

Ski touring on ski slopes – Problem or opportunity?

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Introduction

Within the last few years, ski touring has become an increasingly common form of outdoor recreation. In this context a new trend has emerged: ski touring along ski slopes. In Austria and Germany, the increasing number of people ascending on ski slopes, even during night time, has resulted in conflicts between ski tourers on one side and the cable car enterprises and alpine skiers on the other side. Consequently, in some areas, especially around big cities, slopes have been closed for ski tourers and these conflicts have been frequently discussed in magazines and newspapers, including the following portrayals:

- “pist walkers”, especially at night, destroy the newly groomed pists,
- many “pist walkers” don’t obey the FIS rules and put the alpine skiers in jeopardy of collision risk,
- “pist walkers” use the infrastructure, such as toilets and parking lots, mostly without paying,
- after the closing of the cable car, the “pist walkers” risk their lives because of the grooming activities at night
- the complex liability situation, that differs in each Austrian province, leads to further misunderstandings.

Some ski resorts have already established management measures including rules, information strategies, establishment of designated ascending trails, ski tourers evenings, parking fees or bans.

So far the number and motivation of people ascending on ski slopes is largely unknown. This study examines this new trend through a survey of athletes and operators in two ski areas.

Methodological approach

In two Austrian ski resorts in close proximity to big cities, people ascending ski slopes were counted and given questionnaires. During days with perfect weather conditions up to 140 people were counted within 3 hours in the ski hut, during ski tourers evenings more than 200. The return of questionnaires was 86,9 percent.

Selected results

Overall the study shows that one segment of the ski tourers uses this activity to start alpine ski touring in unsecured open areas. There are many beginners (24 percent less than 2 years) as well as experienced athletes (24 percent more than 10 years). The majority of the people ascending on ski slopes are used to go backcountry skiing and most use ski slopes only if there are improper snow conditions elsewhere.

As figure 1 shows, “exercise” and “health” are the main motives for people ascending on ski slopes. The most important reasons for using pists compared to the alpine terrain are “no avalanche danger” and “appropriate conditions”.

Especially women, who are a minority among the “pist walkers” (27 Percent) and newcomers appreciate the safe conditions on ski slopes.

Similar to indoor climbers, who favour rock climbing (Hindinger und Pröbstl 2011) almost all the “pist walkers” don’t stay on ski slopes but already go, or want to go to the alpine terrain.

The results of this study suggest that the ski tourers are not very aware of wilderness areas (Sterl et al., Rupf et al. 2011) and many of them have already experienced hazardous situations (17 percent in the alpine terrain, 2 percent on ski slopes). Therefore further information and training for this group of athletes is required by the alpine clubs.

The study also shows that management measures could reduce conflicts between downhill skiers on the slope and ascending athletes. Furthermore management actions may contribute to increasing the willingness to pay for certain services such as parking lots along with changing the acceptance of the “pist walkers”.

Through appropriate management actions, this new group of recreationists can be attracted by a challenging and safe new experience offering.

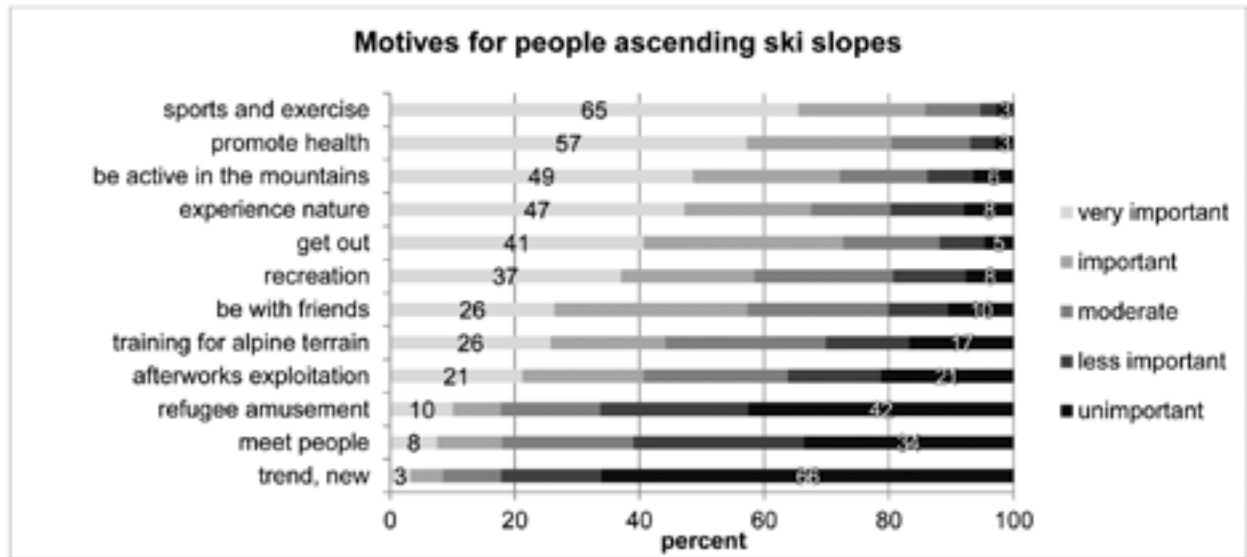


Figure 1. Motives of people ascending ski slopes (n= 508)

Hindinger, F., Pröbstl, U. (2011): More ecological damage due to boom of indoorclimbing? Results of an interview in climbing halls in Vienna. *Naturschutz und Landschaftsplanung* 2011.
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Sterl, P., Eder, R., Arnberger, A. (2010): Exploring factors influencing the attitude of ski tourers towards the ski touring management measures of the Gesäuse National Park. *Eco mont* 2 (1). S. 31–35.