

The challenge of sustainable ski area management: the New Zealand club fields model between experience and sense of place

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Abstract

Purpose of the paper: *This study explores how a small ski area in New Zealand is experienced and managed. Small ski areas around the world are facing the challenges of sustainability and climate change. The ski area in question is not only economically, socially and environmentally sustainable, but also seems to meet the growing demand for authenticity and immersive experiences. The findings have interesting implications for dealing with competition and climate change that are also potentially useful for major ski-resorts.*

Methodology: *Field research was conducted during the 2019 NZ winter season, by means of face-to-face interviews (15) with managers, employees and skiers and through a questionnaire (258) which collected the perceptions of skiers in order to better understand the day-to-day reality of the object of the case study.*

Findings: *The results reveal some distinguishing features of a club field in New Zealand and present considerations for how it might be usefully adopted in certain European mountain areas.*

Research limitations: *The study is based on a single case study and although the ski field under investigation (in the Selwyn region of New Zealand) is an important destination, the limitations of having one only case study need to be considered.*

Practical implications: *The study enriches the on-going academic discussion on boutique destinations and community-based models and highlights strategic and managerial aspects that could be useful to destination and ski area managers.*

Originality of the paper: *As yet, there is no literature on club fields, and no European ski area has adopted this model. The study, moreover, introduces a micro-segmentation analysis.*

Key words: club fields; ski area management; boutique destinations; sustainability; sense of place

1. Introduction

Ski resorts resemble business organisations, battling for competitive advantage and open to the application of strategic management theories (Flagestad and Hope, 2001). These resorts are dedicated to winter sports and, while presenting different degrees of specialisation, all face stagnant markets and new challenges linked to climate change, on the one hand, and growing sensitivity towards the impact of mass skiing on both natural and social environments, on the resident community, on the other hand. The

present study is part of the academic debate on the strategic-managerial choices that tourism destinations can make when they recognise and combine the dimensions of competitiveness and sustainability (Crouch and Ritchie, 2000); moreover, it aims to fill the gap in this debate with regard to small ski areas. It may be positioned among the studies dedicated to boutique destinations and their relationship with sustainability (Booth and Cullen, 2001; Franch *et al.*, 2005; Clydesdale, 2007; Callaghan and Colton, 2008; Škori, 2010; Casagrande Bacchiocchi *et al.*, 2019). Small ski areas and ski fields are considered to suffer most from the lack of snow caused by climate change and usually are supported by a weak economic-financial buffer. They risk entering a dangerous spiral of decline, which would reduce people's opportunities to practise winter sports, especially in relation to low-cost and/or local options. In the Alps, this decline may result in the depopulation of marginal mountain areas due to the disappearance of an important element of some mountain economies (Bätzing *et al.*, 1996).

Although small ski areas are the first to suffer the impact of climate change, they can also offer innovative ideas for rethinking winter leisure in more sustainable ways. The main objective of the study is to understand the different forms of value of winter leisure and how these can be developed in a small ski area with a management model which, while (usually) weaker in terms of capitalisation, is more flexible and can break more easily. Skiing and its impact in terms of sustainability is the focus of the analysis, which draws inspiration from the community model (Murphy, 1985; Flagestad and Hope, 2001; Murphy and Murphy, 2004; Beritelli *et al.*, 2007; Beritelli *et al.*, 2016) and examines the value of the experience of skiing (as well as other related recreational activities) in terms that are not strictly economic, but rather investigate what a ski area can transfer to the surrounding region according to a concept defined as 'sense of place' in the literature. The study considers the case of New Zealand club fields as emblematic examples of small ski areas that have been able to leverage authenticity and experientiality as competitive and distinctive factors in their offers.

The research was conducted in the Broken River ski area in New Zealand during the 2019 winter season. Through both content and thematic analyses of the interviews, key themes related to the ski area management were identified (a sense of community and belonging; participation; traditions; environmental awareness). A questionnaire was carried out to capture the skiers' responses regarding the factors that attracted them to the area and the emotional dimension. The results highlight the resilience of the New Zealand model and offer interesting and original ideas that other small ski areas could consider when addressing contemporary criticalities and that involve adopting radically different strategies compared to those shaping the typical large ski resort offer.

The paper is divided into four sections. It first describes the main challenges that ski resorts are currently facing (over-tourism and climate change, in particular). It explores the theme of 'a sense of place' and 'experientiality' as strategic elements in a unique selling proposition for small ski areas that distinguishes them from large resorts. In the last sections, after outlining the structure of the field research, our findings are presented, thus highlighting the key elements of the NZ club fields

model that could be implemented by small ski areas in other mountain destinations.

