Ski Resort Development in Colorado: Current Trends and Issues

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Abstract

Twenty years ago I wrote a report about ski resort development in Colorado: ‘Mining the ‘White Gold’. The present article reviews ten trends I had outlined for the 1990s and examines whether they came true or were false assumptions. Further, I will sketch five broad trends which form a continuation of 1990s trends or represent new issues in the current situation. They include (1) a further diversification of skiing, winter sports and outdoor recreation activities year round and a broadening of the tourism base and (2) the continued expansion of the resort communities and more urban sprawl for the Colorado High Country. The new issues address (3) tensions between the global and the local, (4) the question of whether we are closer to the ‘green resort’ and (5) concerns about climate change.

Zusammenfassung

Die Entwicklung von Wintersportarten in Colorado: Aktuelle Trends und Forschungsfragen

1. **Introduction**

Almost exactly twenty years ago I was invited to summarize my views on ski resort development in the Colorado Rocky Mountains in a published report entitled Ski Resort Development in Colorado: Mining the 'White Gold'. They reflected my five years plus experiences after arriving in Colorado in April 1985 and teaching recreation, tourism and related geography courses at the University of Colorado Boulder. At the occasion of the 1992 International Geographical Union’s Commission on Geographic Education Symposium in Boulder, Colorado, I was asked to guide a field trip to Vail. My report for the field trip participants was included in the Colorado Field Studies volume for the IGU event (Hartmann 1992a). In addition, I contributed a paper on The Making of ‘Vail Valley’: Spatial and Social Expressions of Resort Growth in a High Mountain Valley in the course of the symposium (Hartmann 1992b).

Today I would like to review my 1992 assessment of skiing and ski resort development in Colorado including an outlook I gave for the Colorado ski resort industry in form of ten trends for the 1990s. I plan to examine whether these trends applied to the situation in 1991/92 came true or turned out to be partially or completely wrong assumptions. Further, I will focus on five broader trends and issues that may characterize the present and future situation in the Colorado High Country.

Colorado has changed considerably over the past twenty years (1990–2010). The state population jumped by about 30 %, from 3.3 million in 1990 to 4.3 million in 2000. Although more moderate growth followed the 1990s, the population reached and surpassed 5 million in 2009 and 2010 respectively, with another hefty growth of about 16 % for the last decade. The economy of the state which had just come out of a period of recession or stagnation 1985–1989 started to grow by 1990 and went through major waves of growth, modernization and diversification. Employment in nonagricultural jobs increased from about 1.5 million in 1990 to over 2.2 million in 2000. The following years saw more moderation in growth of jobs and two major set-backs in form of the immediate post September 11 period 2001/2002 and a national recession 2008–2010; the latter severely affected the state economy but in less dramatic ways than in other states. Colorado’s unemployment rate was on an average 1 % lower than that of the nation and the state economy has gradually recovered some of the lost ground. While 25,000 jobs were lost in 2010, 11,000 jobs were added during the first five months of 2011. Most of all, the structure of the state economy has changed, from a once dominant reliance on the extractive industries and agricultural exports (until 1984) to a widely diversified economy including more jobs in business and other producer services, in information technology, in biotechnology, in R & D and high tech jobs and last but not least an array of jobs directly or indirectly linked to recreation and tourism services. The above mentioned changes in population volume and economic structure affected in particular the Colorado Front Range, the 150 mile plus (250 km) long urbanized corridor running parallel to the Rocky Mountains, from Fort Collins/Greeley, Boulder, Denver, Colorado Springs to Pueblo. The built-up areas along this corridor have more than doubled in size during the past twenty year period. As farm lands were increasingly turned into new residential subdivisions, with retail, commercial and industrial complexes added, the character of a once fairly rural and open Colorado even near the big cities has become more and more an image of the past. Though, still population densities are comparatively low (48.5 persons per square miles statewide versus 87.4 nationwide) and the percentage of federally administered lands (e.g. by the National Forest Service and the National Park Service) continues to remain well above 30 %. Colorado has changed in many ways; yet, the state has been able to keep some of its original qualities with additional, new distinctive features added.

Most of these changes have also affected the Colorado High Country. In particular, the five northwestern ‘ski counties’ (Eagle, Grand, Pitkin, Routt and Summit Counties) have experienced rapid population growth during both decades. Eagle County (with Vail Valley), for instance, increased its population from 21,928 in 1990 to 41,659 in 2000 (by 90 %) and experienced another 25 % jump to 52,197 during the past decade. Second-home development has skyrocketed in the Colorado High Country, most prominently in Summit County (with four ski areas), 60 to 75 miles (or about 100 km) from the Denver Metro Area. Most of all, the structure of the economy on the Western
Slope (Colorado’s area west of the continental divide) has changed from more jobs in the primary sector (e.g., ranching, mining) to a largely recreation and tourism services based economy. One of the main reasons for the population and economic changes is the continued expansion of the ski resort economy. In the following, I will review the trends I had originally outlined for the 1990s; I will then move beyond past stages of ski resort development in Colorado toward an analysis of the current situation.


