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Alpine skiing has been a popular activity since the 1950s. However, global warming leads to milder weather, melting glaciers, and reduced snowfall which deteriorates possibilities to skiing. The purpose of this paper is to sketch a contemporary history of alpine skiing and environmental awareness in Sweden through the narratives of ten alpine skiers. A temporal and spatial perspective contributes to make changes over time and meaning of places visible. The skiers share a fixed narrative: nature as central for skiing. This is not unproblematic since nature has been more adapted and modified and resulted in a crowded landscape. Nature is a space to be preserved but also as a space to enable skiing. In this constructed landscape, over time snowmaking is reconstructed to being normal, albeit not natural. A way to handle these changes is to care more for nature, travel less, ski more local, and show environmental awareness.

Keywords: Alpine skiing, constructed landscape, environment, oral history

How much are we going to construct alpine skiing with lifts, carbon gas emissions, cars, and all . . . . I mean, to get access to skiing?¹

In this paper, alpine skiing and its relation to nature and the environment are presented through the living memories of Swedish skiers, covering the contemporary period from the 1960s to the 2020s. Undoubtedly, the modification of the landscape has had an immense impact on the environment. In skiing, as in other sports and outdoor activities, increased participation impacts the environment and climate through the consumption of natural and nonrenewable resources (e.g., for

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the production of gear and clothes and the construction of facilities) and the production of greenhouse gas emissions (e.g., through travel to the location of the activity). In particular, the expansion and renovation of ski destination infrastructure and facilities—such as accommodations, restaurants, services, lifts, and snow cannon systems—is a comprehensive undertaking that is negatively affecting the environment and the climate.

The relationship between nature, skiing, and human beings is not new, but it has changed during the past two centuries. Besides being a means of transportation and aid for hunting in a snow- and ice-covered landscape, the development of skiing was also driven by military interests and ski troops have played an important role in for instance World War II. Today skiing is mostly perceived as a sport and leisure activity with strong connections to tourism and recreation.

The development of alpine skiing (skiing down a hill or mountainside) into a modern leisure activity in Europe started slow but grew steadily during the 1800s in the European Alps as a complement to summer tourism. To adapt to the conditions of nature, the construction of lifts and hotels provided skiers with an easier and more comfortable access to the mountains. This was an important development for the mountain regions, enabling them to make a living out of tourism, which is still an important industry for many regions. The development of skiing created a strong demand for ski instructors, who influenced the diffusion of skiing when traveling between different ski resorts. Thus, during the early decades of the 1900s, the Alps were transformed from a pristine mountain area into a site for modern ideas of leisure. After World War II, the transformation and development proceeded in expanding technical infrastructure and further development of ski schools.

This type of meeting between humans and the mountain was just as much an attempt at being part of nature as it was a human endeavor to conquer the mountain. Landscapes designated for skiing have been increasingly adapted to fit the contemporary needs of skiing as a sport and an activity. For instance, the alpine skiing infrastructure of a dense lift network has modified mountains and villages from untouched nature to the constructed sites for skiing we meet today. This included facilitating transportation to the ski resorts and accommodation. Another development of significance is snow production and adapting to artificial snow. Snowmaking has since the second half of the past century helped ski resorts to keep open, especially in marginal winter climates. When studying landscapes as sites for contemporary outdoor sports, researchers mention the difficulty to talk about them as “natural,” “original,” or “authentic” in comparison to “constructed” and “artificial,” some being more natural but still constructed and vice versa. Indoor skiing facilities, which are artificial landscapes, have increased in numbers. Regardless of the extent to which landscapes for outdoors sports are constructed, the purpose is to create controllable, more predictable, and reliable conditions.

In general, stakeholders in the sports industry are aware that they have a negative impact on the environment. Ski tourists may be aware that their actions and behavior may negatively impact nature and the environment, but this awareness does not necessarily translate into pro-environmental behavior regarding gear, clothes, or transportation. Research on skiers and boarders shows that environmental consciousness did not translate into pro-environmental behavior...
regarding traveling to winter sports destinations.\textsuperscript{16} In addition, although skiers like their destinations, they might change resorts or ski less often if snow conditions deteriorate or if a resort needs to reduce its season.\textsuperscript{17}

Despite being a prosperous and expanding activity in mountain areas all over the world, skiing can also be described as a threatened activity.\textsuperscript{18} While the ski industry has modified the landscape of prosperous ski destinations over time, global warming now affects the ski industry. Alpine skiing is reliant on cold temperatures and snow. Warmer temperatures have led to a decline in natural snow cover in the Alpine countries, North America, Australia, New Zealand, and more recently Sweden and Norway.\textsuperscript{19} Glaciers in Europe have been melting and declining in size because of climate changes. As a result, Austrian workers at glacier ski resorts claim that their existence is literally melting away.\textsuperscript{20} Common adaptation strategies are snowmaking, postponing season dates, and closing ski destinations. These changing conditions have a direct effect on those who work in the skiing industry, such as instructors and coaches, and those who have adopted skiing as a lifestyle. Their experience of skiing, nature, and environmental impact would provide an inside perspective on the daily practice of skiing—meeting all kinds of weather and snow types, facing challenges and opportunities on skis, and working and skiing in a mountain landscape. Therefore, ski instructors, coaches, and lifestyle skiers’ perceptions and experiences of the changing conditions of alpine skiing are worth exploring.

