

WHAT'S WRONG WITH BIODIVERSITY?

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The White River National Forest in Colorado is home to 11 major ski resorts and accounts for approximately 13 percent of the nation's annual skier/rider days. The U.S. Forest Service is in the process of drafting a new Land and Resource Management Plan for the forest to chart the course for management of recreational, agricultural, commercial and habitat uses for the next 10 to 15 years.

From among the eight alternative management themes created through public comments and input from various user groups, the Forest Service's preferred plan is Alternative D, which seeks "to make the most rapid progress, compared to other alternatives, toward a diverse, healthy ecosystem condi-

SPEAK-OUT *continued*

tion. Of all the alternatives, Alternative D places a low emphasis on developments for human use and recreation."

Alternative D reduces the land available for off-road motorcycle and snowmobile use and eliminates the developed recreation designation of some lands proposed for future ski area expansion. While Alternative D has drawn intense criticism from off-road vehicle groups as well as from others—including some ski industry sources—as overly restrictive of recreation, it has also been criticized by environmental groups as insufficiently protective of wilderness. *Aspen Skiing Company, however, supports the theme of Alternative D.*

That support results from an exhaustive review of the draft plan and an introspective analysis of our industry and our company. Aspen Skiing Company is deeply committed to the preservation and enhancement of our natural environment, but our support for Alternative D is not the product of blind adherence to environmental zealotry. We support Alternative D, not as a marketing ploy or secret plan to gain advantage over the competition, but because it is the right thing for us to do as a company and, we submit, the right thing for our industry.

As everyone in the ski industry bemoans, total skier visits in the U.S. have remained flat (about 50 million per year) for more than 20 years. During that period, resorts have made fabulous investments in infrastructure and terrain expansions. The net result has been higher lift ticket prices but no overall growth in skiers. While Alternative D reduces the scope of some proposed future expansions, would our industry be better off if its 50 million visitors are spread over more terrain?

As the 1999 National Skier/Boarder Opinion Survey taken at Aspen and Snowmass showed, preservation of the environment is extremely important to skiers and riders. With our guests calling for earnest protection of our mountain environment, why would our industry presume to know better and argue to the contrary?

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The most vocal opponents of Alternative D have been off-road users of dirt bikes, snowmobiles and ATVs. Unfortunately, by virtue of the perception of ski industry opposition to Alternative D, our industry is now in a *de-facto* alliance with groups and viewpoints that we believe are drastically inconsistent with the sentiments of our customers. Does an image of a snowmobile roaring through the mountains help persuade consumers to take a winter ski vacation?

Thinking realistically and pragmatically, a forest plan that emphasizes ecosystem health and biodiversity is not a sudden change in the state of the world for the ski industry. It seems extraordinarily unlikely that an existing, operating ski area will ever be closed down as the result of some newly discovered needs for habitat or species protection. Threatened and endangered species will have impacts on ski area operations, but so do hundreds of other existing federal, state and local laws. It seems equally unlikely that any new ski area expansion would be permitted if the expansion caused material negative impacts

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on biodiversity that could not be adequately mitigated. Existing laws such as the Endangered Species Act, among others, would likely already foreclose the project. In today's climate of almost universal support for environmental protection and nightly news images of protesters chained to redwoods, would anyone even propose such a project?

Alternative D is not perfect, as was made clear in our Aspen Skiing Company comments. Alternative D is an attempt at compromise between the need to protect biodiversity in the forest and a burgeoning demand for recreation and development. In time, circumstances may develop that support changes to the Forest Plan to allow additional ski area expansions or off-road vehicle use. Alternative D is not intended to be permanent.

The snowsliding industry should be in the forefront of environmental protection, if only because support for the environment aligns us with our customers and not at odds with mainstream America for no good purpose. **///**

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