

No Idling

Avid Skier Urges Resorts to Adopt Policies to Curb Wasteful Emissions.

Alpine skiing has always been one of my greatest joys. Those moments of Zen breaking through trees into a new bowl or glade, feeling the wind in my face while taking in some magnificent mountain scenery. That feeling of freedom and the sheer joy of being fully alive and in the moment has few equals in my life experience.

And yet, more and more, when I consider whether to head up to the mountain on a rare free day, I elect to go backcountry skiing instead. Backcountry is a delightful activity in its own right, but it rarely provides the same adrenaline thrill. So why do I make that choice? It's not the extra money, if that's what you were thinking. Frankly, it's the pollution.

As I begin to think about a day at the mountain, my mind goes to the parking lot where it will begin. And in that parking lot will be as many as a dozen cars and SUVs idling their engines while the occupant dons their ski gear, often while standing *outside* their vehicle. This must strike most people as perfectly normal, based on its prevalence. But I have some questions about it. One, why does someone need to run the engine when a cab will stay warm for up to 15 minutes after the engine is shut down? Two, what difference will it make? Aren't you hoping to be on a chairlift in about five minutes anyway?

So, my much needed commune with nature begins with a noisy, smelly, unhealthy downer. The end of the day is worse. In extremely cold or snowy weather, it is sometimes necessary to defrost a windshield with your engine before you start driving. Unfortunately, this occasional necessity has evolved into a nearly universal habit. Most of the time, the afternoon sun has warmed the parking lot and it would ordinarily be possible to enjoy the afterglow of a good day of skiing as you fight with your ski boots. Instead, half the guests in the lot give in to the seemingly instinctual need to fire up their engine before they even have their gloves off.

Guests can be educated to be more cognizant of their behavior by the employees. And the best way to do that is by example. Too often at the resorts that I visit, the service vehicles are left to idle for no discernible reason. Likewise for all the vendor delivery trucks and buses coming up to the mountain. If you have a Sustainable Slopes education piece in your lodge, but you allow vehicles to park in the entry areas and leave the engine running, you are not sending a very consistent message.

Many Americans still live in a 1940s mindset when it comes to vehicles. Engines, particularly diesel engines, were once upon a time notoriously fickle and hard to start in cold weather. People

grew up on the assumption that it was not only risky to try to restart in cold weather, but also used more gas than just running. This may have been true at one time, but it is most emphatically not true any more, even for diesels, much less for regular engines. If you are going to be stopped for more than 10 seconds, you will save fuel by shutting down your engine. Think what the cost savings in gas per year alone would be for a ski area that enforced such a policy. This is not just a cold weather issue, you will see the same thing happening all year round, at your resort and at any parking lot, school or convenience store you visit. It's just a lazy habit we've all developed that is going to require active education to reverse.

So for all the mountains that are members of Sustainable Slopes, concerned about climate change, or simply their guest's experience, I applaud you if you are talking about putting up a solar powered T-bar up above tree line. But I would applaud you even more if you

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went after the low hanging fruit of the tens of thousands of unnecessary idling hours that occur on your property each year. A few mountains are taking the lead here already. Mammoth Mountain in California has a policy covering all the situations mentioned above. Their policy is friendly, informative and firm (i.e., it doesn't work if it's just written down somewhere, you have to get everyone out there and talk to employees, guests and suppliers). Lisa Isaacs, environmental programs director at Mammoth, says that it is working. “It took a season or so for some to change behaviors, but now it's the exception and no longer the norm,” claims Lisa.

So please, for the sake of the snow, for your own health, and for the peace, quiet and beauty that should be the mountains, create a policy and implement it at your mountain. I'm eager to come back.

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