This study aims to sketch a contemporary history of alpine skiing and explore skiers’ environmental awareness in Sweden through the narrative of ten alpine skiers. Since these skiers have lived and worked in different ski areas for thirty to sixty years, a spatial and temporal perspective can make visible the meaning of places and changes over time. Thus, the study applies such a perspective when exploring the skiers’ experiences and perceptions.

**Alpine Skiing in Sweden**

Most of the ski areas in Sweden are in the mountain range in the northern, western, and central parts of the country. Swedish mountains have lower altitude than the Alps. Snowfields beyond the groomed slopes are often big and open, with windswept mountain birches and pine trees. These snowfields are only skiable with enough natural snow cover (see Figure 1). Sweden also has many smaller skiable hills, spread out from north to south. They often lie close to a community or town and operate a couple of lifts and slopes, providing recreation for residents and regional guests.

Swedish ski tourism was initiated around the 1900s, it had a slower start compared with the Alps until the 1950s but has seen a prosperous expansion since then.\textsuperscript{21} The small farmer village of Åre in the midwestern mountains built its first major hotel in 1895 to host summer tourists. The first ski lift, Åre funicular, was built in 1910, and a surface lift was added in 1939. Today Åre is an established ski destination with a well-known world cup arena for alpine skiing.\textsuperscript{22} The most northern ski resort, Riksgränsen, established Sweden’s first ski school in 1934 in collaboration with Swedish ski pioneers who studied “modern” downhill skiing in St. Anton, Austria. The first lift was inaugurated in 1952.\textsuperscript{23} Åre and Riksgränsen
Figure 1 — On the way to the top of Sadeln in Åre, Sweden. March 2023. Private photography.
remain among the popular ski destinations in Sweden for local and international skiers. Meanwhile, one example of a local ski hill is Yxbacken, close to the city of Norrköping (Figure 2). Norrköping’s ski association had their inaugural meeting in 1895. Today, the ski association owns and manages Yxbacken’s three lifts and four slopes. Several bigger ski destinations, smaller ski resorts, and local hills in the country share a similar history.

The Swedish ski industry grew significantly between 1980 and 2000, with an increase in Swedish skiers from 22% to 34%, an increase of 800,000 individuals. Today, about two million skiers and snowboarders annually visit the Swedish ski destinations and local hills. According to the Swedish Ski Area Industry Association, there is a continued interest for skiing and outdoor recreation in Sweden; the industry report stated that the season 2022/2023 was second best on record.

In 2007, a study on the effects of climate change on Swedish alpine skiing stated that the past decade was wetter and warmer than the preceding thirty years. It predicted losses for the ski industry that exceed the ski-ticket sales. The proposed solution was that ski resorts should develop adaptation strategies as soon as possible, such as year-round tourist activities. More recent research shows that this trend has continued. Adaptation strategies include both increasing snowmaking and creating more activities for summer tourism, such as mountain biking and hiking. In 2013, Swedish tourism developers argued that they did not differentiate between the effects of climate changes and weather variations, such as warmer winters or lack of snow. A study from 2022 shows a higher concern and awareness of climate change’s effect on the industry. In the quest for snow, snowmaking is the most utilized option. Sweden is not as affected as the Alps; on the contrary, the Swedish ski industry has managed climate changes rather well.

The Swedish Ski Areas Industry Association’s work with environmental sustainability is not new. Since 2019, they have had a plan with measurable objectives and goals. For instance, resorts have reduced diesel fuel in grooming machines and instead use biofuel and electricity. Moreover, many resorts use electric snowmobiles, and they operate ski lifts and snowmaking systems with renewable energy by up to 90%.