The originally chosen periods in the development of skiing and the ski resort industry still stand. It was not until the mid-1930s that the recreational sport of skiing (including the tremendously popular form of ski jumping in the 1920s) resulted in infrastructure improvements and other economic development measures. It was also correct to designate the period 1936 to 1959 as the ‘formative years of a new industry’ (Hartmann 1992a, p. 55). This period included the installation of mechanized uphill transportation in form of rope tows, the first one at Berthoud Pass right off the continental divide (February 1937), first chair lifts, a ‘ski train’ from Denver to the Winter Park ski area (developed by the City and County of Denver and opened with new chair lifts for the ski season 1939/40) and a first destination ski area in Aspen (1945/46). A crucial step in the foundation of new ski areas and more complex ski lift operations was the post World War II return of members of the Tenth Mountain Division (stationed at Camp Hale near Leadville) to Colorado; several dozen of these former soldiers on skis either launched new ski areas or contributed with their professional expertise to a wave of successful ski area operations in Colorado in the late 1940s and 1950s (see, for instance, the role of 10th Mountain Division soldiers for the early development of the Aspen ski area: Colorado Ski & Snowboard Museum and Hall of Fame 2011). The next distinguished period 1960 to 1989 saw both boom years and a slowing and maturing of the industry. The 1960s and 1970s witnessed the establishment of larger new ski areas or substantial expansions of the ski areas’ lift systems; during these two decades skiing and ski resort development experienced annually double-digit growth rates – with the notable exception of two ‘snow drought’ seasons (1976/77 and 1980/81). Though, a slowing trend for the new industry set in during the 1980s.

In my 1992 report, I distinguished three types of ski resorts or ski towns which had evolved in the Colorado High Country: (1) at former mining and/or ranching towns such as Aspen, Breckenridge, Crested Butte, Steamboat Springs and Telluride, (2) as planned resorts that eventually developed community life and became incorporated towns such as Beaver Creek, Copper Mountain and Keystone. Further, skiing in Colorado gained international recognition with three world alpine ski championships held in Colorado, first in Aspen (1955), then in Vail (1989, 1999), and the regular inclusion of most prominent runs at Aspen, Beaver Creek and Vail for world cup skiing events.

By 1992, skiing in Colorado had come of age. The need for restructuring and modernizing the Colorado ski resort industry continues on to date and has seen distinct spatial and social expressions, in particular, in sites and locations where skiing in Colorado had started. Some of the oldest and once popular ski areas like Berthoud Pass (1937–2001) closed down. The Colorado Ski & Snowboard Museum and Hall of Fame in Vail has closely followed the many changes including in Vail Valley with a special fifty year anniversary exhibit (‘Vail-Dream Realized’). And Colorado Ski Country USA, marketing association for Colorado’s commercial ski areas, produced a poster and map of ‘Colorado’s Lost (Ski) Resorts’ showing the locations of more than a hundred discontinued ski hills in Colorado.

My original assumption of a complete economic transformation from mining to tourism has not come true, yet. The last decade has seen a revived interest in mining, most of all in natural gas, but also in coal and even uranium mining. There have been ‘battlegrounds’ over the revived and conflicting uses of mining: the Roan Plateau/Garfield County and Crested Butte/Gunnison County. Whereas the citizens of Crested Butte, a well preserved historic town with a leading ski area nearby, have been successful so far in fending off developers of a molybdenum mining project, well paid natural gas
extracting jobs in Garfield County resulted in an economic and population boom. Garfield County’s population has increased from 43,791 in 2000 to 56,389 in 2010. This jump by 29% is primarily due to many more mining/extractive industry jobs, but surprisingly enough, also to more service jobs for wellness/health oriented tourism and culinary tourism (with hot springs in Glenwood Springs and about 20 wineries in the nearby Grand Valley/Mesa County). In addition, retirees from the Front Range moved in droves into this part of the Western Slope known for its milder climate conditions. In short, mining activities have been taken up again in several selected sites and areas but its general impact on the state has remained medium to low.

How has skiing and the hospitality industry driven by the ‘mining of the white gold’ fared over the past twenty years? Colorado’s ski industry continues to grow, and it has reached with 12.5 million skier days (a formula of total ski lift tickets purchased during a given season) new heights. The ski seasons 1987/88–1990/91 had stabilized skier days at the 9.5 to 10 million range after a bumpy ride in the early 1980s. Finally, the ski season 1991/92 resulted in a record breaking 10 million skier days, a highlight I mentioned in my 1992 assessment. It is important to note that total skier days for Colorado’s 25 commercial ski areas have consistently been above the 11 million and four times above the 12 million threshold in the past decade (2010/11: 12.3 million), even in the severe drought year of 2002 (with little natural snow fall and huge forest fires) and the recession seasons of 2008/09 and 2009/10. The main reason for such relatively stable numbers is the availability of more technologically advanced systems of artificial snowmaking. This also applies to Arapahoe Basin, Colorado’s highest ski area (at 10,780 feet or 3,278 meters at the base) regularly open till June and occasionally even for the Fourth of July holiday weekend. ‘A-Basin’ was the last ski area in Colorado to join the general trend for regular use of most modern snowmaking equipments in 2006/07. Sking and winter sports activities of all kinds are alive and well in the Colorado High Country although the world of mountain ski resorts has changed considerably.