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2. Theoretical background

2.1 *Ski resorts' strategic responses to the challenges posed by sustainability and climate change*

The ski sector business model not only considers how production can be aligned with demand in terms of technology, but also takes into account geographical and ecological constraints and climatic and meteorological trends which determine whether or not the essential conditions for skiing, such as temperature and snow cover, can be guaranteed (Clydesdale, 2007). Indeed, the competitive success of a resort derives from maintaining a complex balance between management strategies, technology, and the specific environmental conditions in which the resort's services are provided (Pröbstl-Haider *et al.*, 2019) With regard to this last factor, one of the main challenges for ski resorts is climate change. Numerous studies have shown that the ski season is becoming more and more uncertain with each year that passes, and that the whole ski industry is vulnerable to imminent crisis (Unbehaun *et al.*, 2008; Scott *et al.*, 2008; Rutty *et al.*, 2015 and 2017). As the freezing level rises, natural snow cover decreases and the ski seasons shorten. Possible response strategies to climate change have been identified (Bicknell and McManus, 2006), including new snow technologies, but the issue remains critical. As a response to climate change, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has introduced the important concepts of mitigation and adaptation (McCarthy, 2001, pp. 85-95), which should be rapidly integrated into the medium/long-term strategies of ski resorts and their surrounding regions.

A second critical factor affecting some ski areas is overtourism. An exponential increase in tourists in concentrated periods of time results in congestion for tourists, residents and the ecosystem, and can slide into uncontrolled tourism, exceeding the carrying capacity of the area (Goodwin, 2017; Peeters *et al.*, 2018; Dodds and Butler, 2019). Even the most successful ski areas often suffer from overtourism, with thresholds of ecological sustainability being exceeded, leading to negative impacts on the area (Weiss *et al.*, 1998). This situation entails not only environmental costs (traffic congestion, uncontrolled waste generation, consumption of particularly fragile natural resources), but also various social inconveniences, as residents have to put up with frustrating conditions such as increased tourist flows at certain (often sensitive) times of the year (e.g., during the Christmas holidays). Excessive tourist numbers have been shown to impact a community's social fabric and subsequent loss of local traditions and customs. Tourists, too, have a negative experience, characterised by high prices and overcrowding, which limits both the enjoyment of skiing and, more generally, the fun and relaxation associated with a holiday (Tung and Ritchie, 2011). The context described so far concerns ski resorts in general: the geo-morphological and dimensional

features of each place naturally entail considerable differences between them, depending on whether they are big commercial resorts, located in areas with high tourist intensity, or small neighbourhood ski areas, with limited capacity. The latter are more likely to be located at altitudes where natural snow cover cannot be guaranteed now. Major resorts with high capital and turnover volumes are lengthening their ski seasons (or even becoming year-round resorts), because they are located in places with high tourist densities (Martini *et al.*, 2019). Some large resorts, however, have committed to implementing destination management and marketing strategies that are shifting away from pro-growth models towards more sustainable ones (Gill and Williams, 1994). Small ski areas facing similar challenges are in a very different situation and have profoundly different strategic, organisational and financial structures (Flagestad and Hope, 2001; Martini *et al.*, 2019). It would thus seem unwise, and maybe also impossible, for them to try to compete with large ski resorts in terms of products/markets.

The basic hypothesis of this study is that, by developing different dimensions than those focused on by the larger resorts, small ski areas can find distinctive, innovative ways to deliver leisure experiences. Rather than pursuing a model that would inevitably put them at a competitive disadvantage -while also undermining the environmental and social sustainability of the offer itself- we argue that the strategic development path of small ski areas should be based on two key elements:

- the development of a sense of place, which can be achieved through the active involvement of residents;
- the experiential nature of the offer, which can be significantly enhanced by providing services that require little infrastructure but have high symbolic and intangible value.

2.2 From sense of place to experientiality through the involvement of tourists and residents: opportunities for smaller ski resorts

In tourism, the importance of the resident community is well established based on the awareness that when residents perceive tourism as a benefit, they treat visitors in a kind and friendly manner, thus increasing tourist satisfaction, and hence positive word of mouth about the destination (Oviedo-Garcia *et al.*, 2008; Presenza *et al.*, 2013). It is not, however, easy to coordinate residents' involvement in tourism activities, since their opinions about, and interests in, tourism naturally differ: the challenge is to draw diverse ideas, opinions and behaviours together into an overall shared vision. Public sector intervention has an important strategic role to play here, starting with information/education initiatives targeting all local actors (Simmons, 1994). Such initiatives would enhance community awareness and the capacity to support planned, organised tourism and a more equitable distribution of power among local actors that would facilitate the destination's economic development (Wondirad and Ewnetu, 2019).