**Narrative of Ten Skiers**

This study is inspired by oral history and narrative inquiry to collect alpine skiers’ in-depth knowledge and perspectives on skiing, nature, and environmental awareness. In oral history, the researcher and the participant have a collaborative relationship and both parties are integral in the process of generating data. Ten participants were interviewed, and the interviews cover an extensive part of the participants’ lives. They have been skiing since they were children, starting between the age of three and seven, and they all work or have worked as ski instructors or coaches. All participants were active alpine skiers in the winter of 2022/2023. At the time, five worked as ski instructors in ski schools or educators for ski instructors, and three worked as ski coaches. Some of them also worked within the organization of their ski resort. Moreover, all ten participants perceive skiing as a lifestyle and are presented in a brief biographical sketch summarizing the skiing background. The names of the skiers and ski resorts are replaced with...
Figure 2 — Yxbacken, a local hill outside the city of Norrköping. Photographer: Carl Rydberg.
pseudonyms to protect their privacy. Martin, sixty years at the time of the interview, has been a ski instructor since the early 1980s. Today, he educates ski instructors at a bigger ski destination. Anna, forty-one, has been a ski instructor and ski coach since 2000. She is sports director at a ski resort. In addition, she is involved in Snowsport Sweden (the national ski instructors’ team, developing and representing the Swedish ski school) and involved in the Swedish ski instructor’s exam (a comprehensive exam for ski instructors who has passed four educational levels. It consists of theoretical, practical, and pedagogical tests, certifying ski instructors at the national and international level). Henrik, fifty, has been a ski instructor since the early 1990s. He is the CEO of a ski resort and involved in Snowsport Sweden. Sara, forty-seven, has been an alpine ski coach for thirty years, and coaches in a club located at a bigger ski destination. Sofia, forty-five, worked as ski instructor for two years, then she has sporadically worked as an instructor. Further, she is active on all kinds of skis, several weeks per season, and owns a chalet in the Swedish mountains. Richard, fifty-five, has been a ski instructor since 1988. He educates ski instructors at a bigger ski destination and is responsible for educations in one of the national ski instructor associations. Joanna, sixty-five, was a ski instructor for ten years during the 1980s and 1990s. Today, she is an active skier, skiing five to seven weeks/season. Tobias, forty-seven, has been a ski instructor since 2000. He is head of a ski school and responsible for summer activities at a bigger ski destination. Tom, forty-four, is a ski instructor and ski coach since 1999. He is a ski coach in a local ski club and works every now and then as a ski instructor. Jack, forty-one, has been a ski instructor since 2000. Today, he is coach and chairman in the local ski club, and participates in operating the local hill. Seven of the skiers participating in the study are certified international ski instructors. All interviews were conducted digitally on Zoom or Teams, recorded, and transcribed verbatim by the author. The interviews ranged between fifty-five and ninety minutes.

In this study, I treat the interviews as stories about the skiers, relaying the events that have affected their choice of profession, of places to live and work, and of recreational activities. In addition, I link the individual stories to each other. Using oral history, I get first-hand valuable knowledge of experiences over an extensive period including past and recent events. I also gain “community” experiential knowledge, since the participants are members of a defined group: alpine skiers. I explore these stories because of their subjectivity; namely, they show reality as it is experienced by the individual and reveal temporal and spatial meanings for the individual. Also inspired by narrative inquiries, which “point characters along with a plot connecting events that unfold sequentially over time and in space to provide an overarching explanation or consequence,” I want to investigate the meaning of experiences and perceptions constructed through the participants’ narratives. We live in and through time and space, and a narrative is a way of organizing both temporal and spatial experiences.

The selection of the period 1964–2023 is motivated by several relevant facts. All participants talked of memories of their childhood skiing and these experiences are therefore included in the study. Joanna started skiing in 1964, and Martin in 1966. The expansion of alpine skiing in Sweden was promoted during the 1970s because it fostered development in mountain regions, and many lifts were built in the 1980s and 1990s; it is within this developmental period that the ten skiers
started skiing and started as instructors or coaches. Moreover, it was during the late 1960s and early 1970s that environmental issues were put on political agendas. In 1972, Stockholm hosted the first United Nations (UN) Conference on the Human Environment, bringing together politicians, researchers, and environmental activists. Further, important UN Earth Summits have been held during the studied period: in the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, the Commission on Sustainable Development was created, and Agenda 21 was adopted. In the 2015 summit, the Agenda 2030 for sustainable development was adopted.

Of importance to mention is my relation to the studied subject. I have been skiing since 1983. I started working as a ski instructor in the Swedish mountains at the age of nineteen, and I got internationally certified in 2004. Thereafter, I also worked in ski instructor education until 2009. I have not worked with skiing since then, but I still ski and identify strongly as a skier. This background has aided me in recruiting participants for this study. Eight participants were recruited from my former network of instructors, and two participants were suggested by others. In narrative inquiry, having a shared preunderstanding is not a disadvantage; instead, bias is embraced and acknowledged. This type of bias contributes to an authentic reaction and interaction with the participants because we share, to some extent, a co-constructed knowledge of any given inquiry. A feature of oral history is that the researcher and the participant are co-creators in the knowledge-building process. Therefore, I perceive my relation to the participating skiers and my understanding of the ski industry as positive, and I believe it adds value to the interpretation of the skiers’ narrative. Nonetheless, I am careful of not being blinded by familiarity.

