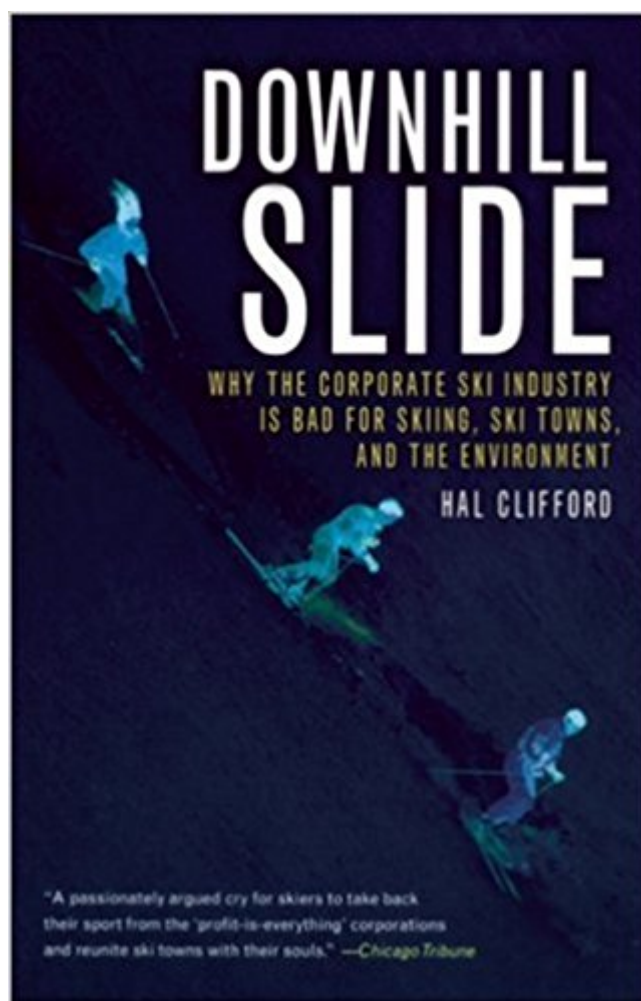


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Downhill Slide: Why The Corporate Ski Industry Is Bad For Skiing, Ski Towns, And The Environment



Synopsis

In this impassioned expose, lifelong skier Hal Clifford reveals how publicly traded corporations gained control of America'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 Street'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 America's alpine communities.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"[This] book should be mandatory reading."--Los Angeles Times -- Review

Hal Clifford is the author of *The Falling Season: Inside the Life and Death Drama of Aspen's Mountain Rescue Team*, winner of the Colorado Council for the Arts Prize for Best Non-Fiction, and *Highroad Guide to the Colorado Mountains*. His work has appeared in the *New York Times Magazine*, *Business Week*, *National Geographic Adventure*, *Outside*, and *Orion*. A former editor of the *Aspen Daily News* and *Ski Magazine*, Clifford currently serves as Executive Director of

Mountainfilm in Telluride, Colorado.

This book never gets old. As we watch the resort industry circle the drain EXACTLY as predicted in Downhill Slide, it makes you wonder how we could all be so stupid. A few get very, very rich at the cost of thousands of people left with nothing and an environmental disaster where taxpayers pick up the tab. This book is about the ski industry but could easily have predicted the inevitable downfall of Enron or Goldman Sachs.

Downhill Slide will almost certainly play well among class warriors, ski town kvetches and the Chicken Little faction of the environmental movement. But if you're looking for objective analysis and honest debate over real issues, look elsewhere. Hal Clifford questions almost every statement made by senior industry managers (backing many with snide comments), but treats pronouncements made by industry opponents - including some based on patently false assumptions - as gospel. In Clifford's world, ski resort managers are highly biased, but environmentalists, EPA staffers and disgruntled former ski resort and Forest Service employees are objective beyond question. This simply isn't the case. An honest assessment of the issues related to ski development would examine the motives and views of those opposed to mountain development as diligently as it does those who favor it. Clifford assails, correctly, the piecemeal approach by which some ski areas obscured their growth plans during the permitting process. But he places all of the blame on resort operators and totally ignores the no-growth movement's direct responsibility for the creation of that tactic: subversion and abuse of regulatory and public comment processes. These abuses, which result in a staggeringly expensive and indeterminate permitting process, are well documented; it's no wonder that resorts attempted to keep their public and financial exposure small. He also ignores the fact that a growing number of progressive resorts now conduct their planning and permitting processes openly and invite environmental groups to participate. An objective book would at least acknowledge these efforts and give fair assessment of the questionable tactics used by some industry opponents. Instead, Downhill Slide assumes that resorts and related real estate developments are uniformly creeping environmental disasters overrunning the mountains (in fact, skiing's footprint on the land is tiny; a fraction of one percent of the public lands in the mountain states are impacted by ski development). Clifford especially despises the concept of the modern ski resort village, which can be viewed as a response to the environmentally irresponsible sprawl that occurred around the base of ski areas decades ago. The new villages concentrate visitors on a small footprint, leaving more open land. So why isn't this a good thing? In Clifford's view, it's