In small ski areas, the involvement of local stakeholders and residents facilitates the creation of a sense of place, a tridimensional concept

involving the physical setting of, and human interactions within, a place, and the social and psychological processes that link people to it (Relph, 1997). A sense of place is born when people relate to each other and to their natural surroundings within a particular geographical space (Eisenhauer *et al.*, 2000), i.e. from a connection that develops between nature, culture, traditions and relationships, so that the characteristics of certain landscapes can become the basis of feelings of attachment and satisfaction. Sense of place transcends social constructions and, as pointed out by Stedman (2003), the physical environment can contribute to the creation of profound place-related meaning. A sense of place connotes a 'special place' that is considered particularly valuable for an individual (Eisenhauer *et al.*, 2000) but also necessarily incorporates human activity, in terms of presence and action, and the atmosphere, social context and ties that are created with the local community. Thus, each community, on the basis of its culture and the historical elements that characterise it, determines the meaning of (its particular) place through a process of co-creation (Campelo *et al.*, 2014).

This co-creation can occur when local communities, service producers and consumers/tourists all participate in its collaborative process. Many tourists wish to be actively involved in the experience production process (Prebensen *et al.*, 2013; Prebensen and Xie, 2017), thereby helping to generate added value for the service itself (McLeay *et al.*, 2019). The literature includes research on the affective responses that tourists generate during co-production processes in the service sector (Pencarelli and Forlani, 2018), and the link between the perceived quality of a service and the direct participation of tourists in the process of producing the experience in question (Gallan *et al.*, 2013; Pencarelli, 2016). When an individual is asked to co-create an experience (particularly an adventurous one), that experience will more likely generate special memories that contribute to the individual's sense of having enjoyed a unique experience (Tung and Ritchie, 2011; Shaw *et al.*, 2011). People who take an active part in the creation of a product value that product more highly: indeed, "the time and effort consumers put in is directly proportional to their willingness to buy and pay a higher price" (Lala and Chakraborty, 2015; Busser and Shulga, 2018 p. 70).

In snow tourism, skiers co-create their own experiences through a range of activities (skiing, dining on the slopes, socialising with other guests, sharing photos online, recounting episodes from their day) (Kreziak and Frochot, 2011). Skiers also seek the opportunity to relax, reminisce, escape their daily routines, improve their skiing skills and experience adrenaline-fueled emotions (Hall *et al.*, 2017). McLeay *et al.* (2019), in a study on the co-creation of ski chalet experiences, highlighted five relevant elements:

- Socialisation: enjoyment of conviviality in the chalet. The chalet "community" is key, in that it allows guests to socialise and share their days' experiences; staff must also be able to participate in this co-creation;
- Pseudo-authentic infrastructure: the "ideal mountain village" context is considered to be pseudo-authentic, because the perceived naturalness of the landscape clashes with the artificiality of the facilities and services offered;

- Hedonistic skiing: search for, and opportunity to find, enjoyment both on and off (après-ski) the slopes. When hedonistic experience is shared/co-created, skiers are more inclined to socialize with each other;
- Location/place: physical location of the chalet and its atmosphere (vibe);
- Enhanced skier communities, both on and offline: sharing of information through word of mouth, but also on social media (McLeay *et al.*, 2019).

Tourism thus becomes an activity with strong symbolic and experiential content; tourists perceive themselves to have “escaped” - one of the main motives for travel - when they feel that they have distanced themselves from their daily routines (Oh *et al.*, 2007). In a study of the factors that elicit experiences during a holiday, with specific reference to tourism in natural settings, Farber and Hall (2007) identified four types of stimuli (landscapes, recreational activities, wildlife and social interaction), which combine to generate emotional responses in tourists and create high quality recreational experiences. By focusing on these four stimuli, small ski areas could implement supply strategies that were likely to prove effective at attracting specific consumer segments.

