



NH Skiers Facing Downhill Slide Of Diminishing Ski Areas

Contact: [Lori Wright](#)
603-862-0574
UNH Media Relations

November 9, 2006

EDITORS AND REPORTERS: Professor Cliff Brown can be reached at 603-862-0765 or cliff.brown@unh.edu.

DURHAM, N.H. -- When New Hampshire skiers hit the slopes this winter, they will have fewer choices than they did 30 years ago -- the state has lost approximately 60 percent of its downhill ski areas since the 1970s.

According to Cliff Brown, associate professor of sociology at the University of New Hampshire, the state had about 65 downhill ski areas in the 1970s. The areas were scattered across the state, with a significant number in the state's southern tier where they had a geographical advantage because they were close to the large metropolitan areas to the south.

"As long as the winters reliably produced snow, these areas remained viable. During this period, a certain degree of diversity characterized the industry, such that small-scale and family-owned resorts co-existed with larger areas that could offer more amenities," Brown says.

Today, however, the state has about 20 downhill ski resorts, which tend to be larger areas located at higher elevations in New Hampshire's central and northern regions. "Unlike the smaller, family-run resorts that dominated the industry several decades ago, the surviving resorts typically offer snowmaking, trail grooming, chairlifts, lodges, real estate development, and off-season activities like skate and water parks," Brown says.

So why has the state seen a decline in what is arguably the New Hampshire state sport? (The New Hampshire ski industry generates about \$560 million annually in visitor spending and about \$60 million in tax revenue. Approximately 10 percent of the state's wintertime jobs are related to skiing, and New Hampshire is one of the nation's top five states in terms of the total economic benefit derived from skiing.)

According to Brown, there are a number of possible explanations. Consumers have more choices for recreation, and as the costs of skiing, gasoline, or accommodations increase, preferences may shift. Even though resorts have ramped up investments and diversified their economic activities, lift tickets have become more expensive, which may deter some skiers.

In addition, consumers want a consistent experience. When the conditions on the slopes are not conducive to skiing, that affects the number of skier visits. "Over the last seven seasons, the top 10 percent of attendance days accounted for about 30 percent of total attendance at

two of the state's major resorts. Thus the timing of poor weather has a big impact. The closure of smaller ski areas in the state's southern half may be one consequence of less consistently cold and snowy winters," Brown says.

In the last century, New Hampshire winters have warmed by about 3.8 degrees Fahrenheit, with most of the warming occurring since 1975 and resulting in more variability in the snowfall, according to Brown. Data since 1950 shows that overall annual snowfall has declined and there has been significant year-to-year variation, a trend that has been especially pronounced in the southern part of the state.

"The frequency of low-snow winters has increased, and recent seasons have exhibited tremendous variation. The 2000-01 season was a strong year for snowfall and skier attendance, while 2005-06 was comparatively weak for both snow and skier visits," he says.

Although climate and the ski industry has been studied in other areas, notably Colorado and Switzerland, New Hampshire is particularly interesting given the importance of skiing for the state's economy combined with the regional shift of the industry to the north. According to Brown, "the general variability of New Hampshire winters, due in part to unique features of the state's geography, means that small changes in climate can potentially have big consequences."

"Snowmaking provides some buffer against the climate trends we have witnessed in recent decades; the industry has demonstrated significant capacity for adaptation, and that will continue. However, warming winters, increased variability, and shifting consumer preferences are certainly a concern. Our research suggests that over the last 30 to 35 years, the state's ski industry has evolved in a manner that is consistent with climate change, but climate is only one of numerous factors that have been important in this process," he says.

Despite the warmer climate, unpredictable snowfall and increased expenses associated with skiing, the popularity of snowboarding has invigorated the industry and introduced younger generations to the sport.

"Families value skiing and find ways to share the sport with their children. Many resorts cater to families by providing lessons, childcare, and other accommodations, and these adaptations help to insure that families will continue to find the sport attractive," Brown says. "Skiing is definitely still a viable outdoor activity, and it is an important part of the region's history and culture."