

Snowmaking may not save ski resorts

By Jakob Schiller, Powder

The first time I went to my local ski area last year – Sipapu Ski and Summer Resort in northern New Mexico – there was one run open and almost all the snow was man-made. To any bird flying over it must have been quite a scene: a mostly brown hill with a thin, continuous patch of white running from top to bottom.

But there I was, season pass in hand, anxious to put skis to snow. I'd waited all summer to strap on my boards and it seemed more important to finally be making turns than to worry about what it all meant. I was hungry. Still, the question lingered in the back of my head: What was the cost of this absurdity?

Porter Fox, whose book "Deep" was excerpted in the September issue of Powder, says the snowpack in the Cascades is down 20-40 percent because of climate change. Here in the Rockies, the spring snowpack is down 20 percent. Climatologists estimate that two-thirds of ski resorts in Europe might have to close by 2100 and only four of the 14 major resorts on the East Coast might be afloat at that same time.

According to a report cited in a study released by Protect Our Winters and the Natural Resources Defense Council, "Park City, Utah will lose all mountain snow pack by the end the century while Aspen Mountain, Colorado snowpack will be confined to the top quarter of the mountain under a higher emissions scenario."

To compensate for a lack of snowfall that has already dramatically declined, 88 percent of North American ski areas make snow, although according to an article in High Country

News, some resorts are trying to mitigate the impacts as best they can. Heavenly Mountain Resort uses computers to run its snowmaking operation, which helps make it more efficient. And Loveland Ski Area in Colorado has found a way to capture the runoff from its manmade snow and store the water so it can be reused. Both strategies are creative, but no amount of computerization or runoff capture will offset the amount of snow these large areas will need to make and the battles that will be fought over the water to make it.

Snowmaking is already a contentious issue in the West and several recent cases point to the kinds of problems that will undoubtedly crop up as other resorts turn to snow cannons to make sure they have enough snow on the slopes for opening day.

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