The participants’ descriptions of skiing as a profession and lifestyle form the foundation for understanding their approach to skiing, nature, and environmental awareness. A collective narrative based on the ten separate stories took form instead of several narratives. My interpretation is that the similarity in the skiers’ stories signals something important in relation to temporal and spatial changes and continuity. Some of these skiers know each other, but most do not. The collective narrative uncovered in this study shows that they are part of a community that shares ideas, assumptions, and future visions. Therefore, the collective narrative is the lead narrative which is nuanced with the participants’ individual thoughts.

The following presentation is divided into sections based on the recurring themes of nature, the constructed landscape, and snow. These themes are closely connected, but they are discussed separately here to highlight not only temporal and spatial aspects of each but also their relation to environmental awareness.

### The Connection With Nature

Skiing is a way of being outdoors, intrinsically linked to nature, and the skiers’ appreciation of nature as a meaningful outdoor space to ski in is evident. Anna says that skiing is her job and lifestyle, that she lives with and by nature, and that she always has: “I mostly spend my days off in nature or on skis depending on time of the year.” The participants expressed that they ski or work with skiing because they enjoy the experience and want to share it with others. This positive experience is encapsulated by the importance of the context—nature—which relates to being
in a specific outdoor landscape. They all have long experiences of carrying out activities on the mountain and know its possibilities and hazards. Particularly the mountains seem to be an important place for the participants, and they all have lived or still live in the mountains. “The mountain is a free zone, where I can disconnect from daily issues and stress. Just breathe. It is a different bodily feeling!” Sofia’s description of the mountain demonstrates a connectedness to nature that all the participants express in similar ways.

The participants describe skiing in the mountains as vast, open, sometimes dangerous, and highly affected by weather and wind. It provides a feeling of freedom and being small in nature: “To me, the mountain is about big views, rough weather, and being small in all this big vastness.” This quote could just as well be dated 1892 or 1922. Accounts of skiing during the 1900s contain descriptions similar to those recurrent in the stories of the skiers in this study, such as an unforgiving landscape of austere beauty and a vast and timeless landscape. Furthermore, the participants emphasize the locality of nature, but all ski areas are not located in the mountains. Today, Jack lives in a southern region and spends much time on the local hill. He talks of the amazing possibility to ski this far south in the lowland forest landscape. Locality is meaningful in the sense of having nature and the possibility of skiing close to town, providing valuable recreation for its residents.

Vast mountainous nature and hills in lowland landscapes have been modified to create a skiing landscape with lifts, groomed slopes, and service facilities, such as restaurants, hotels, and chalets. Tobias, Martin, Henrik, Anna, and Sofia talk about how the untouched and open nature spaces have been altered as more people visit these areas. Ski tourist destinations have become dense and crowded places. The impact of the ski industry on nature has also altered the relationship between skiers and nature. Many of the participants seek less crowded areas to ski in, and more often ski outside the slopes. One example of this is touring, as can be seen in Figure 3.

Humans’ connection with nature is also threatening nature. Alpine skiing has scarred and put an unsustainable pressure on the mountain landscape. Nature has shifted from a landscape to revere and protect to a commodity to buy and develop. The big expansion of Swedish ski areas occurred during the 1980s and 1990s, and they have continued to expand after the turn of the century, with investments in lifts and snowmaking systems. This altering of nature into a skiing landscape is an undeniable part of the development of skiing, and understanding its impact on nature and the environment is of significance. Martin connects the crowdedness to environmental aspects: “We are no longer able to let it be just nature. The pressure is too high; we need to construct the prerequisites and create paths and trails, improve roads, and lead people.” While skiing has taken place in nature and put pressure on the environment, there is recognition from the ski industry to develop new management and commitment to co-exist with the environment.

The Constructed Skiing Landscape

The constructed nature of skiing landscapes is visible in the collective narrative and similar to that described above but expressed from a contemporary perspective. In their descriptions of nature and skiing, the participants use a temporal and spatial
Figure 3 — Touring in the vastness of Scandinavian mountains. Private photography.
synthesis of the natural and the constructed landscape. The participants spend much of their time skiing, kayaking, mountain-biking, running, and hiking all year round. These outdoor activities take place in various landscapes that are constructed to varying degrees: a hiking trail is most often constructed, but this does not necessarily mean that the construction disturbs nature or the experience. It is difficult to fully be in nature with no constructions at all. The participants talk about changes over time, but they also discuss their own behavioral shifts in relation to what type of skiing they want to carry out, where they want to ski, and whether they want to work or not when skiing. Martin describes these temporal and spatial shifts:

Then, outdoor recreation and alpine skiing was what nature offered. Now, we arrange nature in a totally different way to suit us, not that we should fit into nature! We see a reaction to this, [in the form of] people walking on touring skis and moving beyond the constructed sites; this part has increased. But this is also constructed . . . . You just construct another part.49

Martin explains that when the first surface lift was built in Åre 1939, village men welcomed this development. They stated it was nice that they no longer had to carry the upper-class ladies’ skis up the hill, indicating the need of an industry to serve the guests: villagers could operate the lift instead of being the lift. Further, Martin’s first ski school experiences in 1968 were on a hill without lift, where he had to walk up on skis with loose heels. Today, all new slopes are prepared with drainage ditches, water pipes, and power lines, and the vegetation is cut every year. These experiences illustrate the change from skiers being in nature to shaping nature for skiers.

The “constructed landscape” is an explicit subject in the narrative about the experiences of and the prerequisites for skiing. When the participants ski outside the constructed area, it is an attempt to be closer to nature. Untouched nature landscape without lifts or machine-made ski tracks often lies beyond the constructed ski areas. Such landscapes only have natural snow and simple facilities for overnight staying. Nonetheless, skiing still takes place in or close to a constructed landscape. As can be seen in Figure 4, skiing is done outside the groomed slope, which is accessible by traveling in the gondola lift and traversing for one minute.50

The boundary between the natural and the constructed is difficult to outline. The constructions do not have to be ruled out for skiers to be in nature. Joanna, who started skiing in the 1960s by hiking up a hill or stubbornly holding on to a rope lift, appreciates both the natural and the constructed. When she worked as a ski instructor during the 1980s and 1990, her ski resort Idre was surrounded by untouched mountain areas. To her, the constructed skiing landscape is perceived as in nature and close to untouched nature. Moreover, Martin states that it is not the skiing itself but its prerequisites that are constructed. Denning calls the development from hiking up the mountain to lift-assisted skiing in the early 1900s a “reconception of the natural environment.”51 Listening to the participants, the existence of these constructions does not imply that the contemporary image of the mountain is no longer that of big views, rough weather, and vastness or no longer that of an austere beauty. Lifts make skiing accessible, but they also make nature accessible. Contemporary alpine skiing for most skiers is constructed nature, and a ski resort’s location,
elevation, and skiable area are important geographical factors to attract skiers. However, artificial constructions impose on nature and can cause serious environmental problems such as landscape fragmentation, soil erosion, and pollution.52

The participants move between expressing a positive image of nature, the mountain, and the constructed landscape for skiing and making a quite critical reflection about it. The constructed landscape is made not just to make skiing accessible but to make skiing and staying at a ski resort easier. This reflection is related to tourism. For instance, chalets are built on the mountain side, following a ski-in ski-out concept. They provide a feeling of being close to nature, but they are equipped with facilities that ensure a comfortable vacation (e.g., Wi-Fi,
dishwasher, and washing machine), thereby creating a contradiction. From a critical standpoint, it seems that nature needs to be denaturalized: nature is needed for skiing to be skiing, but nature should not be too difficult to be in. While the feeling of being in nature is enhanced when staying in a chalet “in the slope,” the untouched and unconstructed nature is pushed further away.

The participants’ ambivalence toward the constructed landscape show tensions in the human–nature relationship. On the one hand, they think it is good that skiing is made accessible. It is important to get people on skis, create positive encounters with nature in a safe way, enable healthy activities, and share the enjoyment they themselves love about skiing. Tobias recurrently talks of his desire to keep skiing “a people’s sport.” In addition, the accessibility means that instructors have guests to instruct and new instructors to educate and that coaches can train more children and teenagers in alpine racing. On the other hand, the participants themselves and several in their social circles think that this constructed skiing context is being too much; it is not just about a never-ending adaptation of nature to fit the needs of skiers, it is an industry that harms nature and the environment. They support solutions to keep skiing, and preserve and protect nature at the same time. These thoughts are in line with Denning’s reasoning on the “reconception of the natural environment” and the development of skiing, namely that “nature is an ongoing debate about the relationship between human beings and the non-human environment.” Some of the participants reflected on environmental awareness, asking whether it is worth it to impose constructions on nature, make efforts to access water, and pay for energy in order to sell a lot of ski tickets. Should we only visit what is available and not build availability? Herein lies as a paradox, as constructing nature is a way to access skiing.

The Meaning of Snow

The participants mostly discuss environmental issues in relation to snow. Snow is a core feature of their experiences of skiing; it is the prerequisite for skiing and integral to the landscape in which skiing takes place and a part of the constructed skiing landscape. Snow is often called the “white gold,” providing year-round livelihood to the populations of mountain regions. The meaning of snow is nuanced through the participants’ temporal perspective in stories of passion, possibilities, and defeats. In these stories, snowmaking’s impact on the environment is also visible.