3. ‘Ten Trends for the 1990s’ Revisited: True or False?

(i) No or Only Few New Commercial Ski Resort Areas

This trend proved to be largely correct. Lake Catamount, the mentioned ski area project near Steamboat Springs which had received preliminary approval by the U.S. National Forest Service in the early 1990s, was never realized. Opposition to the project was considerable and persistent; it eventually faltered. Though, the base area of the projected ski area was developed for a subdivision of large acreage resort properties. Another proposed ski area preliminarily approved by the Town of Minturn on the backside of the Vail Bowl areas has lost its initial financial support and never got off the ground. Chances are slim that it will succeed as it includes lands on or near a former superfund site (Gilman zinc mining area) and as it is much higher in elevation (and year round colder) than most of Vail Valley. Over the past two decades only two applications for new ski areas were successful: Silverton and Echo Mountain. The Silverton ski area, near the old mining town of Silverton in southwestern Colorado, represents a new type of ski area for Colorado. It occupies a steep mountain and was developed as a ‘no frills’ ski area for advanced and expert skiers operated usually only during the weekends. Owners and developers Aaron and Jenny Brill applied the New Zealand ski club model to this part of the rugged San Juan Mountains. Echo Mountain on the western periphery of the Denver Metro Area is the result of a revamped small ski area (‘Squaw Pass’) as a modern-day terrain park. Recently, it has added more runs for beginners and intermediate skiers. Thus, it has become a relatively inexpensive and popular ski area for locals where children and teenagers can learn and practice – before they move on to the larger ski areas of Colorado.

(ii) Expansion of Most of the Existing Ski Areas

This trend was certainly correct for the 1990s and is valid for the past decade. All the major ski areas with more than 350,000 skier days (Vail, Breckenridge, Steamboat, Winter Park, Keystone, Beaver Creek, Snowmass, Copper Mountain, Telluride and Crested Butte) have either successfully expanded beyond their (by the National Forest
Service approved) original skiable terrain or have projects in the planning or implementation phase. Usually, these projects take extensive time periods for public review, e.g. the Category III expansion (‘Blue Sky Basin’) of the Vail ski area took more than five years. The skiable terrain of Vail is now at 5,289 acres (or 2,140 hectare), and it spans a distance of seven miles (more than 10 km). The latest expansion of a large Colorado ski area is the Peak 6 project at the Breckenridge ski area; it was also proposed by Vail Resorts Inc. which operates Breckenridge (with current access to Peaks 7, 8, 9 and 10). It received initial approval by the National Forest Service on June 10, 2011. Expansion of the ski areas has to be put into the wider context of raising or maintaining competitiveness among ski areas in Colorado and the American/Canadian West (more on that in Trend 5).

(3) **Diversification of Skiing**

This trend was certainly correct, and the diversification has continued in unforeseen ways. The trend not only applies to all kinds of winter sports but also to many more active outdoor recreation activities at or near the resort areas; this theme will be taken up again in a wider context later in the text.

(4) **Supplementary Summer Activities**

This trend was also correct; it applies to all the resort companies’ efforts (as well as to private local initiatives) to create a four season environment.

(5) **Increasing Competition in a Slow Growth Market**

This trend included the drive of the larger ski areas to expand their skiable terrain – as discussed in trend (2). One of the distinct trends in this respect was to create more runs and challenging environments for the advanced and expert skiers – useful for competitive ads to separate their mountain from others. It is also important to keep in mind that the outlook for the ski areas’ growth potential was considered bleak in the mid/late 1980s and early 1990s. The general assumption of that time was that the U.S. ski resort industry had reached its peak or would be growing only in marginal ways. What was not factored in was the rapidly growing popularity of snowboarding in the mid/late 1990s which gave the sport back its image of youthfulness and the continued interest of the large baby boomer generation for outdoor recreation in a winter environment. Most of all, Colorado’s ski resorts underwent massive internal changes, from pure ‘ski towns’ to amenity rich leisure environments. Real estate transactions became as or more important for the ski companies as selling lift tickets to the mountain they operated. The latter was only part (in some places only a small part) of the equation. The once usual practice of arriving, for instance, in Aspen or Vail, for a skiing weekend or skiing vacation was more and more transformed by the wish of a majority of visitors to enjoy the resort in all its qualities including shopping, dining and participation in cultural events. As Frick maintained in 2002, skiing, and with it the ski resorts, evolved from adventure (1950s), sport (1960s), lifestyle (1970s), recreation (1980s), entertainment (1990s) to a community amenity (2000s). Thus, the slow growth market situation applied only to skiing and the skiers’ uses of the commercial ski areas but not to the dynamics of resort development on a broader scale.

