



## Ski resorts working to reduce environmental footprint

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It begins when you hand over your skis or snowboard and step into the gondola at Kicking Horse Mountain Resort.

On days without lineups, because every skier or snowboarder knows you don't mess with a powder day, the 12-minute ride up the mountain can take an extra six minutes because the gondola is running slower to conserve energy.

"It's not a difference the regular person would notice," said Andy Brown of Kicking Horse Resort, located in the Purcell Mountains near Golden, B.C. "So, when there's no lineup, we dial it down.

"It definitely makes a big enough difference to make it worthwhile."

The restaurant at the top, Eagle's Eye, has low-flush toilets, waterless urinals and hands-free faucets to conserve water. Back at the bottom, the Whitetooth Grill uses reusable red baskets to serve its meals to reduce waste.

It's one of several ski resorts in or, in its case, near the Canadian Rockies that are increasingly adopting sustainable practices not only to improve their environmental footprint, but also to reduce their overall costs.

One green entrepreneur suggests they could take it a step further by turning to renewable energy sources such as wind or solar power to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

"Climate change is a big issue and ski resorts have a lot to gain by adopting renewable energy," said Nick Blitterswyk, an alumni of the University of Calgary who's the chief executive of Urban Green Energy in New York. "We often forget, but the cost of energy is one of the largest costs for ski resorts. Making snow is very energy intensive and so on.

"They have a lot to gain by lowering their energy costs as well."

The threat of climate change for ski resorts is becoming more real.

In the western United States, scientists are detecting a change in the snow cover at lower elevations due to an increased temperature in the past 50 years.

It has major implications for ski hills such as those around Lake Tahoe in California, which is in the midst of a historic drought.

Researchers in Alberta are also studying stream flow, precipitation, snowpack, groundwater, vegetation and mountain meteorology to assess the overall impact of environmental change in the mountains.

“They are in a much warmer situation so they are seeing it first,” said John Pomeroy, Canada research chair in water resources and climate change at the University of Saskatchewan. “Right now, we don’t see a decline in snowpack at high elevations in the Rockies. Not at all but, with continued warming, yes.”

Pomeroy said it’s unknown how quickly it will happen, but he suggests it could be in this lifetime — for some.

“With four more degrees of warming in the Rockies at high elevation, the simulations I ran show we would lose half of the high mountain snowpack and we would lose a month-and-a-half of snow cover,” he said. “We could have that kind of warming before the end of this century. Say by 2070 or 2080.

“People who are alive will see ski resorts in the Canadian Rockies struggle because of a lack of snow and that it’s really too warm to ski. Long before then, Colorado resorts and the U.S. Sierras will have lost their snowpack.”

In the short term, he said resorts in Canada might actually benefit from the conditions down in the U.S. because more people will travel north to ski.

However, Pomeroy said it’s in their interest to care about climate change because their business model depends on snowpack.

It’s a similar message from Blitterswyk, who adds that renewable energy would both reduce their costs and their emissions.

“If one ski resort changes to renewable energy, it’s not going to solve climate change,” he said, “but, if they all do, it will have a big impact.”

As an example of how renewable energy can take off, he pointed to work they did on the home of the Philadelphia Eagles’ football stadium.

“That project has wind and solar on the stadium and it’s very very visible,” said Blitterswyk. “It’s had such a huge knock-on impact because so many — especially homeowners, but also businesses in the area — now see sustainability as something they want to do as well.

“Ski resorts have a big opportunity there, too.”

Back at Kicking Horse, officials said they are “taking a hard look” at alternative energy supplies for remote locations.

“We’re directly impacted by the environment,” said Brown, noting sustainable choices often save money in the long term. “If we keep everything good for the environment, we keep getting good snow years and we have more people that come out here.”