Since the turn of the century, there has been a significant change in the climate due to global warming. Joanna ponders on the snow conditions during her childhood in the 1960s compared with today:

When I was a child, when there was snow, then you skied. When there was ice, you ice skated. You just had to adapt. And natural snow is what we want the most. But considering there is not much snowfall today, not many slopes are skiable, so we need to go far north.

Sharing the same concern, Sofia and Sara remember that winters in the 1980s and 1990s were colder and had more snow. They could trust that winter would come, but now they do not know for sure. However, while natural snow is still
valued, the importance of produced snow is not downplayed. The participants perceive it as a reasonable development to sustain the ski industry, and all skiers have experienced and accepted the need for and the increase in snow cannons to complement the reduced snowfall. Produced snow does not only enable ski resorts to open despite reduced snowfall, but it may also extend the season because there is a more solid base of snow. Richard points out the differences he has noticed:

If we go back in time, to the 1970s and 1980s, and you came to Åre in week ten, it was not at all unusual to see large patches of soil in the slopes. And we do not have those at all today, not even in May.57

According to Richard and Martin, the possibility to produce snow has also led to expectations that ski resorts offer even slopes without patches, soil, and branches sticking up. As seen in Figure 5, the groomed slope invites the skier to a nice ride surrounded by nature, and snow—regardless of the way it is produced—has its place in nature.

Changes in weather conditions and snowfall are a recurrent experience told by the participants, and they devoted quite much time on this topic. There have “always” been warmer winters; nevertheless, they acknowledge global warming effects. Jack, Tom, and Tobias emphasize that the weather has changed roughly in the last decade. The preseason in November and December is more unstable than before. A decade ago, at Tom’s local hill, they were ready to produce snow by October and often did as it was cold enough by then. Jack and Tom, who spend a lot of time at their local hills, argue that they no longer wonder when snow is going to fall; instead, they wait for continual colder temperatures to produce snow and open the lift. Tobias, who lives in the mountains, says they no longer know what kind of winter it will be: when they can start snow production, when the natural snowfall will come, or how much produced and natural snow they will get. The season has moved forward by three to four weeks, and this is the new calendar to adhere to.

Richard claims that before the year 2000, the discussion was more about whether a ski resort would invest (more) in snow cannons or mostly keep trusting the natural snow to come, but this has changed; nowadays, having a base of produced snow is the status quo. This development also leads to a positive consequence: there might be more snow in the slopes over an entire season. Anna, who is responsible for a ski school and meets young staff at the ski area where she works, illustrates more recent changes:

The younger ski instructors today were not even born twenty years ago; they do not know there was not as much produced snow before. Today they know there is a lot of snow here and in bigger resorts like Åre. Resorts need produced snow as a base. Very few slopes have only natural snow.58

A recent study on future climate-change risks in the Swedish ski industry argues that snow production needs to increase even more to protect and prolong the ski season, especially in southern and central Sweden.59 The skiers in this study accept the change. Their perspective is summarized in this statement by Anna: “Everyone needs to secure their base cover; you need incredibly big amounts of natural snow to replace fifty centimeters of produced snow . . . . And unfortunately, we do not have that today.”60
Figure 5 — Groomed snow. The local hill Yxbacken. Photographer: Carl Rydberg.
The produced snow does not only provide a base layer that will secure the season but also adds to the construction of the skiing landscape. “Natural” snow is combined with “artificial” snow, making the snow cover more controllable and reliable. Produced snow may not be natural, but today it is the normal snow. Nevertheless, the participants uncover a tension in relation to this change in snow conditions. On the one hand, they had wished for more natural snow “as it was before” because it made the skiing more “natural” and to some extent more fun and challenging with an uneven base. On the other hand, a season from November–December to at least April is made possible with snowmaking for most bigger ski resorts from Sälen and northward. Producing snow is also a way to control snow conditions and make slopes more reliable. Clearing trees, rocks, and bumps in the ground became a prerequisite to creating an even slope a century ago, and even natural snow is groomed to create the best opportunities for skiing. Producing snow may thus be interpreted as an important way to sustain—and in that way further construct—the outdoor skiing landscape.

Produced snow has become expected and accepted; it is a way to secure the product (i.e., skiing), and economic interests collide with environmental concerns. Snowmaking also costs money, energy, and water. These elements are required in large amounts to secure a high-quality snowmaking system, which is problematic from an environmental sustainability perspective. Martin reflects on this:

I am not only happy about the snowmaking. It is good for me in the short run, to keep my job, but . . . . No, there is a concern . . . . And the snowmaking itself can be discussed . . . . I am worried in the long run.