(6) **Changing Accessibility of the Ski Resorts**

This trend was and is correct. Both external and internal accessibility of the ski resort area saw major improvements. Many more direct (and often locally subsidized) flights for the customer to local/regional airports in the Colorado High Country have significantly decreased travel times to the resorts. There have also been ongoing forms of modernization at these small airports such as the expansion of the runway(s) or more amenities in or near the airports to provide a better infrastructure for such operations. Internally, the usually free of charge bus systems in the ski areas have been expanded more and more to reach even most remote parts of the catchment area. As to an increased accessibility of the expanded terrain on the ski mountains (see trend 2), considerable progress has been made in the movement of the skiers (faster ski lift systems, electronically managed ski mountain operations, etc.). The technology of reaching desirable terrain outside the groomed areas – for skiers who wish to experience untracked, deep snow areas – has seen also some improvements, e.g. in
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public sector across resort communities worldwide to the systematic implementation of strategies and policies in resort management and planning developed in other places on the globe (or vice versa borrowed from leading Colorado agencies or commercial entities in far-away worlds). Examples for this trend are the recent hiring of Vail Resorts professionals for jobs in Russia (Sochi) or China (see Hartmann 2008). Vail’s 2006 free style gold medalist Toby Dawson, a Korean child adopted by two Vail ski instructors, would play an important supportive role in Pyeong Chang’s successful bid for the 2018 Winter Olympics. The Breckenridge Ski Area was once owned by a Japanese company. Intrawest, the Canadian resort corporation, has owned three Colorado ski areas (Copper Mountain till November 2009; Steamboat Springs and Winter Park to date). What used to be called ‘internationalization’ in the 1980s and the early 1990s is nowadays more appropriately understood as trends of a ‘globalizing economy’ connected by travel and current resort destination management practices.

(7) More Regional Cooperation

This trend proved to be false. The model of partially aided operations of the four ski areas in Summit County (under different ownership) which existed for a few years in the late 1980s and early 1990s faltered and was not taken up again. The ‘Colorado Gem’ model – cooperation among the smaller ski areas on the Western slope – also dissipated. My original assessment from 1992 was biased by personal experiences of Alpine models (regional passes) successfully in place for a long time. In Colorado, the lines of cooperation have been drawn, foremost and now exclusively, along corporate ownership lines (e.g. cooperation between the four Colorado ski areas operated by Vail Resorts or those operated by Intrawest or Aspen Skiing Company). The season passes offered each year to the public in costly and extensive advertisement campaigns, for instance, reflect this new business reality. An example of the imposed corporate structure on ski area operations is Vail Resorts Inc. As Vail Associates went public (Vail Resorts, Inc.) and moved its company headquarters from once fairly modest offices in Vail to upscale Beaver Creek, then on to Avon and currently to Broomfield, north of Denver (outside the area where they operate the ski areas), the once strong local identity – in the early years Vail was often perceived as a company town of Vail Associates – seems more removed in favor of a powerhouse image in the international resort and recreation business. Vail Resorts, with its four Colorado ski resorts, also opted out of Colorado Ski Country USA, regional marketing association for 26 member ski areas for 45 years, in 2008.

(8) Internationalization of the Industry

This trend was correct as the previous remarks about the greater international orientation of Vail Resorts Inc. may indicate. This may be considered one of the more interesting if not intriguing aspects of resort development. Internationalization of the industry is expressed in a multitude of ways, from the transfer of expertise as it occurs within the context of individual career moves in the private or public sector across resort communities worldwide to the systematic implementation of strategies and policies in resort management and planning developed in other places on the globe (or vice versa borrowed from leading Colorado agencies or commercial entities in far-away worlds). Examples for this trend are the recent hiring of Vail Resorts professionals for jobs in Russia (Sochi) or China (see Hartmann 2008). Vail’s 2006 free style gold medalist Toby Dawson, a Korean child adopted by two Vail ski instructors, would play an important supportive role in Pyeong Chang’s successful bid for the 2018 Winter Olympics. The Breckenridge Ski Area was once owned by a Japanese company. Intrawest, the Canadian resort corporation, has owned three Colorado ski areas (Copper Mountain till November 2009; Steamboat Springs and Winter Park to date). What used to be called ‘internationalization’ in the 1980s and the early 1990s is nowadays more appropriately understood as trends of a ‘globalizing economy’ connected by travel and current resort destination management practices.

(9) A Further Homogenization of the Resort Environment

Was this trend a correct assumption? Yes and No! Yes, Colorado’s resort areas appear to have become more and more alike. The trend is obvious in small items like identical artifacts – some good like recycle bins, others not so good like ubiquitous advertising trinkets – found literally everywhere and anywhere. On a more visible scale, homogenization expresses in near identical designs chosen for resort additions or in the diffusion of similar types of post-modern buildings. In a more intricate way, broader umbrella frameworks in place for everyday practices in mountain towns (such as shopping in ‘big box’ stores) contribute to homogenization as well. Yet, many resorts and their host communities continue to make efforts to distinguish themselves in unique and unforgettable ways. Some of these initiatives may be rooted in the defense of a distinct past or in a specific geographical environment – social and natural – that invites contemporary reformulations of what, for instance, Aspen, Basalt & Carbondale in the Roaring Fork Valley or ‘The (Crested) Butte’, are or could be.
(10) An Expanding High-tech Leisure Environment

This trend was and is correct. It emerged as a new trend in the early 1990s, from manually punched to scanned ski lift tickets and regular phone reservation lines to internet web sites. High tech gadgets are well loved by visitors and residents of the Colorado High Country alike. There are hardly any areas left which do not have cell phone coverage. This coverage – initially focused on a few densely settled resort corridors – has grown extensively. New generations of customers, e.g. the ‘echo boomers’ (or Generation Y) now in their teens and twenties, do not want to spend their time up in the mountains ‘away from it all’.

