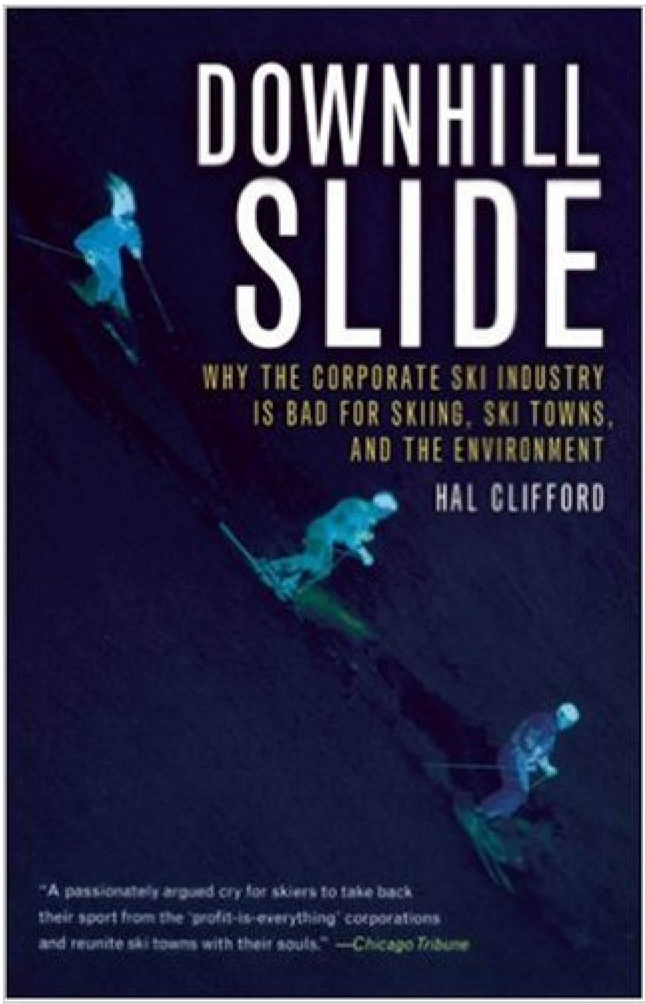
Downhill Slide: Why The Corporate Ski Industry Is Bad For Skiing, Ski Towns, And The Environment



Synopsis

In this impassioned expose, lifelong skier Hal Clifford reveals how publicly traded corporations gained control of Americaâ ™s most popular winter sport during the 1990s, and how their greed is gutting ski towns, the natural environment, and skiing itself. Chronicling the collision between Wall Streetâ ™s demand for unceasing revenue growth and the fragile natural and social environments of small mountain communities, Clifford shows how the modern ski industry promotes its product as environmentally friendly, while at the same time creating urban-style problems for mountain villages. He suggests an alternative to this bleak picture in the return-to-the-roots movement that is now beginning to find its voice in many American ski towns, and he relates stories of creative business people who are shifting control of the ski business back to the communities that host it.Hard-hitting and carefully researched, Downhill Slide is indispensable reading for anyone who lives in, visits, or cares about what is happening to Americaâ ™s alpine communities.