3. Case study and research design

3.1 *Small ski areas in New Zealand: key features of the club fields*

New Zealand is famous worldwide as a skiing destination. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, its resorts were frequented between June and October by tourists from not only New Zealand and Australia, but also the northern hemisphere. New Zealand offers skiing opportunities in wide open spaces, with slopes that suit a diverse range of technical abilities and preferences. Both the North and South Islands provide ski areas with modern ski lifts that are similar to European/North American resorts. Of particular interest to us, however, are the country’s small ski areas - called club fields - which have continued to operate - and flourish - using an old-fashioned lifting-system. They are located mainly in the Selwyn district, which is known for its magnificent mountains (a section of the Southern Alps) and impressive rivers. Selwyn lies between 100-120 km north-west of Christchurch and it is a favourite destination for skiers who put adventure before comfort: the ski lifts are rudimentary and the slopes ungroomed. The New Zealand club fields are almost a hundred years old, having been established between the late 1920s and early 1950s. They are a testament to the passion and commitment of different groups of young people with a love of snow and fun, camaraderie and adventure, who realised their dream of creating small ski fields. A club field is a non-profit organisation run by a group of members who invest time and money in the field so that they can have a familiar place to ski. The club fields have only recently opened to non-members, who can now spend quiet days or holidays in the snow. They are often difficult to reach, located on unpaved mountain roads or even accessible only on foot (shouldering one’s equipment), or by cable car.

There are six club fields in the Selwyn District (Porters, Cheeseman, Broken River, Craigieburn Valley, Temple Basin and Mt Olympus), with the city of Christchurch as their hub. The Mt Hutt Ski Area, a much larger and more modern ski area with new facilities and groomed slopes, is also nearby. Although their organisation and management structures are similar, the six club fields differ in terms of terrain and membership, with the latter leading to occasional ‘parochial’ animosities. Most offer neither groomed slopes nor artificial snow, and are therefore always dependent on natural snowfall. Table 1 summarises the main characteristics of the club fields in the Selwyn District.

The rope tow, which dates back to the 1940s, is a typical feature of New Zealand club fields. Nothing has changed in the last 80 years, except at Porters and Cheeseman, where a small chairlift, treadmills (magic-carpet) and a T-bar have been installed. In the other club fields, the old rope tow system is still in place. It consists of a metal rope positioned at hip-height: the skier holds on to this rope and hooks the harness to a metal clamp (nutcracker) so he or she can be towed to the top. Unsurprisingly, skiers are often alarmed by this challenging lift system. It has, however, been in operation for more than eighty years and is well suited to the region’s geography and climate (a remote area, sometimes without electricity, and exposed to the New Zealand wind, the main cause of enforced closures of ski areas with aerial lifts). The environmental impact of the rope tows, which use little energy, is also very limited: in the past they were driven by tractor engines, but now they are usually connected to an electric generator.

Tab. 1: Club Fields in the Selwyn District

	Km to Christchurch airport	Ski-Lift	Top elevation	Bottom elevation	Skiable terrain	Type of Access
Porters	83,8 km	1 chairlift, 3 T-bars, 1x poma-lift, 1x magic-carpet	1980 m	1320 m	285 ha	Short access road, 2WD snow chains
Cheeseman	105 km	2x T-bars, 1x drag-lift, 1x rope tow	1860 m	1540 m	50 ha	2WD with snow chains
Broken River	106 km	5x rope tow	1820 m	1425 m	175 ha	2WD with snow chains + 30 minute walk (mountain tram)
Craigieburn Valley	107 km	3x rope tow	1811 m	1310 m	290 ha	2WD with snow chains
Temple Basin	146 km	3x rope tow	1923 m	1493 m	380 ha	45-60 minute walk (cableway for goods)
Mt Olympus	135 km	4x rope tow	1880 m	1430 m	60 ha	4WD with snow chains

Source: authors’ elaboration based on Selwyn District website (<https://www.christchurchnz.com/explore/seasonal-guides/winter/ski-selwyn>)

3.2 The case study: Broken River Club Field

The Broken River ski field was created by a group of young people in the 1950s. The timber that was cut to make way for the new access road was used to build the huts near the ski lift. The first ski mountaineering trip to Broken River took place in 1951, and the first rope tow was built shortly

afterwards. All the work was carried out voluntarily by the club members. Today, Broken River has 400 members, four huts, five rope tows and a funicular system (the “Broken River mountain tram”) which was initially used for freight transport and was only tested for passenger transport in 2009. A decisive change occurred in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when the power source for the lifts shifted from diesel to the electricity.

The Broken River members see themselves as a large family that meets when possible to ski and spend time together. Many of the members are the children or grandchildren of the founding members carrying on the latter’s traditions and keeping their passion alight. The concept of a ski day here is very different to that in a large commercial resort. The atmosphere is extremely tranquil, there are no queues outside the ticket office, people can cook their own lunch either in the kitchen or a barbecue area provided for guests of the highest hut called “daily lodge” by club members and, at the end of the day, guests spend time together before and after dinner playing cards or chatting. Guests are also required to help the lodge staff by washing dishes, taking out the rubbish or shovelling snow (there are no snowploughs).