because they're built for transient guests, rather than providing a year-round haven for ski bums and colorful oddballs, and because developers can make money building them. Clifford is correct in noting that some resort communities have essentially become second-home vacation retreats so expensive that resort workers can't afford to live there. Clearly, the industry could be more diligent in providing housing for staff. But resorts already do better job housing low-income workers than do most non-ski communities. Nor is anyone is forced to work (or live) in one. The book's biggest stretch is the suggestion that social ills such as racism, alcoholism and domestic abuse in some areas of the Rockies are the fault of (and, by extension, the responsibility of) the ski industry. The argument is fallacious - both post hoc ergo propter hoc and as a splendid example of affirming the consequent. Clifford even implies that ski resorts are responsible for the presence of illegal aliens (apparently, that responsibility falls to Vail, not the INS)- but cites not one case in which a ski resort ever recruited or hired an illegal alien, even by oversight. Finally, Downhill Slide advances the premise that three companies, which between them represent about 30 percent of the US market - have driven the sport into a death spiral making the sport accessible only to the super-rich. This is utter nonsense. 30 percent of market share, split three ways, can't possibly control an entire industry. Besides, skiing has always been an expensive sport, and relative to disposable income - especially considering the ticket deals out there currently - skiing is actually more affordable to more people today than it was 50 years ago. That the sport hasn't grown (Clifford repeatedly hammers on that point) has far less to do with price than it does with demographics, weather conditions over the past decade, competing recreation options and inept marketing. Stripped to its essence, Downhill Slide is a plea - backed by fallacies of logic, appeals to pity, false dilemmas and half-baked environmental and social concerns - for things to be the way they used to be. Clifford openly states that he misses ski town life of old. Fair enough. But humans cannot freeze themselves in one moment in time. Such a freeze is what Clifford desires - and advocates - in holding up a handful of niche resorts in unique market situations as the model for how ski resorts should be run. That many ski areas which once operated in similar ways have gone out of business isn't mentioned. Nor is the fact that skiers and snowboarders vote with their wallets. Most clearly prefer the experience provided by larger resorts. Clifford's prescription would kill skiing, not save it. He's welcome to patronize the niche resorts - indeed, they'd no doubt love his business. But to suggest their model is the only acceptable approach to skiing is arrogant beyond belief. So is Downhill Slide.

Good read if you live in a mountain town.

If you want to know what happened to your local ski area and the scourge of corporate ownership. Read it and weep!

There are two elements to Clifford's book. Foremost is his "deep environmentalist" screed. Other reviewers have accurately described the flaws in this thesis: Clifford is a ski-town leftist who really wishes that the rest of us would just go away. It is impossible for the reader to avoid his anti-free market rantings, they crawl through the chapters like head lice. I think Clifford has adequately struck a nerve, however, on his second theme: the homogenization of skiing. Many of us have stood on a slope in Vail, or Whistler, or Sun Valley and wondered where we are. I think Clifford is on to something about how this is the real reason that skier visits are flat and skiing is very different on the mountain than it is in the brochure. Surely, his prescription would make the disease worse. But, the geniuses who manage skiing in America had better fix the problem of the disney-ification of skiing. Their stagnant markets show it's a problem, and their investors will demand it.

I enjoyed reading this book. One individual has given it the same rating of one star three different times, bringing down the overall score by more than one reviewer should. Not fair to Mr. Clifford and his efforts, should fix this. I do understand why people in the industry might wish to discredit Mr. Clifford's book, though. I do not feel this book is "deep environmentalism" as suggested by some other reviewers. I think Clifford's discussion of impacts, on minimum streamflows and wildlife habitat for example, are relevant within the context of current environmental concerns, policy, and law. I suspect readers who feel this is "deep environmentalism" might find any obstruction to enterprise on behalf of fish and wildlife to be unacceptable. I also find the social aspects discussed to be relevant to the residents of these communities and the labor force which supports the industry. I think anyone interested in resort skiing, real estate, and development in general can read Mr. Clifford's book and find themselves informed and entertained. That is, unless the thought of elk herds and trout getting in the way of development of recreational properties annoys you. I found it to be well researched, well edited, and yes, opinionated. All in all, informative and easy read.

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