



Voluntary environmental programs at an alpine ski area: Visitor perceptions, attachment, value orientations, and specialization

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Examines how specialization, attachment, and values influence perceptions of VEPs.
- Data were from surveys of 429 visitors at Mt. Bachelor ski area in Oregon.
- Visitors did not know much about VEPs and few visited due to these programs.
- Many intended to visit more in the future if this area increases its VEPs.
- Specialization, attachment, and values influenced these perceptions of VEPs.

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ABSTRACT

This article examines visitor perceptions of voluntary environmental programs (VEPs) at the Mt. Bachelor ski area in Oregon, USA by examining what they know about VEPs, how these programs influence motivations to visit this area currently and in the future, and how place attachment, value orientations, and specialization influence these motivations and knowledge associated with VEPs. Data from an onsite survey of skiers and snowboarders ($n = 429$, 89.7% response rate) showed that few were knowledgeable of VEPs at this ski area or motivated to visit on their current trip because of these programs, but many intended to visit more often in the future if this area increases and promotes its VEPs. Respondents who were motivated to visit because of VEPs were more attached to this area and biocentric or environmentally oriented. Those who are likely to visit more often in the future if VEPs at this area increase were also more biocentric. Visitors who were knowledgeable about VEPs at this ski area were more biocentric, specialized in their activity, and attached to this area. Implications for management and future research are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Alpine ski areas use resources such as water for snowmaking, energy for operating chairlifts, and forests and wildlife habitat for activity terrain. Environmental impacts at these areas include air pollution from maintenance equipment, as well as erosion, habitat fragmentation, exotic species introduction, and clearcutting on ski slopes (Tsuyuzaki, 1994; Watson, 1985). Ski areas have taken steps to reduce these impacts by implementing voluntary environmental programs (VEPs), which are “programs, codes, agreements, and commitments that encourage organizations to voluntarily reduce their environmental impacts beyond the requirements established by the environmental regulatory system” (Carmin, Darnall, & Mil-

Homens, 2003, p. 528). In 2000, the United States National Ski Areas Association (NSAA) created the Sustainable Slopes Charter, an initiative developed with the Environmental Protection Agency, Forest Service, and other agencies to promote VEPs at ski areas (Rivera & de Leon, 2004). This charter encourages, but does not mandate, ski areas to mitigate negative impacts by adopting VEPs. Examples of VEPs in this charter include water and energy conservation, wildlife habitat protection, and waste and vegetation management (NSAA, 2012b). As of 2011, over 190 areas had endorsed this charter.

Research has examined VEPs at ski areas relative to environmental performance (e.g., Donohoe, 2004; George, 2003; Rivera & de Leon, 2004; Rivera, de Leon, & Koerber, 2006), stakeholder interests (Steelman & Rivera, 2006), and manager perspectives (Blust, 2004). Donohoe (2004), for example, evaluated the extent that ski areas have adopted the Sustainable Slopes Charter and found that although many areas were making progress

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implementing charter principles, environmental ethics were important for distinguishing resorts that are demonstrating environmental leadership with a higher implementation rate. Blust (2004) examined perceptions of ski area managers regarding sustainability in this industry and found that reducing financial costs was one of the most important incentives to becoming more environmentally sustainable.

This body of research, however, has focused little on the importance of VEPs to winter visitors such as skiers and snowboarders, especially what they know about VEPs and if these programs may influence motivations to visit these areas presently and in the future. This article helps to address this knowledge gap by measuring visitor knowledge and motivations associated with VEPs, and examining if other cognitions such as place attachment, value orientations, and specialization may influence these motivations and knowledge. It is plausible that visitors who are knowledgeable about VEPs and motivated to visit a ski area because of these programs are strongly attached to the area, have more biocentric or environmentally oriented values, and are more skilled and committed to their activity. Understanding if these other cognitions influence knowledge and motivations associated with VEPs may help managers understand groups of visitors attracted to an area because of its VEPs and can assist in targeting advertising efforts.

2. Conceptual foundation

2.1. Knowledge about VEPs

Studies examining knowledge of tourists and recreationists regarding environmental issues such as wildlife diseases (e.g., Vaske, Needham, Stafford, Green, & Petchenik, 2006) and fossil fuel exploration (e.g., Teel, Bright, Manfreda, & Brooks, 2006), and conservation behaviors such as catch and release fishing (e.g., Sutton & Ditton, 2001) have found that many of these individuals are not highly knowledgeable of some environmental issues and behaviors. In the context of ski areas, for example, Holden (2000) reported that the majority of skiers were highly appreciative of the esthetic surroundings at these areas, but their knowledge about ecosystems and specific impacts at ski areas was low with less than 30% being aware of these issues. Similarly, Hudson and Ritchie (2001) also found a general lack of knowledge and even confusion among skiers about most environmental issues associated with this activity at ski areas.