In Sweden, smaller local hills such as Storstenshöjden in Örebro and Vallåsen in Scania have closed their skiing facilities permanently, particularly in the southern parts, where the ski season was already shorter due to normally warmer winter temperatures. The participants, who have followed this negative development, explain that it is not economically viable or justifiable to be prepared to produce snow when it gets cold without certain knowledge that the cold will be sufficient for the operator to cover the slopes. This scenario represents the imminent threat to many ski areas, not just those in the southern parts of Sweden. Many of the skiers claim that without an established and updated snowmaking system, several ski areas and local hills will not be able to open their gates to guests until January or even later in the season. A bleak future scenario involves the shutdown of more resorts.

Going With or Against Nature?

Of course, skiing is a luxury consumption. No one says we need to ski! We do not need to use energy to produce snow for the planet to survive. We need that insight . . . . Concurrently, we know that nobody feels well without recreation.

Henrik’s above reflection pinpoints a reasoning that runs through many of the interviews. Returning to the discussion on the constructed landscape and
environmental awareness, snowmaking shows that humans maintain an activity that goes against nature’s course. However, the ski industry provides an important source of income for ski areas and their permanent residents and seasonal workers. Many of the participants also express feelings of frustration, knowing they contribute to the negative impact on the environment, which in turn affects the possibility of skiing.

During the 1920s and 1930s, the development of skiing in the Alps was criticized because nature was modified and crowded. At the time, skiing itself was not threatened; instead, it developed and flourished. Today, skiing as an activity as we know it is threatened. During the interviews, the skiers talk about solutions for this issue. While some are worried about their profession and their own skiing within their generation’s lifespan, others’ concern is for the next generations. A radical but contested solution is to ski without resorting to snowmaking. Access to skiing would then be more unstable over the course of a season (skiing only when there is natural snow) and connected to place (slopes and areas where snow falls). It would be a “back to basics” strategy, a return to how things were some forty and fifty years ago and following the course of nature. Nature in resorts with only natural snow will potentially be even more affected by transportation to the resort, crowdedness, and the maintenance of service facilities.

Another solution mentioned is the use of indoor slopes. In the quest for snow, indoor slopes are perceived as optimal, especially for alpine ski racers who want to start preseason training as early as possible. The artificial indoor landscape with either plastic slopes or only produced snow, perfect temperature, and optimal conditions provides skiing. Henrik argues that indoor slopes will have an important role for skiing in the future. Artificial skiing in indoor facilities threatens the human–nature relationship, and an important part of the skiing experience is lost. Anna says,

I work with skiing because I love being outdoors in nature. To me, it feels wrong to ski in indoor slopes, but of course, if we get to a point where we need to decide, do I want to continue working with skiing? Maybe that is the way to go, but I am not pro that.

From a sustainability perspective, this option also has a negative impact on the environment—namely through building and operating the facility, which consume energy and water, and traveling to the facility.

A third solution proposed is to continue snowmaking but only if it is done in environmentally sustainable ways, with renewable energy sources and climate friendly water management. Better technology will result in a need for more economic resources. The participants believe that an already expensive activity will probably be even more expensive and exclusive, thereby contrasting with the goal of accessibility in terms of getting people on skis.

Continuity Over Time and Changed Spatial Meanings

During the 1920s and 1930s, the Alps had been “disfigured to suit the needs of lazy skiers and avaricious business interests,” and alpine skiing became increasingly artificial and alienated from nature. How are alpine skiing, nature, and the
environment experienced and explained by skiers a century later? The ten skiers in this study talk about comfortable skiers and business interests, but not in terms of being “lazy” or “avaricious.” Instead, they speak of a leisure activity made accessible over time by developing and expanding ski areas in nature to experience nature—a space that has changed immensely and continues to change.

This study aimed to sketch a contemporary history of alpine skiing and environmental awareness in Sweden through the narrative of ten alpine skiers. My point of departure was that the experiences and perceptions of these skiers have an active role in shaping a collective narrative that aligns with their own lives and the future of which they are co-creators of. They use temporal and spatial events to describe continuity and changes in the landscape in which they live, work, and pursue their lifestyle activity. This collective narrative describes the heritage of the ski industry’s development of technology of snowmaking, operating lifts, the construction of slopes, and the impact on nature and the environment.