4. Analysis of Today’s Situation and Possible Futures

After reviewing the ten trends from my 1992 assessment I would like to sketch five broad themes relevant for an analysis of today’s situation and possible futures of the Colorado High Country, either in form of continued trends or of pending questions in chapter 4.1 to 4.5.

4.1. Continued Diversification of Skiing, Winter Sports and Outdoor Recreation Activities Year Round and a Broadening of the Tourism Base in General

This is a theme already touched upon in trend (3) and trend (4). When Colorado’s ski resorts took off in the 1960s, skiing in the high country largely meant downhill skiing (or alpine skiing). This once fairly narrow interpretation of the sport has been fundamentally changed or challenged by a variety of new and old snow sports. The large majority of the ski areas/resorts now offer opportunities for cross-country skiing in the form of Nordic centers near the base of the downhill area. Over the past two decades ski-touring has become more popular as several hut systems (e.g. the Tenth Mountain Division Hut System with close to 20 cabins) in the backcountry were established. Older techniques or practices in skiing such as snow shoeing and telemark skiing have seen a revival. Last but not least, it was the arrival of snowboarding that revolutionized the snow sports scene. First, ‘boarders’ encountered hostilities from skiers, and some Colorado ski areas initially banned the new and younger crowds frequently associated with a distinct attitude and lifestyle. Colorado ski resorts all reversed course as the percentage of snowboarders in ski lift users would eventually surpass 30%. As skiing has also gone more technical (with free style skiing events), and the X-Games (in Aspen, a once fierce opponent of the snowboarding sport) popularized 360 jumps and the like, new terrain parks became a ‘must’ addition for the major ski areas. This adrenaline shot in the arm for the aging ski areas helped to rejuvenate their image. Subsequently, ski schools adopted new approaches to the learning environment – in form of camps/tent villages for the youngest learners or special weekends for women hesitant to get out ‘into the cold’. More and more, handicapped skiers – with the Winter Park Ski Area being the pioneer in this field – were also encouraged to join the snow sport lovers with specially designed equipment.

It should be mentioned that winter sports outside the commercial ski areas have seen many regular user groups, too. Sledding and tubing continue to attract good sized crowds including families with children who easily find appropriate terrain near roads and on the back yard slopes of the mountain towns. Many back country ski areas are used nowadays by snowmobilers. A persistent or even increasing trend in the Colorado High Country is a publicly demonstrated reluctance or unwillingness to pay the steep price of commercially provided, modern uphill transportation. At a dozen places, for instance on and near the slopes of the former Berthoud Pass Ski Area, boarders, skiers and their fans congregate to help each other with free rides. Another contemporary high country phenomenon highlighting the pleasures of free (spring) skiing are groups gearing up for casual but strenuous hiking excursions to remaining snow fields high up in the mountains in April/May/June.

Outdoor activities at or near the mountain resorts whether organized by the resort companies or by non-associated agencies and individuals have increased tremendously over the past two decades. Most prominent are the many trails for mountain biking at the resort areas; frequently, the ski rental shops in town simply re-stack their stores with the bikes easily moved up the mountain by one or a few running lifts. On some of the mountains, alpine slides have been established.
They have found considerable popularity at resorts catering to families. For the higher end clientele of the resort spectrum, nearby golf courses have become important recreational amenities. Though a resource which requires considerable space and consumes significant amounts of water (a scarce commodity in Colorado’s semi-arid climate!), it represents a crucial element for building new subdivisions and additions to existing resort corridors (e.g. Vail Valley with more than a dozen golf courses now). Other popular recreational activities that have flourished in the mountain environment with many streams are fishing, rafting and/or canoeing trips.

Summers in the resort areas have become unthinkable without the many cultural events offered in the mountain towns usually held at music events and festivals (e.g. Aspen’s classical music festival inaugurated early in the 1950s but strengthened with new venues and programs). On a more general note, the tourism base in Colorado’s resort areas has been substantially broadened by attracting other visitor segments. It is part of the efforts of the resort communities to create a four season environment. The range of other forms of tourism include wellness tourism, culinary tourism/agritourism events, the visitation of heritage sites, e.g. on jeep tours to ghost towns from the mining era in nearby or remote locations, and educational seminars & professional events in the low/shoulder seasons. What once used to be resort destinations with two distinct seasons, a major winter season and a shorter summer season, have become leisure environments populated year round – maybe with the exception of the ‘mud season’ (late April and May, when locals tend to leave town) and a few weeks in October and November when the resorts prepare frantically and noisily for the opening of the ski season.

