

# Skiers accustomed to Mother Nature's cycles

**By Skiing**

While on a ski tour with a group of friends late last spring, I asked one of the old-timers, who has skied in the Sierra since 1967, if he'd ever seen a pair of consecutive below-average seasons stretch into a third year as the winter of 2013-14 had done. Without hesitation he replied, "Of course. This is California."

One look at the Central Sierra Snow Laboratory's historical snowpack and snowfall graph, which shows cumulative snowfall data from 1879 to the present, confirms his experience. The lines on the graph rise and fall as precipitously as the peaks and valleys of the mighty Sierra. But that's part of the reason why skiers like him stick around. Each year can be different. Sure, some are better than others, but even the bad ones are only as bad as you let them be.

In the mid-1800s, the California Gold Rush drew people hoping to strike it rich and helped populate this great state. While the California ski industry isn't exactly a gold rush, the frozen precipitation that falls from the sky each winter is nearly as precious, and not only because of the winter recreation opportunities it creates. Nearly one-third of the state's water supply is contained in the snowpack that accumulates along the spine of the Sierra. Spring runoff feeds numerous watersheds, countless reservoirs, the cities on the coast, and thousands of miles of farmland in the Sacramento and San Joaquin valleys of Central California.

Much like the Gold Rush – and modern-day equivalents like the real estate and dot-com bubbles – California's snowpack has been booming and busting for as long as records have been

kept. Skiers of the Golden State are a hardy bunch who've learned to play the hand they're dealt. And it can go both ways. From Tahoe to Mammoth, resorts of the Sierra logged as much as 800 inches of snow during the winter immediately preceding the current rough patch. As deep as it seemed to be, the 2010–11 season of endless powder days doesn't even crack the top five winters on record. California can ski even better.

While it's certainly added to the climate-change dialogue, the recent demoralizing stretch has been more than just bad for the soul. Tough winters and tougher press have had real impacts on the region. According to the National Ski Areas Association, the Pacific Southwest region, which includes California, Nevada, and Arizona, has seen skier visit numbers plummet.

Last winter's late start led to employee layoffs and furloughs throughout the Tahoe region. Ski shops slashed prices shortly after New Year's to cut losses. In one of the more extreme cases, Porters Sports, a well-known ski shop with locations in North Tahoe and Truckee, closed its doors for good last February.

"There were a couple of financial assumptions that didn't pan out that were the real source of the demise of Porters," says John Chapman, former co-owner of Porters. "But the past three abysmal seasons only nailed the coffin shut."

Fortunately for many Tahoe-area businesses, summer tourism has been robust enough to keep the ink black regardless of the season's snow totals.

Unlike many winter destinations, though, when California is dominated by high pressure, the weather is typically agreeable – sunny and 50 degrees – with corn and soft groomer skiing for days on manicured manmade snow blown by some of the world's most advanced snowmaking systems. Even when battling thin

cover, the adventurous can find backcountry turns on wind deposits in the high peaks.

(Just be sure to bring your rock skis.)

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