operate as for-profit entities
- **Ski Season Length:** A typical ski season for private clubs is between 72 and 86 days
- **Operating Requirements:** Private clubs collect the capital required to operate for a season prior to opening as members pay dues in advance
- **Demand:** As climate change impacts the ski season, clubs should work to channel more member interest to ski in April to make up for later December starts
- **Stakeholder Influences:** A few key stakeholders influencing sustainability at the clubs are the members, staff, management, the municipality/county, and conservation authorities
- **Sustainable Slopes Program:** Clubs are willing to participate in the program, though many have already completed projects incentivized by the program
- **Outreach:** Clubs lack formal education for their membership on climate change and sustainability

Discussion & Key Takeaways

- Private clubs are more sheltered to financially-related climate change losses than for profit operations
- Member – Management Relationships allow for sustainability related initiatives to be undertaken without the costly certification process
- Efficiency is key, it helps save time, money, and the environment by using less energy
- All clubs are 100% reliant on snowmaking and it is a crucial future investment for future viability
- Snowmaking automation will help to improve efficiency and significantly reduce snowmaking time
- The ski industry is one where taking care of the environment pays off by providing better experiences to members
- Diversification of activities offered is key to engaging and maintaining members as ski seasons are disrupted by climate change
- Many clubs can expand waste management to include composting

References

1. Harvey, A. (2020, January 17). *Rain, volatile weather pose problems for ski resorts*. The Globe and Mail. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/toronto/article-rain-volatile-weather-pose-problems-for-ski-resorts/>

Contact Information

Jarid Palter, Bachelor of Commerce
Master of Science in Sustainability Management
j.palter@mail.utoronto.ca
Supervisor: Brett Caraway, PhD
Brett.caraway@utoronto.ca