The Broken River club field was chosen for this study because it has distinctive structural and cultural characteristics and it is different from large ski resorts. It accepts volunteers, so it was possible for the researchers to join the staff for the winter season. This meant that it was possible to create a favourable situation for the study, including the opportunity to closely observe certain social phenomena and the “club life”.

3.3 Framework and phases of the fieldwork: survey instruments and analysis techniques

This research project follows a case study approach, consisting of an empirical in-depth investigation and analysis (Gillham, 2000). As suggested in Yin (2006), the case study adopts both qualitative and quantitative methods to explore a real-life context. The qualitative one enabled the authors to understand how managers, club members and active fellows of the ski association are forging a very unique experience in a boutique destination. It also reveals how visitors perceive, and sometimes help create, this same experience. The quantitative method allowed the authors to analyse what has been explored subjectively. Interaction with privileged stakeholders and interviews with local skiers enabled the authors to identify key features of the ski area from both a supply and a demand perspective. The division of the research into two phases, the in-depth interviews and the delivery of the questionnaire, allowed for an iterative and incremental approach, as outlined in Eisenhardt (1989).

The overarching objective of this study is to understand the value of winter leisure, and how this has developed in a small ski area managed by an association. The focus is on the value (above and beyond the economic one) of skiing and other winter leisure activities, which was explored by analysing tourists’ experiences and how they transfer (non-monetary) value to the surrounding region through the concept of a “sense of place”. In July and August 2019, 15 in-depth personal interviews were conducted

and 258 questionnaires collected in Broken River, the ski area chosen for the case study.

The first research phase consisted of semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted in person on site. Although expensive in terms of preparation, analysis and interpretation, this instrument is considered the most suitable for exploratory studies (Gillham, 2005, pp. 70-71). The target participants were the ski area's managers and workers, as well as its skiers. In drawing up the interview guide, the six steps proposed by Ritchie and Lewis (2003) were followed: invitation, introduction, start of the interview, during the interview, end of the interview, after the interview (Ritchie and Lewis (2003, p.144-147). The interview guide included an initial presentation, with the aim of introducing the interviewee to the project, followed by the actual interview in which the key questions were asked. This was followed by an open part included to collect any spontaneous input from the respondents. The final phase covered specific dimensions of the study and involved questions asked of all the participants. Specific questions were later added to the first interview guide to explore some themes that had emerged during the first set of interviews and enrich the data on motivations, information and conceptualisations (Gillham, 2000). The interviewer also adopted the role of a facilitator to put the interviewees at ease and elicit statements regarding feelings and experiences (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003, pp. 147-148). A total of fifteen face-to-face interviews were collected during the 2019 winter season, five of which involved staff and members with strategic roles within the association. The interviews lasted between twenty-five and fifty-five minutes.

The qualitative analysis of the data from the in-depth personal interviews was first subjected to *content analysis* with a subsequent phase closer to *thematic analysis* (Vaismorandi *et al.*, 2013): the first coding phase was followed by the *content analysis*, which resulted in a set of codes that were then used to interpret the data and served in the next phase, in which a *thematic analysis* identified the key themes to answer the research question. The data from the interviews were classified according to their relevance to each of the main research questions. In addition, implicit meanings were identified in the interview transcripts to ensure that all points in the authentic narratives were linked.

The second phase of the research employed questionnaires with both open and closed questions (multiple and dichotomous choice). The closed questions were used to obtain specific information within a short time frame and the open-ended questions were used to collect qualitative comments and insights. The latter proved very effective given the particular nature of data collection in a mountain hut, since the participants had time to reflect on their opinions before filling out the paper questionnaire. The questionnaire contained seven sections, each covering a different focus of the investigation (determinant factors for choosing a ski destination, ski spirit, club field characteristics, environmental and natural aspects, sport and events, the club field's future prospects, demographic information). Some of the participants were chosen on the basis of their knowledge of the club (long-term members or those with a strategic role in the association's board, the area's managers), others as representatives of the (non-member)

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skiers who were guests at the lodge. A total of 258 questionnaires were collected. The average time required to answer the questionnaire (including the open-ended questions) was about twenty minutes.