4.2. Continued Expansion of the Resort Communities and More Urban Sprawl in the Colorado High Country (with Two Components in Motion: Exodus from the Core Resort Areas & Rapidly Growing Down Valley Areas)

The last two decades have seen tremendous growth of the resort areas and dramatic changes in community life in the Colorado High Country (BEST 1998; CLIFFORD 2002; RADEMAN 2003; HARTMANN 2006). Whereas the core resort areas have been marked by a need to restructure and modernize its older, maturing sections (DORWARD 1990, 2006), most of the expansion to the resort areas occurred in what has become known as down valleys. Meanwhile these areas make up large urbanized corridors most often located downstream from the original resort areas. It is there that the employees increasingly live – no longer being able to afford the steep prices for real estate in the core resort areas. At the same time, the down valleys have seen the relocation of bulky infrastructure and other undesirable amenities previously located at the immediate periphery of the resorts now occupied by new subdivisions for more second home owners and time share holders. Subsequently, urban sprawl has spread to previously non affected parts of the Colorado High Country. In terms of community life, core resort areas have become less lively except during the high season and their residential subdivisions are at times nearly deserted while the exodus of the locals to the Down Valley continues. Typical examples for this trend are the Roaring Fork Valley, with Aspen and Snowmass Village as core resort areas and Basalt, Carbondale and sections of Glenwood Springs forming Down Valley communities, as well as Vail Valley, with Vail and Beaver Creek as core resort areas and a Down Valley reaching now past Edwards to Eagle and Gypsum. In both cases, the resort corridors stretch over fifty miles (80 kilometers). Employee housing continues to be a major issue in the Colorado High Country, and efforts have been made by, for instance, the City of Aspen and the Town of Vail to provide affordable housing and real estate opportunities for the locally employed – though in legally limited ways and in peripheral locations within their communities.

What are the principles of growth and connectedness between the core resort areas and the down valley areas? See enclosed Fig. 1 and Fig. 2, which explain their complex spatial and social relationships.
Modeling Mountain Resorts: Core Resort Areas & Down-Valleys

A — are intricately interconnected

B — are complex in organization

C — are dynamic entities

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Fig. 1: Modeling mountain resorts: Core resort areas and Down Valleys
Down Valleys & Core Resort Areas: 10 Ground Rules

1) The original term 'down valley' denotes a section of a mountain valley that is located farther down and/or is lower in elevation, in particular, from a given upper valley view point. The contemporary 'down valley' concept not only comprises the traditional spatial component but extends to some of the economic and social implications of such a location within a valley system. Mountain resort areas have increasingly seen a split between the original core resort areas and larger expanding down valley areas. The latter have meanwhile assumed important service functions for the core resort areas and the system as a whole.

2) Core Resort Areas, i.e. the original core(s) of resort development in a mountain valley, and Down Valleys are intricately interconnected. Both areas seem to complement each other in many ways. For instance, populations living in down valley areas work for/in businesses and agencies in core resort areas; bulky and undesirable infrastructure necessary for the maintenance of service to visitors of core resort areas are placed or relocated into down valley areas.

3) Relations between Core Resort Areas and Down Valleys are characterized by inequality. Populations in down valley areas and their representatives in community organizations have little or marginal decision making power regarding the whole valley system. The more powerful decision makers live in the core resort areas and/or are associated with businesses or agencies located in the core resort areas. Moreover, outside perceptions of the valley differ significantly. Whereas core resort areas provide the name and identity of the whole valley the newer down valley settlement areas remain rather non-descript parts of the system. Most often, the distinct lay-out of a core resort area (such as in the form of a 'village') and some of its outstanding design elements (such as 'alpine architecture') are widely known beyond the valley system.

4) Core Resort Areas and Down Valleys are complex in organization. There are hardly any 'pure' core resort areas and/or down valleys. Core resort areas most often continue to contain smaller sections where first service functions for the resort originated, down valleys may comprise pockets of new upscale resort developments.

5) Upscale resort development in the Core Resort Areas as well as in selected down valley locations are socially more segregated and spatially more isolated (such as in form of gated subdivisions or fenced-in properties), whereas Down Valleys are more open in terms of access and allow for a more diversified community structure. Down valley areas are most often characterized by a wider demographic spread (such as the distribution of age and ethnic groups). Subsequently, down valleys have started to display a fuller spectrum of community life.

6) Core Resort Areas and Down Valleys are dynamic entities, which are in constant flux reflecting the many changes in the local real estate market, housing/rental market and the availability of land for development within and/or on the periphery of a mountain valley system.

7) Down Valleys are difficult to delineate spatially as the 'frontier' moves on and gobbles up more land 'farther down'. Social and economic indicators (such as household income of residents or number of residents occupying a structure) and lifestyle indicators (such as weekly or weekend work hours or length of occupancy of structures within a season or the annual cycle) may help to differentiate down valley populations from those residing in permanent homes or second-home dwellings in the core resort areas. Last but not least, the physical appearance of and amenities in the housing structures (such as trailer parks) may identify down valley conditions.