Little is known, however, about visitor (e.g., skiers, snowboarders) knowledge of VEPs at alpine ski areas. Studies have identified ski area attributes that are important to visitors, but this does not mean that they are aware of every attribute at an area (e.g., Alexandris, Kouthouris, & Girgolas, 2007; Klenosky, Gengler, & Mulvey, 1993). Unlike well-known attributes such as chairlifts and terrain, VEPs are a relatively recent phenomenon at many ski areas, so this article examines what visitors know about these programs. Understanding how much visitors know about VEPs and if other cognitions influence this knowledge may allow ski area managers to assess the effectiveness of their marketing of environmental programs and performance.

2.2. Motivations and intentions associated with VEPs

Although visitors may or may not be knowledgeable about VEPs at a ski area, this does not necessarily mean that they are motivated to visit the area because of its participation in these programs. Motivations are internal or external factors arousing and directing human behavior (Iso-Ahola, 1999), and tourism and recreation motivations typically are reasons for participating in activities or

visiting areas (Manfredo, Driver, & Tarrant, 1996). Motivations to visit an area *currently* or *on the present trip* have received substantial attention in the literature. Iso-Ahola (1999) identified two dimensions of these motivations. The first dimension, “seeking,” involves motivations associated with searching for rewards from participation (e.g., challenge, competence). The second dimension is “escaping” or the desire to escape from life experiences (e.g., escape pressure, daily routine). The recreation experience preference (REP) scales are one of the most common measures of these motivations and contain over 300 social psychological motivations that can be grouped into fewer broad domains (e.g., exercise, exploration, escape; Manfredo et al., 1996). Most of these motivations are internal forces that “push” people to visit an area or engage in an activity (e.g., escape, relax, adventure, stress relief, challenge). There are also, however, external motivations that “pull” or attract people to an activity or destination such as ease of access, activities offered, reputation, and scenery (Dann, 1981). Motivations pulling individuals to an area tend to be related to features of the destination, whereas push factors tend to be internal cognitions that can be independent from these features. This push – pull framework is one approach for explaining motivations of why people visit an area on their current trip.

Studies at alpine ski areas have found that motivations pushing people to visit in the winter include excitement, relaxation, exercise, and testing skill and ability (e.g., Holden, 1999; Klenosky et al., 1993; Williams, Dossa, & Fulton, 1994). Attributes pulling visitors to these areas include terrain, scenery, snow conditions, number of runs, and ticket prices (e.g., Alexandris et al., 2007; Hudson & Shephard, 1998; Klenosky et al., 1993). The focus of this study is VEPs, which may be additional attributes that pull visitors to a ski area on their current trip.

Motivations to visit an area or participate in an activity *in the future* are related to the concept of behavioral intentions, and research has shown that an individual's future behavior can be partially predicted by his or her intention to perform that behavior (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). Hudson and Ritchie (2001) found that some skiers intended to visit alpine ski areas in the future if these areas were considered to be environmentally responsible instead of ski areas not addressing environmental performance. Many skiers in their study also intended to pay more to visit ski areas attempting to reduce environmental impacts. This article builds on this research by examining intentions to visit a ski area in the future if it promotes and adopts more VEPs.

2.3. Place attachment

It is possible that visitors who feel highly attached to a ski area may be more aware of its VEPs and motivated to visit because of these types of programs. Place attachment identifies bonds between people and places, and “what begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value” (Tuan, 1977, p. 6). A number of dimensions related to place attachment have been reported in the literature (e.g., belongingness, rootedness, bonding), but the most commonly studied are place dependence and identity (Hammitt, Kyle, & Oh, 2009; Kyle, Graefe, & Manning, 2005; Williams & Vaske, 2003). Place dependence is the functionality associated with an area and is represented by its physical characteristics (e.g., snow, terrain; Proshansky, Fabian, & Kaminoff, 1983). Place identity refers to emotional ties to a place, can develop over time, and is related to symbolic meanings of an area (Proshansky et al., 1983). People engender connections to places through these functional and emotional associations.

Place attachment has received considerable research attention and has been applied to many activities and settings (see Manning,

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