The data analysis was based on frequency analysis and some descriptive statistical measures. A Likert scale with values from 1 to 5 was adopted to measure the importance attributed by skiers to attractiveness/desirability factors. Elements with a mean of more than 4 were considered high values and elements with a standard deviation of less than 1 were considered stable values. The results are presented in the following section.

4. Findings

4.1 Results of the qualitative analysis

Through data processing using content and thematic analyses, the following themes related to skiing in the Broken River club field were identified: a sense of community and belonging, participation in club life, traditions and praxis, and environmental awareness.

The first theme, a sense of community and belonging, includes three different categories which were identified during the data interpretation process:

- *the Social aspect*: interviewees expressed a strong sense of belonging to a community; skiers not only have the opportunity to enjoy skiing, but also to build friendships that enhance this activity. Broken River's particular characteristics contribute to the experience but the main benefit, for both skiers and the club itself, is the strong community that supports the club field. Some interviewees said that the main attraction for them was being able to go up to the lodge and simply meet friends or new people. The opportunity to make friends during the ski day was perceived by the respondents as "automatic and spontaneous at Broken River".
- *Sense of place*: strongly linked, in this context, to the sense of community. Even skiers who are not members of the association come to feel that they are part of something bigger and, at the end of a day's skiing, they feel a sense of fulfilment that comes not only from the skiing itself, but also from the affiliative "atmosphere they have breathed". "It doesn't take a long stay to feel like part of the community", "it only takes a day to feel at home here in Broken River". This sense of place is also experienced by people in relation to the natural physical characteristics of Broken River, and this is unusual in the context of winter leisure, where ski lifts often compromise the perception of a natural mountain environment.
- *Kind of experience*: the concept of being "unique of its kind", clearly sums up what skiers perceive at Broken River and what the experience of skiing there represents to them. Despite initial difficulties with the rope tow, in the end it is considered "fun", but above all "a great relational tool" as skiers "help each other", so - as a unique lift system - it becomes an "interesting topic" of conversation and discussion throughout the

day. The Broken River experience was perceived positively in a variety of ways, as a series of unusual features help to build relationships, including “the possibility to access the kitchen”, “preparing your own food”, “dinner time together” when staff and customers all share the same tables, and then cleaning up and washing the dishes together. Skiing in a club field is like “escaping to another place” and immersing yourself in a “different dimension”.

- The second theme that emerged is *participation*. This was extrapolated from the following three categories:
- *Volunteer dedication*: all Broken River members are fully dedicated to volunteering, which they see as intrinsic to their community/membership. Club members participate in “working bee” initiatives to maintain the lodges and the rope tows and also feel like protagonists in the delivery of skiers’ experiences. Broken River seeks to involve people in the club’s activities from an early age, which means that knowledge and skills are passed down from generation to generation. All of the interviewed members reported “a sense of responsibility” and “personal involvement” in several activities in the ski area. During the winter season, the researcher’s observations confirmed volunteers’ commitment to a wide range of both maintenance and management tasks.
- *Co-creation*: both members and guest-skiers take an active part in the daily life of the ski areas. Through simple chores and daily duty rotas in which they are directly involved, they all “take part in Broken River life”. This “Broken River way of doing things” is perceived by the skiers as a “fun” and “useful” way to build relationships with other people in the ski area. They feel as “protagonists of the time spent in the lodge and in the mountains during the holiday”. In this “ecosystem”, the staff, who possess knowledge and technical skills, play an important role in structuring the co-creation of certain activities.
- *Activities and events*: activities and events organised by Broken River are perceived as important by both members and non-members. In some cases, guest-skiers became aware of Broken River’s existence because of a particular event. One of the site’s special features is that it offers “fun activities beyond skiing” to foster a “family-friendly atmosphere”.

The theme of *traditions and praxis* unites the three categories of: clubbies’ heritage, skier characteristics, and club field wishes.

The importance of the cultural heritage of the club fields (clubbies’ heritage) was perceived as particularly strong by the respondents, to the extent that some of them said that one of their main wishes was the maintenance of the “clubbies’ status quo”. It is clear that the features for which Broken River is famous, such as “low crowding”, “short waiting times for the lift”, a “friendly environment”, and the “clubbies’ vibe”, would be lost if tourist numbers increased. Skiers go to Broken River because they know what they will find, and what they find is exactly what they want. The club field traditions are strongly supported by the generations who have been managing and frequenting the fields over the years. The respondents said that this cultural approach provided an experience which cannot be had in other ski resorts, because the “old way of skiing has remained

here". Interviewees expressed the importance of Broken River's heritage, which has its roots partly in the physical characteristics of the ski area (its rope tow and nutcracker lift system and basic amenities, the considerable physical effort required to reach the ski area), and is partly the creation of the people who have passed on their passion for skiing in the club fields from generation to generation. This pattern means that the people frequenting Broken River share similar characteristics and attitudes and are in tune with the place.

