Outdoor industry's snow and ice dilemma

Only the coldest heart could fail to find the ice and snow of the mountains uplifting. The majesty of a snow-covered peak is awe-inspiring, even from an aeroplane. This must be why so many songs and orchestral pieces have mountains as their theme.

The outdoor industry—apparel, footwear and equipment—is growing partly because more and more people are spending time in the mountains. In summer, we hike and cycle, in winter we ski, and we climb all year round. Flights to airports that serve ski-resorts have multiplied beyond belief in the last decade with the advent of no-frills airlines.

Increased activity in the great outdoors is not the only reason for industry growth, of course. In the apparel sector especially, an ongoing connection between function and fashion is also an important contributor. The brands and retailers selling the clothes don't really mind if buyers wear them to walk in the Alps or to watch television.

Governments in the developed world do mind. Sedentary, urban lifestyles and poorer diets are pushing the numbers of obese people and of diabetes sufferers to unprecedented levels, and *Time* recently reported that the average height of today's Manhattanite men was 4.5 centimetres shorter than that of their fresher-air breathing counterparts in Kansas. As a result, the city of New York, like the governments of most western nations, is urging citizens to take more exercise.

Damage limitation

There is a great paradox surrounding exercise in the mountains though. The more we take part in it, the less snow and ice there seems to be. All those flights to winter sports resorts are contributing to the melting of even the polar ice-caps, with the North Pole (basically, a little ice surrounded by a lot of water, while at the South Pole it's the other way round) deteriorating at an especially alarming rate.



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Salewa

So, on the one hand, the industry and the authorities who take responsibility for our health want us to do more on the other hand, if we accept the invitation and make more of the mountains, we run the risk of causing irreparable damage to that same environment. Is this an unsquareable circle, or do the companies and characters at the forefront of the outdoor sector have the answer?

Bolzano-based Salewa is typical, in some ways at least. While sponsoring a team of elite athletes (including Roger Schäelli, see panel pg.00) who engage in extreme mountain and ice activity, it is also pushing more into the mainstream. Its most recent launches include new footwear for hiking and 'speed-hiking', the latter, the Viper Athletic model, is especially lightweight and is

aimed at people who prefer to rush along mountain trails without pausing to smell the edelweiss. There is also a new Flex Zone sleeping bag that allows, through new patent-pending technology, the sleeper to move around without losing heat energy through a lack of insulation.

These innovations, the company hopes, will mirror the success of the '100% blister-free' shoes it launched last year. It claims a 99.8% success rate on blisters: after four months in the shops, only 40 users out of thousands complained that the shoes had failed to keep their feet free from blisters.

Clearly, the principal idea is that we can spend our nights as well as days in the snow without compromising too much on our comfort or safety, which is good news for the vast majority of us, those who are not elite Alpine athletes, but may not be such good news for the mountain environment itself.

"This is always a matter of intense discussion inside the company," says Salewa CEO, Massimo Baratto, "and there is no easy way of balancing it all. What I can tell you is that I could sell a million more shoes and a million more T-shirts if I were prepared to compromise and follow all the lifestyle and fashion trends, the way some sports companies seem to do."

The company refuses to become a slave to fashion, but it has still worked hard to achieve growth, from a turnover of €10 million ten years ago to €130 million last year. Mr Baratto describes growth as stable, and points out that Salewa can keep growing at its steady pace through diversification. It supplies clothing, footwear and equipment, and wants outdoor enthusiasts to use more of its products, but without compromising its integrity. It uses no plastic, and, in its apparel lines, as much recycled fabric as it can. This will continue, the chief executive says.

"We are a serious company," he continues. "We love the mountains, and we want new people to discover how beautiful they are, but in the proper way, with respect."

View from the top

Marc Girardelli discovered the beauty and excitement of being in the mountains at a very young age. He was five when he started skiing in his native Austria and seven when he started racing.

By the time he gave up competing in 1996, he had won four gold medals, four silver and three bronze at the World Championships, and two



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silver medals at the Olympics, specialising in the combination, slalom and giant slalom events.

He went on to set up an indoor ski-centre for children in the industrial German town of Bottrop, showing them videos of the mountains while they waited for their turn on the slope. Eventually, he set up a travel agency inside the centre so that local families could book a trip to the Alps while enthusiasm levels were high.

He ran this business successfully for several years, bringing in 700,000 customers annually, before selling up and using the capital to launch an outdoor clothing brand in his own name, again especially for children. He has just launched his first summer collection (see separate story in this issue).