8) Core Resort Areas and Down Valleys usually share a stream, creek or river in a mountain valley. Down valley areas are most often (but not necessarily) found in the environmentally disadvantaged downstream location. Usually, first waves of expansion of a mountain resort valley system follow the stream to downstream locations. Though, some core resort areas have down valley expansion areas that are both 'downstream' and 'upstream'.

9) Core Resort Areas and Down Valleys either expand into new areas and areas not yet fully built up or restructure. Because of the scarcity of land core resort areas tend to restructure more frequently, in particular, when the resort has entered a mature stage. By contrast, the mechanism of expansion is more common in the case of down valley areas.

10) As a mountain valley system goes through waves of expansions and restructuring Core Resort Areas and Down Valleys change. Though, the basic relationship pattern as expressed in ground rules 1) through 9) remains irreversible in the current mountain resort economy!

Fig. 2: Down Valleys and core resort areas: 10 ground rules
4.3. The Global and the Local: What does Globalization Mean for Local Communities in the Colorado High Country?

The processes of globalization and its economic, social and spatial implications have been studied by geographers in many ways. Dicken (2011) analyzes the growing interconnectedness in the global economy and comes up with sketches of a dynamic global economic map; he maintains that – even in a globalizing world – economic activities are geographically localized. Murray (2006, p. 260) argues that space, place and scale are important geographical concepts in the examination of the rise of globalization. As a socially committed human geographer he sees a sense of urgency: ‘...globalization is real and we live in unprecedented times. The current wave of globalization is reproducing and intensifying the unequal world.’

As my colleagues Tom Clark, Alison Gill and I (2006) have pointed out in our edited volume ‘Mountain Resort Planning and Development in an Era of Globalization’, the global economy has thoroughly and fundamentally affected the processes of mountain resort development in North America and beyond. We invited an international group of geographers and urban, regional and resort planners to assess the status of mountain resorts from a variety of perspectives including a concern for the stewardship of mountain environments in a globalizing resort economy.

Who are the winners and losers in the Colorado High Country? Certainly, there are more business opportunities resulting from e.g. a globalizing skiing industry and worldwide connected resort environments. In general, Colorado mountain communities may have had the advantage of being situated in well connected resort areas versus a more isolated location in parts of the less developed world, but it is largely one group of people – commonly referred to as the transnational capital class (TCC) – who have similar assets, interests and educational backgrounds resulting in a self-projection as citizens of the world (Dicken 2011, p. 492). They have made the greatest gains from the processes of globalization. On the other hand, inward oriented locals cannot fully participate in the global economy, and tensions between global and local have frequently caused frictions. Must global trump local? Several pathways to a sustainable environment including forms of resistance to global trends are outlined by Clark et al. (2006, p. 329–333).


Visions of a green resort have been in discussion for quite a while. The first time I encountered this concept and appealing notion was at the occasion of a conference on mountain resort development I co-organized in Vail 1991 (Gill and Hartmann 1992). The conference contribution came from Terry Minger, former City Manager of Vail and later President of Whistler-Blackcomb Resort as well as of Sundance Enterprises in Utah. In his paper presentation he outlined the need, if not urgency for environmental stewardship in the resort planning and management field in the following way (1992, p. 66): ‘The successful resort of the 21st century will be the green resort. By green resort, I mean an ecologically sound, biologically diverse, sustainable community. In a world of ever increasing environmental pollution and decreasing resources, the ski resort of the future will be called on not only to provide for the public’s recreation and well-being but to serve as a beacon of environmental consciousness as well.’

How far have we come in Colorado? Certainly, progress has been made in the implementation of policies for a green (or greener) resort. Initial support for the green resort idea in a corporate world came out of the Roaring Fork Valley pushed by the Snowmass Rocky Mountain Institute and Aspen Skiing Company (SkiCo). It was SkiCo under the leadership of Pat O’Donnell, which launched first initiatives in the unchartered field 1996–1999. A new position (and fully paid job!) was created for Auden Schendler, Director of Environmental Affairs (now Vice President of Sustainability). A newly established Environmental Foundation provided an institutional base with considerable financial resources for employees committed to local environmental causes. Programs included hazardous waste reduction, a greater resource efficiency (e.g. cutting energy usage for snowmaking), green building technology (e.g. early examples of LEED certification) and the uses of wind and solar.
Aspen’s environmental stewardship initiatives caught on. The National Ski Areas Association based in Lakewood, Colorado, developed a Sustainable Slopes program in 2004. Other ski corporations such as Vail Resorts eventually followed by carving out their own ideas in the environmental stewardship field: ‘Use Less, Do More’ (an energy conservation program), an effective recycling program (re-using 70 % plus of the mountain’s cardboard, aluminum, glass, etc.), and programs in water conservation.

