

Travellers order green to go

ski hills play global-warming catchup by purchasing eco-friendly snow guns that will pay for themselves in about three years. Tourism as a whole is going after environmentally aware clients

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Ski magazines may show piles of powder, but many skiers and resort owners are seeing shorter, slushier seasons thanks to warmer weather. As global warming threatens to turn snow into an endangered species, ski hills and hotels are investing in environmentally friendly ways to satisfy their energy needs.

Their actions are doing more than curbing greenhouse gases; they're cutting costs, too.

Christine Tremblay, environmental project manager at Mont Tremblant Resort, is whittling down the mountain's energy consumption by purchasing low-energy snow guns. The resort replaced 200 snow guns this year and several hundred more in previous years. It will eventually replace each of the 950 snow guns that provide padding to the mountain's snow pack.

"We have almost no more old snow guns; it's much more efficient," Tremblay says. A hill's investment in snowmaking energy can be 10 per cent of its total operating costs, according to Ski Area Management magazine. Although the new technology is more costly, the payback is about 3 1/2 years.

A University of Waterloo study of Ontario ski areas found that as the ski season shortens and snowmaking intensifies over the next 50 years, ski hills that switch to better technology would cut their losses.

Tremblant's summit and base lodges also underwent major renovations to reduce energy loss and water consumption, and many of the slopes have been altered to change the depth of snow they need to lay down.

"Last year, we counted almost 3 million gallons of water saved, just by changing the level of the slope," Tremblay says.

Peter Williams, director of the Centre for Tourism Policy and Research at Simon Fraser University, says that sustainable tourism is taking hold across the travel industry. Unlike barebones, no-impact ecotourism pioneered by small companies in the 1990s,



CREDIT: GORDON BECK, THE GAZETTE

Ian Pople (left) and Stephan Becker at the Biodome. They run Beautiful Oceans, an eco-friendly tourism business that teaches people about the coral reef.

sustainable tourism is being put into practice by large hotel chains and industry organizations.

"Sustainable tourism is not about no impact, but about reducing ecological and economic losses to areas, and it occurs at a much different scale," he says. Big hotel chains and other travel companies can influence other businesses upstream and downstream of them, like meat packaging or recycling companies.

Industry associations like the National Ski Areas Association, the Hotel Association of Canada and Green Globes are introducing smart power and waste recycling programs, ecologically sensitive planning and social responsibility.

Tony Pollard, president of the Hotel Association of Canada, recently launched the Green Key Program, a graduated rating system that ranks hotels' environmental performance. The Delta Montreal is one of four hotels in Quebec that have earned four (out of five) green keys for their environmental efforts.

Pollard anticipates 800 to 1,000 hotels participating in the Green Key Program by the end of the year.

"At the end of the day, I want to have all of them on-board," he says. The HAC represents 6,680 hotels, motels and resorts in Canada. "Hotels realized very quickly that the Green Key Program was not only beneficial in terms of cost savings, but there are benefits because people want to stay at a green hotel."

A recent survey found that 60 per cent of Canadians prefer green accommodation and 43 million Americans consider themselves as ecologically concerned.

"That is a consumer base that we want," says Michelle White, manager of Environmental Affairs at Fairmont Hotels and Resorts.

This year, checking into the Queen Elizabeth Hotel was a breeze - the hotel's front-desk computers are powered by wind. During 2006, Fairmont, which operates the Queen Elizabeth, bought Eco-Logo certified wind power through the Pembina Institute for the 249 check-in computers across North America.

White plans to repeat the investment in 2007. Individual Fairmont properties have invested in lighting retrofits, installed energy-efficient thermostats and purchased green power to reduce their energy consumption and greenhouse gas emissions.

But there's a business case for adopting a sustainable philosophy. Their actions aren't just cutting greenhouse gases, but costs as well. Fairmont's properties in British Columbia have saved more than \$700,000 in electricity since 1999, earning the company the 2005 Energy and Environment Award from the Hotel Association of Canada.

"We're on the leading edge of a movement that is going to become stronger," Williams says. "Marketing directors are aware that they have to become more corporately responsible."

Next week: Pharma firms clean up their act.

Beautiful oceans teaches and supports conservation

When Stephan Becker and Ian Popple started Beautiful Oceans, a company that produces coral reef biology courses and sells them to the ecotourism market, they decided to invest a portion of their revenues into protecting the natural resource they relied on.

"If I'm offering a product that teaches people about the coral reef ecosystem, then some of the revenue should go back

to the very resource they are exploring," Becker says.

The pair joined 1% for the Planet, a Massachusetts-based not-for-profit organization that requires members to donate one per cent of their revenues (or 10 per cent of their profits, whichever is greater) to environmental and conservation organizations.

They chose Coral Cay Conservation, an organization that has invested in conservation activities to protect threatened coral reefs and tropical forests. Beautiful Oceans also invests in the local Caribbean communities they work in to preserve coral reefs, which are threatened by global warming, fishing, coastal development and pollution.

"It can be hard for a company to communicate its commitment to the environment," says Terry Kellogg, executive director for 1% for the Planet. "We have a recognizable logo that says it all."

Karim Haggar and Anthony Chamy, founders of Ecotours, a young Montreal-based travel company that develops itineraries for clients through careful consultation instead of selling pre-made packages, have opted for a different measure of sustainability.

They carefully choose their destinations and group leaders so that their clients form a connection with the communities and cultures they visit.

More than half the cost of the trip goes

directly to the service providers in the local areas, Haggar says.

"The clients get to develop a relationship with the local population," Chamy says.

"They have more than just an album of beautiful pictures, but they have really spent time and lived with Egyptians or Peruvians or those from Madagascar."

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