The spatial aspect in this study relates to nature, snow, and the constructed skiing landscape. Regardless of where the participants have been skiing or ski today, they do not seem to make a difference between countries or ski destinations; the skiing landscape is local and global. The transnational impact is present in the participants’ stories. The appearance of the skiing landscape has shifted over time to be more constructed and adapted and increasingly puts pressure on nature and the environment. Thus, the compassion about skiing and appreciation of this space—that is also described in several historical sources—is today accompanied by ambiguous feelings such as guilt for impacting nature, doubt about expansion of ski resorts, and uncertainty about the future of skiing. The meaning of snow in the participants’ narrative is related to space. They rely on snow to make a living on skiing and to keep having skiing as their lifestyle. Natural snow is the optimal type if snow, but they cannot do without snowmaking technology because snow is a produced commodity. The skiers also talk of skiing being a product. The link between snow and specific outdoor places makes these places important. In addition, indoor skiing facilities are perceived as normalized sites for skiing. Thus, spatial experiences and opinions of skiing landscapes have shifted over time for these skiers. My interpretation is that their discussions on temperatures and snow to facilitate skiing have shifted from being part of a weather discussion to a discussion of climate change, humans’ impact on nature and the environment, and that this activity is threatened. This relatively new thought is a fact that skiers around the world need to deal with in their daily practice. It is of significance for the ski industry to work with environmental considerations, develop responsible tourism, and manage and put forth an ethical consumption. The participants in this study talk of proenvironmental strategies and solutions within their organizations and associations.

The skiing landscape is the participants’ space for work and leisure activities and can be compared with Nöbauer’s glacier landscape: “occupationscape.” The “occupationscape” is formed through histories of occupational behavior. Accordingly, the landscape for skiing can to some extent be referred to as a landscape of occupation because the modification of the landscape is shaped by the ski industry’s dependence on nature. In this study, the skiers’ collective narrative frames the skiing landscape as many parallel landscapes—where tourism, recreation, training, adventure, and competition can all take place in the same space. The
history of alpine skiing shows that economic incentives have driven the development into a modern leisure activity, but the economic perspective is not a very visible theme in the collective narrative in this study. Instead, the participants talk of how skiing is part of their lives and how they want to share the value of skiing with others. A central part of this narrative is the descriptions of nature as a space to be preserved but also as a space to enable skiing. Although the skiers are critical of the immense construction of the landscape in many ski destinations, they do not reject the need for a constructed site for skiing.

This study also explored the generational differences among the skiers. The collective narrative shows an unchanged temporal perspective among the skiers regardless of generation. They all share a critical reflection of skiing’s place in nature. The difference is that skiing has been more constructed the younger the skiers in this study are. Nevertheless, all skiers are in the same landscape today, experiencing the same innovations and technological developments. They are part of a community and share a common knowledge. Ski instructors and coaches’ expertise is transnational as skiing is a universal activity. The transfer of knowledge among ski instructors developed not only skiers’ skiing abilities, but also skiing as activity. This study shows that knowledge about nature and the environment related to skiing is part of today’s ski instructors and coaches’ competences, and the participants argue they should share this knowledge with guests and skiers. It is no longer only about the ability to move on the mountain and learn about the mountainous nature, today this knowledge needs to be added with awareness of humans’ impact on nature and the environment.

In sum, the altered nature of the skiing landscape is not only contested, but also loved, and cherished. The landscape is important to people who have skiing as a profession, a lifestyle, and a recreational activity. Ski instructors, coaches, and lifestyle skiers are active in nature for several weeks during winter. The nature connectedness and environmental awareness shown in this study should be preserved, developed, and shared with other skiers.

Notes

1. Interview with Martin, June 28, 2022, conducted digitally, notes in possession of author.
7. Denning, Skiing into Modernity, 156–159; Aneta Podkalicka and Philipp Strobl, “Skiing Transnational: Cultures, Practices, and Ideas on the Move,” in Leisure Cultures and the


10. Allen, The Culture and Sport of Skiing, 84–89; Denning, Skiing into Modernity, 5.


29. Rice, Cohen, Scott, and Steiger, 2815.


32. Leavy, 10.


36. Smith and Sparkes, 3.


40. Leavy, Oral History, 10.

41. Interview with Anna, September 22, 2022, conducted digitally, notes in possession of author.

42. Interview with Sofia, November 24, 2022, conducted digitally, notes in possession of author.

43. Interview with Sara, November 29, 2022, conducted digitally, notes in possession of author.

44. Allen, The Culture and Sport of Skiing, 4, 95–96; Denning, Skiing into Modernity, 22, 108.


47. Interview with Martin, June 28, 2022.

49. Interview with Martin, June 28, 2022.

50. Author’s memory of a ski ride in Argentiere, France, January 2014.


54. Denning, 5.


56. Interview with Joanna, December 6, 2022, conducted digitally, notes in possession of author.

57. Interview with Richard, November 30, 2022, conducted digitally, notes in possession of author.

58. Interview with Anna, September 22, 2022.


60. Interview with Anna, September 22, 2022.


63. Interview with Martin, June 28, 2022.


65. Interview with Henrik, October 4, 2022, conducted digitally, notes in possession of author.


68. Interview with Anna, September 22, 2022.


76. Nöbauer, 230.

