Socially Constructed Environmental Issues and Sport: A Content Analysis of Ski Resort Environmental Communications

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The United Nations (UN) has stated that "whenever a person engages in sport there is an impact on the environment" (UN, 2010, n.p.). As the environment has become a prominent topic of inquiry and debate, it is necessary to examine the interplay between environmental issues and sport (Hums, 2010; Nauright & Pope, 2009; Ziegler, 2007). Mallen, Stevens, and Adams (2011), found that environmental sustainability was addressed in only 17 of the 4,639 sport management articles they analyzed. Due to the immense ecological footprint of sport, this lack of emphasis on environmental sustainability urgently needs to be addressed (Thibault, 2009).

In the present study downhill skiing will be advanced as a particularly suitable context in which to consider the interplay between sport and the environment. Skiing exerts a large environmental impact (Burki, Elsasser, & Abegg, 2003; Moen & Fredman, 2007; Scott, McBoyle, & Mills, 2002) but is simultaneously heavily reliant on particular environmental conditions (Hamilton, Rohall, Brown, Hayward, & Keim, 2003; Hudson, 1996; Moen & Fredman, 2007). This complex, reciprocal relationship constitutes the primary motive for studying skiing.

The purpose of this research was to examine the environmental communications of ski resorts to determine how environmental issues are socially constructed within them and to compare those social constructions to the actual proenvironmental actions taken by the resorts. Ski resort environmental communications (SRECs) published on their websites are potentially instrumental in shaping proenvironmental behaviors and generating marketing benefits. There is a growing body of research that suggests that sport participants and others willing to travel for leisure and recreation are aware of the environmental impact of their activities and may be willing to pay a premium to off-set their environmental footprint (Becken, 2007; Fairweather, Maslin, & Simmons; 2005, Hudson & Ritchie, 2001; Weiss et al., 1998). Therefore, an evaluation of how accurately the SRECs capture the environmental issues present within the context of skiing and the ski resorts’ actions to address those issues, is warranted. An adaptation of Hudson and Miller’s (2005) model for responsible marketing was utilized to compare the environmental communications (the SRECs) to the degree of environmentally responsible action (as graded by the Ski Area Citizens’ Coalition (SACC)). Consequently, the guiding research question for this study was: According to an adaptation of Hudson and Miller’s (2005) model would the ski resorts that are graded by the SACC be classified as inactive, exploitive, reactive, or proactive?

The ski resorts that are evaluated by the SACC (n=82) constituted the sample for this study. The resorts span 11 states (all in the western U.S.) and are graded by the SACC on an annual basis in the following four categories: habitat protection, protecting watersheds, addressing global climate change, and environmental policies and practices. As the SACC evaluations are central to this analysis, this sampling technique might be described as “relevance sampling,” which Krippendorff (2004) defined as “selecting all textual units that contribute to answering given research questions” (p. 199).

All 82 resorts were given either “high” or “low” grades on their actual proenvironmental performance based on their SACC annual report card score. A content analysis was performed on their SRECs, and the resorts were also given either “high” or “low” grades on their environmental communications, based upon the prominence of the SREC on the ski resort’s website and the breadth and depth of environmental issues covered within the SREC.

The results found 43% of the resorts scored “high” on both measures and were classified as being proactive, where, for example, environmental management is seen to be a priority. 24% of the resorts scored “low” on both measures and were classified as being inactive, where, for example, environmental management is seen as unnecessary. 23% scored “low” on proenvironmental performance but “high” on the content of their environmental communications.
and were classified as exploitive, where, for example, environmental issues are dealt with only when necessary. The remaining 10% scored “high” on proenvironmental performance but “low” on environmental communications content and were classified as reactive, where, for example, environmental management is seen as worthwhile, but external reporting is a low priority.

One of the most interesting (and positive) findings was that the proactive category had the largest number of resorts. They received high scores on their actual environmental behavior and do a good job communicating this fact. While having a quarter of the sample in the inactive category is discouraging, at least they are being true to themselves. They simply avoid talking about their below average environmental standing. Having a quarter of the resorts in the exploitive category is cause for concern, not only for the sake of the environment, but also as a sustainable marketing strategy. These resorts seem to be “green washing” in that their proenvironmental claims fall short of their actual environmental behaviors. If proenvironmental consumers question the legitimacy of these resorts, they may decide to ski elsewhere. It is difficult to understand the existence of the 10% of resorts who were reactive. They seem to be ignoring a potential competitive advantage and corresponding marketing opportunity by doing a poor job promoting their proenvironmental practices. We recommend that they more effectively trumpet their environmental track record on their websites.

Our strongest recommendation regards the standardization of SRECs. Not only was it potentially difficult to find the SREC on each website, but it was also difficult to compare information from one SREC to another. Consequently, these facts become barriers to consumers wishing to make an informed consumption decision based on environmental criteria. Standardizing the SRECs could make them easier for consumers to find and use, and may also help eliminate green washing if more stringent reporting criteria were required.

Two areas for future research may prove particularly interesting— one focused on the supply side of the equation and the other on the demand side. A primary unanswered question is the motivation behind ski resorts’ environmental behavior and communication. They may be wanting to comply with environmental regulations and side-step scrutiny, obtain a competitive marketing advantage, or merely do what they see is altruistically right. Another issue regards the effectiveness of the SRECs in the eyes of the consumers, as it is unknown how they interpret the content and wording of these communications. Interviews both with ski resort managers and skiers would further our understanding of the interplay between sport and the environment.