

March 2003
(USPS 890-900)

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SUMMER

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PROFIT'S

**SUMMER: MORE OPTIONS THAN EVER BEFORE
PLUS: ECONOMIC ANALYSIS REVISITED**

The Lure of Summer

A study at Whistler shows what visitors love about the mountains.

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Last summer, more than 225,000 people visited Whistler Mountain, up from 180,000 two years earlier. Given the importance of this growing business, we studied the social and managerial aspects of summer recreation there to identify the motivations of summer visitors and to measure overall visitor satisfaction, along with acceptance and support for management actions and summer lift ticket prices. The results may well apply to other resorts as well.

In the summer of 2000, we interviewed visitors at five sites, ranging from the easily accessible Roundhouse, atop the gondola, to more remote camping and hiking sites. Most Roundhouse visitors are sightseers from various places around the world, and are slightly older than the visitors to the semi-primitive backcountry settings. Most of the visitors to the remote sites are younger and less affluent day hikers or campers from nearby Whistler or Vancouver. Visitors to the Mountain Bike Park, another survey site, are mostly male mountain bikers, 20 to 30 years old.

Visitor Motivations

The most important reasons for visiting Whistler in the summer are "to experience the beauty of an alpine area," "to view the natural landscape," and "to engage in hiking or mountain biking." Most of these results are not substantially different among the five sites.

Conversely, facilities and services offered on the mountain, such as "to enjoy restaurant dining in an alpine setting," as well as the guided tours and attraction activities, such as "to access helicopter tours" and "to participate in a tour," are some of the least important reasons for visiting.

This is significant because many ski

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area operators, including those at Whistler, are adding attractions such as horse-drawn carriage tours, helicopter tours, and all-terrain vehicle tours, hoping that they will draw more people. Since most visitors are seeking an alpine experience that mainly involves viewing the scenery and going on a hike, it may be wiser to market the natural setting more than the contrived facilities and tours.

Visitor Satisfaction

Overall satisfaction of summer visitors is very high, with 51 to 78 percent of respondents at each site reported being "very satisfied" and 12 to 40 percent of "somewhat satisfied." However, visitors are not satisfied with every aspect of their experience. Many are displeased or annoyed by noise and environmental impacts on the mountain, crowding, pressure from timeshare salespeople, and frequency of over-flights by helicopter tours. More than 66 percent of the visitors at some sites support prohibiting helicopters in the summer.

Management Alternatives

Visitors support several management alternatives that could improve their

visit—such as increasing and improving "visitor education and awareness." Visitors not only want to see and experience the alpine environment at ski hills, but they also want to learn about it.

"...visitors are not satisfied with every aspect of their experience."

Although signage, pamphlets, and tours are provided on the mountain in the summer, more could be done to increase the level of visitor education. This could involve more tours, on-site materials, written materials (brochures, maps, guides), orientation sessions, and interpretive slide shows, videos, computer programs, as well as a greater presence of park wardens and mountain officials. These results do not differ substantially between the sites.

Summer Lift Ticket Prices

We asked visitors if they feel that the gondola fees to access Whistler Mountain in the summer are acceptable. (Whistler's

gondola rides cost CDN\$22 for adults, CDN\$19 for youths and seniors, while children 12 and under ride free.) We told participants that these fees offset operational costs, provide on-mountain services, generate profit, and upgrade trail conditions and interpretation signage.

The majority of visitors (52 percent) feel that the fees are acceptable, but one-third (33 percent) don't. Locals, especially, objected: only 41 percent termed the fees acceptable. It may be useful for operators to consider a locals' price.

Only 8 percent of the visitors support increasing summer fees, even if increasing lift ticket prices provides increased visitor services and area maintenance. It appears that the current summer ticket prices on Whistler represent a threshold regardless of the improvements. This suggests that ski hill operators should not charge summer visitors more than about one-third of the winter lift ticket rate.

The authors thank the management at Whistler/Blackcomb and the British Columbia Ministry of Water, Land and Air Protection for allowing this research to be conducted within their jurisdictions.

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