Mr Girardelli, whose credentials as an elite winter sports athlete no one could doubt, is of the opinion that everyone should have the chance to enjoy the snow. It's tempting to invite him to add "while it lasts" to this phrase, but he's as far ahead as if we were racing on Crans-Montana.

"I know there was little snow last winter in Europe," he says, "but even so, most of the pistes above 1200 metres were active for at least four months, so there was a season. But think back to the year before: there was too much snow. We've all forgotten that amid the complaints about this winter."

And we'll forget about the scarcity of snow during the 2006-2007 season if the winter ahead brings normal snow-falls, he believes.

"I realise that overall temperatures are rising," the former world champion goes on, "and we have all seen the effect on the glaciers. So, yes, we all have the responsibility to preserve the mountains as best we can. We have gained so much from the mountains, and we have to pass them on to later generations."

But, like the Salewa chief executive, his message is that we can still enjoy the snow and ice responsibly.

Code of conduct

Salewa is one of 32 European brands that make up the membership of the European Outdoor Group, an association that aims to help companies active in this arena to address common issues. Secretary general, Mark Held, is in no doubt that questions over conservation and corporate social responsibility come into this category.

"This is certainly one issue that is not going to go away," he says. "Our group, perhaps a year from now, will establish a code of conduct for members. The dialogue, with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) with a particular interest in this subject area, over what the code will cover, has already begun."

One of the ideas he thinks the code of conduct may try to enshrine is renewed respect among brands and consumers for special areas in the mountains that are off-limits, and to create more of these.

"There is no need for complete open access," Mr Held continues. "I have to point out that our group does not include skiing, but there's no doubt in my mind that there is trouble ahead and that skiing is one of the first areas that is going to be hit. Mass-market skiers, unlike die-hard enthusiasts, just want to have fun, and they want it handed to them on a plate There is a lack of snow, so skiers are going higher and higher into the mountains, making more use of snow-cannons. That's definitely bad for the environment."

Trouble in Toyland

The range of goods on display at events such as Outdoor Retailer, ispo and European Outdoor is breathtaking. Shoes, tops, jackets, trousers, back-packs, tents, sleeping-bags, boots: there are thousands of lines in new colours and innovative materials. It's enough to make Daniel Jackson, a long-standing guru of design at influential Canadian outdoor brand ARC'teryx, say: "This is Toyland."

ARC'teryx started life in Burnaby, British Colombia, in 1991 and Mr Jackson was one of the first people to join. He recently negotiated the right to work only three days a week on average, choosing to spend a lot of his time now in Hawaii, where he has been practicing water sports and learning ancient healing techniques.

Perhaps stepping back like this has given him the opportunity to look at the industry in a new light, hence the "Toyland" comment, for which he makes no apology.

"This industry is all about fantasy," he continues. "The marketing shows you people in the most fabulous places on earth and you think,



New products, such as Salewa's Eagle GTX 'blister-free' boots, are taking the pain out of mountain activity.

Salewa



The Jungfrau is the highest peak of a mountain massif of the same name, located in the Bernese Oberland region of the Swiss Alps, overlooking Wengen.

An optimist's opinion

Roger Schäelli is a young man who has spent his entire life in the mountains of his native Switzerland, quickly making a name for himself as an elite ice-climber. He is part of a team called alpineXtrem, sponsored by Salewa, and, winter and summer, has picked his way across practically every path in the Alps. Or so he thought.

During one climb last year, he received a slap-in-the-face reminder of the might and majesty of the mountains. This happened in a part of the Bernese Oberland that hosts World Cup skiing events in winter, an event called the Inferno Triathlon in summer and even a marathon in the autumn.

"It was on the Jungfrau," he recalls. "I was climbing one of the glaciers there, looking down over the pass. I turned and, suddenly, saw a whole north face that I'd never seen before. It was just beautiful and it always will be. You'll never get thousands of people going there because it's too difficult to reach. It will always be unspoilt and amazingly peaceful and beautiful."

'That could be me'. So we're in the business of making people believe we can help them fulfil their dreams."

He believes, of course, that there is a good side to that. For example, people in North America normally only have two or three weeks' holiday a year—he's an exception—and work too hard. He says that he himself has worked 120-hour weeks at particularly frenetic times, which, clearly, left him no time to go to the Rockies, never mind Hawaii.

An industry that encourages people to break that cycle, even for one day a week, and to go and feel the cold and wet of the ice and the fresh mountain air in their faces, is good. But he adds that there is no answer to the question of how we do this without causing lasting harm to the environment.