How can Colorado ski areas and resorts be measured as to their efforts and effectiveness in being environmentally more responsible (or smart), how can they be ranked? The Ski Area Citizen’s Coalition did exactly this by giving all ski areas in Colorado and in the Western U.S. a ‘ski area environmental scorecard’ (using 14 criteria) for the 2008/09 season situation. It was no surprise that three of the four ski areas owned by Aspen Skiing Company landed in the top ten, jointly with Sundance Resort, Squaw Valley, Mount Bachelor and Telluride. Vail Resorts’ ski areas placed in the midfield; the scorecard for Intrawest, owner and operator of the highly acclaimed Whistler ski area, are among the lowest, with Copper Mountain (a ski resort they owned till November 2009) rated last.

It seems Colorado’s ski resorts and resort communities – see, for instance, the Town of Breckenridge’s ‘Sustainable Breck’ action plan (2011) – have successfully responded to some of the public’s general and specific forms of criticism (Clifford 2002; Schendler 2001, 2002). Is the Green Resort finally within reach? Not so fast, if we are to believe Schendler’s (2009) reflections after more than a decade of work in the field. His book is a personal status report as well as an illustration of how difficult it still is to implement policies and to come up with effective solutions in the real world.

4.5. Climate Change: Has it Already Affected Colorado’s Mountain Resorts?

There have been early voices about the impact climate change might have for ski areas in North America, among them from geographers in the tourism study field (McBoyle and Wall 1987, 1992). Long-term, global warming will affect the snow cover of mountain resort areas in winter and with it, in particular, the length of the ski season. During this past decade snow depths at Colorado’s ski areas have not been affected so far by a general warming trend in North America (except for the 2001/02 season followed by huge forest fires in summer/fall 2002). In fact, the last few seasons have seen above average amounts of snowfall in most ski areas as well as locally extended (and not shortened!) ski seasons in Colorado. Though, there are observations indicating that changes are on the way. Mark Williams, from the University of Colorado at Boulder, and Brian Lazar of Stratus Consulting Inc. analyzed long-term temperature and snowfall/snowpack changes (1968–2008) in Aspen, Colorado and Park City, Utah. They studied, in particular, the occurrence of wet avalanches and the run-off in the spring period and found alarming trends. Based on predictions for 2030, Williams argued that the length of the ski seasons in Aspen (and Park City) will be squeezed on each shoulder, with delayed snowpack and earlier melting seasons. Williams also noticed increased CO₂ emissions in the Roaring Fork Valley, with the biggest CO₂ emitters being private jets flying celebrities and vacationers in and out of Aspen. All this will eventually contribute to a reduced snowpack. According to their models temperatures will gradually rise by nearly 4 degrees Fahrenheit (Lazar and Williams 2008; University of Colorado at Boulder News Center 2008).

Earlier run-offs and less harsh winter conditions have become commonly shared observations in many places of the Colorado High Country. The latter trend, with the implications of only short extreme cold spells (instead of the usually longer periods with – 30 degrees Fahrenheit temperatures which most mountain towns have not experienced since 1990), have indirectly resulted in a visual blight: the mountain pine beetle infestation of large stands of lodgepole pines in forest areas of the northwestern ‘ski counties’ of Colorado. Grand County, on the western side of Rocky Mountain National Park, has seen most dramatic changes in its scenery so important for tourism (Robbins 2008). The infestation which started in British Columbia in 1998 has reached most of Colorado’s resort areas. National foresters and ski area officials had to make decisions of how to manage the affected areas – in form of dying trees turning ominously red – and of how to prevent further damage on and
near the slopes. It has been estimated that 100,000 dead trees have been falling daily in Colorado in the last few years. The main reason behind this environmental calamity is climate change: ‘A common thread is warmth: summer warming has contributed to drought stress in many western forests; winter warming allows beetles and their larvae to survive in their galleries beneath the bark and emerge hungry in the spring’ (RAYMONDS 2010).

5. Conclusions

The study of trends in mountain resort planning and development has developed as an inter-disciplinary research field shared by, among others, architects, planners, policy makers, consultants and academicians. Each of the expert groups may have an important role in assessing and identifying issues and problems associated with the complex processes of resort development in an ecologically sensitive elevation range.

There is also an international dimension to the examination of tourism in mountain environments. As previously discussed, a globalizing economy has had far reaching implications for the development processes in even remote and less accessible environments such as high mountain areas. Colleagues from different parts of the world have given attention to past and current changes of recreational travel and tourism to mountain towns and discussed the spatial, socio-cultural and ecological impacts they may have caused in the selected environments (see, for instance, GODDE ET AL. 2000). Cross-border, cross-national and inter-national perspectives in this field allow us to reach a better understanding of frequently interconnected dynamics. Friedrich ZIMMERMANN, a champion in cross-border and international studies of mountain tourism as well as a leading proponent for a global agenda, has provided us with the impetus for following future directions, which he has carefully laid out in numerous studies (see, for instance, ZIMMERMANN 1992, 2006). His works shed light on the promise and contradictions of sustainable development by systematically and compassionately exploring ‘the range of concerns and potentials for mountain tourism now and in the future’ (GODDE ET AL. 2000, p. 20).

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