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Customer Reviews

This is the kind of book there should have been more of forty years ago; then we might not be in this fix.Clifford sketches the transformation of the ski industry from a quaint and healthy alternative to gambling and drinking in the 19th and early 20th centuries, to a monster industry in the 21st, still healthy but not so quaint, that gives drinking and gambling fierce competition for discretionary dollars in our nation’s mountain towns.As mining and logging was gradually phased out, the focus shifted to recreation, changing charming towns into mere appendages of mega-resorts whose reason for being is the hawking of overpriced real estate, overpriced equipment, overpriced food, overpriced lift tickets-- and in the summer overpriced greens fees and tickets to film and music festivals. In most cases the resorts' gouging rest upon a firm foundation of reasonably priced public land leases, usually involving the US Forest Service, an agency of the Dept of Agriculture.This last detail presents a problem for Clifford and his publisher, Sierra Club Books, For as logging and mining revenues to the USDA decline, it is hesitant to raise too sharply the rents or regulations on its new, relatively clean tenants, the resort operators. When Clifford makes the case for saving elk or lynx habitat the Forest Service is no doubt sympathetic, but probably a lot more interested in saving its own budget, and all the jobs that it supports. And a ski run, while not ideal, is a much better place for wildlife to thrive than what's left after a mining company extracts ore.In Colorado there is a pair of sites, both mentioned in DOWNHILL SLIDE: Copper Mtn. Ski Area, and just 5 miles up the road, the mothballed Climax Molybdenum Mine. Copper Mtn has cut down some trees for ski runs and probably uses too much water for snowmaking and doesn't build housing in its "village" for non-rich people--but these are all things that can be fixed. At Climax what is left is a gray, treeless wasteland of slag heaps and tailing ponds. Half a mountain has been eaten away and the leftover sludge sluiced onto a vast flat area resembling a parking lot, into which you could fit dozens of parking lots as big as the one at Copper. Clifford spends many pages criticizing Copper and its owner, Intrawest Corp, but cites Climax only in a lone paragraph as a company which paid a good wage to its employees.It seems to me that authors and publishers of perceptive and thoughtful books such as this one ought to propose real solutions to problems they elucidate. For example, why not build low cost employee housing for Copper Mtn on top of the wasteland at Climax? Anything, but anything they built, even Bauhaus, would be an improvement over what is there now. Looking at a map, one sees that a high speed quad could be run about 3 miles from this proposed employee housing to the top of Copper Mtn, thus cutting down on the commuter traffic from Leadville. The illegal workers discussed in Chapter 9 could realize the all-too-often elusive American Dream of skiing to work.

This book reminded me of Eric Schlosser's "Fast Food Nation" (thorough, probing, disturbing & readable). "Downhill Slide" takes a look at the dangerous reach (Disneyfication) of Corporate America. This book is a must read for skiers (avid and former), the ski industry (listen up!), environmentalists and those who care about those "last best places."

As a life-long Vailite, and an active board member of Colorado Wild and the Ski Area Citizens' Coalition,I have found Mr. Clifford's book invaluable. We have known for quite some time that the sport of skiingis in trouble and that the recent corporatization of skiing and associated development is causing enormousstress on ski towns and the environment. Clifford has concisely and coherently expressed the problems, chosensuperb and telling examples and given citizens of ski towns throughout the country a lot to think about.

This book should be required reading for people, skiers and non-skiers alike, who patronize ski resorts. DOWNHILL SLIDE exposes what really drives the continuing expansion of ski resorts -- and it isn't skiing. Clifford focuses on the "Big Three", the publically-traded corporations that control a large chunk of all the resorts in North America.Although actual ski-run usage (including ski boarders) has been flat for a decade, resorts continue to bombard the US Forest Service with requests for more public land to build ski runs on. Why would they need more runs if the number of skiers is static? To build more condos and "ski villages" around. Clifford says that these companies are theme park/real estate developers masquerading as sports facilities.The resorts are marketed as year-round recreation sites in order to keep the condos full of consumers for the retail establishments in the artifical "villages". The chapter entitled "Potemkin Villages and Emerald Cities" ought to bring a blush to the faces of those who sneer at Disneyland, but gush over the quaint shops and interesting restaurants at places like Breckenridge, Copper Mountain, or Whistler.Why should we care that big corporations are peddling phoney "life experiences" in the heart of our public lands? Because Clifford says these bogus communities that are springing up in the most scenic parts of our national forests are environmental disaster sites. The thin mountain air is ill-equipped to cope with large new sources of pollution. Access roads and boundary fences interfere with wildlife. Clifford describes starving elk herds kept from their grazing areas by the fences around ranchettes put up by clebrities attracted to the Aspen lifestyle. Snowmaking equipment gobbles up enourmous quantities of energy and water. There are now sixteen golf courses in the arid Vail valley (those summer visitors must have recreation). In order to keep them green Vail Corporation appropriated the water rights of an indigenous town, Minturn. The large staff necessary to provide the amenities at the rustic magic kingdoms must commute from affordable housing in places like Minturn, often 50 or more miles away.I quit downhill skiing in the early 70's, but since then have been a non-skiing customer at many of the resorts mentioned by Clifford -- Stratton, Stowe, Vail, Aspen, Sun Valley, Teton Village, Deer Park, and Snowbird. Never again. Skiers may be able to square their love of the sport with galloping environmental degradation, but non-skiers don't need to be party to it.

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