The ARC'teryx approach is to try to lessen the damage by making products that will last ten years, with designs that are "stylish, yet timeless" so that people will still be able to wear the clothes a decade after buying them. If colours go out of fashion, there's no need to throw garments away; their owners can wear them at home, or even out in the mountains where they are supposed to be worn. This brings us back to the unsquareable circle.

Harmful substances

"No one has an answer," Mr Jackson insists. "All there is out there is a lot of greenwash. All that stuff about melting down old shoes and making them into running tracks — have you any idea what that material, under ultraviolet radiation from the sun, is doing to air quality? It's a great story, but that's all it is. They would have done less harm to the environment if they had just buried the old shoes in the ground the way they used to."

Nike has been running a programme to help communities around the world fund new basketball and tennis courts, new football fields, running tracks and playgrounds using recycled material from sports shoes. The programme, NikeGO, will continue until 2009. The company believes this is a positive element of its environmental strategy. Mr Jackson begs to differ.

He continues: "I don't care what anybody says. What we all produce in this industry, every brand, is harmful in itself. The amount of energy and water you need to produce recycled fabric is much greater than for new material. And for us, those who encourage people to go into the mountains, it's true—it's the same as inviting them to go there and cause some harm."

One of the points he makes is that if there is less snow—as Mark Held points out—operators use snow-cannons to be able to keep people skiing. There have to be consequences though, Mr Jackson insists, because "it's not just water in those machines, but a load of chemicals too". There have been reports from the Alps this summer that some farmers found, on taking

their cattle back onto the mountain pastures to graze after the winter sports season, that the meadows had died.

Ironically, though, Daniel Jackson believes the chemicals industry holds the key to a solution. "Chemicals [hydrocarbons and so on] got us into this, and I believe the same industry will get us out of it," he says. "I know some brilliant young people who have gone into chemistry in recent years and I have high hopes that they will find a solution to climate change."

Toxic sites

Echoing the 'Toyland' idea, Fabien Cousteau—who is carrying on the natural history and environmental work his grandfather, Jacques, pioneered in the second half of the last century—says that looking around outdoor exhibitions makes him feel like a child in a candy shop.

An important part of his work is to document changes that have taken place in the vulnerable places he visits, comparing data on water-levels and wildlife with previous expeditions' findings, so he has spent large chunks of this year in the Amazon region and in the Canadian Arctic – watch out for coverage on the National Geographic channel next year.

He sees parallels between growing numbers of people going into the ice and mountains and eco-tourism initiatives in much hotter places, such as the Amazon. "People coming into the forest and spending money with local communities there are certainly helping to save the way of life," he says. "But they consume more food while they're there and burn more fuel to get there in the first place. Nothing is black and white, including the environmental problem."

He talks of quotas, and carefully planning which areas of a delicate environment people should be allowed access to, counterbalancing this with "alternative economic uses".

Some argue that the tourist season in the Arctic is so short that the impact must be minimal, but other factors are affecting the situation there. "I know from talking to Inuit people that their cold season is getting shorter and this is changing the migration pattern of some of the animals they depend on," Mr Cousteau says, "including polar bears, seals and belugas."

Perhaps the saddest thing of all he has to report from his Arctic adventures is that toxicity levels in the Gulf of St Lawrence are so high now that whales are unable to reproduce. "It's become so bad," he explains, "that if a whale dies now, it's considered a toxic clean-up site, and the men in special suits have to come in to dispose of the body. All the toxicity is caused by humanity. This is the kind of thing that keeps me awake at night."

He concludes that tourists should be able to continue to visit places that interest them, but that we must all learn to have a lower impact on the environment than we are having at the moment.

Same for all

Talk of quotas makes you wonder about restricting access to the slopes. If you gave everyone a book of tokens, giving them ten attempts at coming down the mountain, would it be fair? Would Marc Girardelli receive the same number of tokens as someone who was really only there for the beer, and who was trying skiing for the first time?

You could equate this to golf, giving players a limit of one round a week, the same for Tiger Woods as for a 25-handicapper, or someone who only plays on Tuesdays in August. Some observers say the market must decide. If you have enough money, you can pay higher prices to get to the mountains if the no-frills flights come to a halt, and onto the slopes if winter sports become, again, the preserve of the mega-wealthy.

In recent economic history, this has always been the way things have gone. However, a reaction to the plight of the planet on the part of the public, governments and industry means that history is changing before our eyes. Perhaps nothing will ever be the same again.

Confessions of a skier

There is something self-indulgent about this sport. I look around myself on the mountain and think, 'These people are all amateurs; none of them should be here. I'm the only serious skier here, the only one who deserves to be on this mountain.'

I can't help but think it would be paradise if only these other people weren't here.

WSA Reader, name withheld