Finally, the theme of *environmental awareness* emerged very clearly from the interviews. The interviewees' impression of club fields is that they are small associations that adopt simple practices in order to minimise their environmental impact and encourage their guest-skiers to follow suit. Respondents explicitly referred to the low consumption of energy involved in skiing at Broken River; to the waste management system; to the focus on being as green as possible in order to minimise energy and resource consumption. A number of interviewees spoke in some detail about the impact of climate change on the club fields, thus questioning their survival in the future.

4.2 Results of the quantitative analysis

Analysis of the 258 questionnaires administered to Broken River skiers identified both the factors of attractiveness and the facilities (i.e. physical-technical and services) that make them choose this area and the the words that describe the emotions associated with the experience. Broken River skiers mainly come from the South Island (57.7%), followed by Australia (16.3%) and the North Island (14.3%). Only a residual proportion comes from North America, Canada, Europe and Asia. The majority of respondents come to ski (67%), while none of the other activities - snowboarding, ski touring, telemark skiing - are very popular (although a week of the season is completely dedicated to a telemark festival). The respondents were almost all quite experienced: 84.8% had been skiing/snowboarding for more than five years, 11.3% for three to five years, and 3.1% for one to two years; only 1 person said to have been skiing for less than a year. Interestingly, only 28.6% of respondents were club members.

The first part of the questionnaire asked the participants to indicate, on a scale from 1 (*not important*) to 5 (*very important*), how relevant the listed elements were to their choice of ski destination. Table 2 illustrates the results obtained from the responses, ordering the factors according to their mean score; the picture that emerges is of intermediate and advanced skiers who particularly value the factors that score above the mean threshold (3.5).

Table 3 shows the services that are available at the station, ordered according to the importance attributed to them. Respondents appear to be very sensitive to the customer service aspects, in particular those regarding interaction with the staff, while children's entertainment, the availability of equipment for hire, and WIFI or cell-phone coverage are of no particular interest. The order of importance, shown in Table 3, is in sharp contrast to the results of a survey conducted in a larger ski resort: in fact, the factors considered least important here were all at the top of that list.

Tab. 2: Importance of physical-technical characteristics when choosing a place to ski (scale 1 - 5) (n = 258)

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Physical-technical characteristics of the ski area	Mean	SD	N
Off-piste skiing	4.29	0.987	256
Acceptable level of crowding at ski areas	3.97	1.151	256
Snow condition, quality of slopes	3.89	1.169	255
Acceptable lift line waits	3.81	1.206	255
Number of mountain tracks	3.53	1.061	257
Sufficient no. of difficult slopes	3.45	1.377	256
Skiing hours	3.42	1.238	257
Maintenance of lift services	3.42	1.273	255
Vertical drop	3.32	1.131	256
Many ungroomed slopes	3.27	1.414	256
Height of the mountain (elevation)	3.11	1.164	256
Quality of lifts	3.08	1.206	255
Sufficient no. of easy slopes	2.25	1.293	255
Snow-making	2.09	1.174	257
Many groomed slopes	2.09	1.171	255
Special ski facilities (snow park, prepared jumps)	1.95	1.070	257

Source: authors' elaboration on the survey

Tab. 3: Importance of services when choosing to ski at Broken River (scale 1 - 5) (n = 258)

Services in the ski area	Mean	SD	N
Courtesy of employees	4.00	1.004	257
Competence of employees	3.84	1.139	254
Availability of toilets	3.46	1.174	256
Quality of food at the lodge	3.39	1.125	256
Possibility of on-mountain accommodation	3.36	1.191	257
Ski area facilities (catered services)	2.91	1.139	256
Quality of available lessons	2.42	1.363	255
Organized transport to the ski area	2.18	1.214	257
Availability of WI-FI	2.14	1.290	256
3G - 4G coverage	2.13	1.206	256
Quality of guided services	2.12	1.183	257
Day care / children's entertainment	1.68	1.124	257
Equipment for hire	1.54	0.957	256

Source: authors' elaboration on the survey

With regard to the ski area's physical environment, respondents considered (Landscape, uncontaminated environment) (4.31) to be a very important factor. Indeed, the data clearly shows the particular importance accorded to environmental factors. In relation to the economic aspects of the ski area, the ticket price is of medium importance (3.44), while resort advertising received the lowest rating (2.01). In the social/entertainment dimension, the type of people who visit the area was the highest rated factor (4.06), while the lowest was the option of extra activities (1.92).

The questionnaire also asked respondents to describe, using nouns or adjectives, a perfect day in the mountains. Tab. 4 contains the list, with the most commonly chosen words at the top. Tab. 5 shows the words that the respondents used to describe their first impressions of the club field.

Tab. 4: Adjectives/nouns used to describe a “perfect day” (count) (n = 258)

Words	Count	%
Powder	126	48.84
Bluebird day	65	25.19
Friends	19	7.36
Good snow	17	6.59
Uncrowded	8	3.10
Relaxed	3	1.16
Backcountry	1	0.39
Other words	19	7.36

Source: authors' elaboration on the survey

Tab. 5: adjectives/nouns used to describe first impressions of the club fields (count) (n = 258)

Words	Count	%
Good vibe/atmosphere	87	33.72
Friendly	37	14.34
Unique	15	5.81
Fun	8	3.10
Hard work	8	3.10
Challenging terrain	7	2.71
Relaxed	7	2.71
Family	6	2.33
Hard rope tow	5	1.94
Rustic	5	1.94
Good snow	4	1.55
Small club	4	1.55
Remote	3	1.16
Uncrowded	3	1.16
Other words	59	22.87

Source: authors' elaboration on the survey

5. Discussion of the results

The results obtained from the interviews show that skiers who choose to go to club fields are looking for a certain type of holiday, are aware of the differences between the fields and a ski resort, and opt for club fields precisely because of their particular characteristics. The feature that was most frequently mentioned by the respondents is the rope tow, considered “the ski lift par excellence” in Broken River: even people who were initially intimidated by it declared themselves satisfied and amused at the end of the day. Rope tows can only be found at club fields and nutcrackers have

come to symbolise these small New Zealand ski areas. The second element demonstrated to have had a decisive impact on people's opinions about, and memories of, the experience were the challenges they faced on the snow, in particular on powder fresh snow. As Table 4 shows, "powder" was the word that was most frequently mentioned by respondents in the questionnaire when describing their perfect day out skiing.

Terrain morphology was considered a club field attraction and the adrenaline rush provided by challenging terrain is a large part of the pleasure experienced by Broken River skiers. What's more, there are off-piste skiing and no machines to groom the snow (unlike in commercial ski resorts); as we have seen, this is precisely why skiers choose to go to club fields. Another prized factor is the low tourist numbers: in Broken River the maximum number of skiers recorded on peak-season days is about 250. This is partly because it is necessary to walk along a path while carrying equipment to reach Broken River (this is true of several of the Selwyn club fields), and not everyone is able to make this considerable physical effort. The combination of these factors appear to select the type of skier who comes to club fields: they share the same passion and way of experiencing that passion; they seek both adrenaline rushes and tranquillity; they want to ski in a truly natural setting, to be able to be the first to carve through the fresh snow and to enjoy uncrowded spaces. They see the club field as a way to escape hectic city lives: the mountain becomes a refuge, a safe place to find shelter and relax while doing what they love. All these characteristics mean that the people who go to club fields share the same passion and emotions, and also possess very similar technical skills.

Another key feature of the club fields is their mountain huts, where people can spend the night, which is unique in the New Zealand context. Being able to spend the night in one of the mountain huts adds to the specialness of both place and experience.

The club field atmosphere emerged from the research as a significant factor for most respondents. Both the interviews and the questionnaires reveal that a feeling of familiarity and the friendly environment are seen as key to people's enjoyment of these small ski areas and, indeed, represent one of the latter's defining characteristics. Many skiers were impressed by the fact that everybody they met greeted them and often even started a conversation. Respondents believed this to be because the club "veterans", who all know each other, are keen to get to know, and often befriend, the "new faces" they come across. People reported quickly sensing Broken River's spirit of cooperation. When, for example, someone has difficulty with the rope tow, assistance will almost always be offered immediately either by a staff member or another skier.

After a morning's skiing, people gather at the Palmer Lodge for lunch. Here, the club field provides skiers with a kitchen and all the necessary cooking utensils and food. During the lunch break, it is common to see people gathering to prepare meals for themselves and their friends. Everyone has to tidy up and wash their own utensils, and this fosters a sense of sharing and participation that is not experienced in ordinary ski resorts, so people feel at home and, just like at home, they have to carry out certain tasks. In fact, a rota is drawn up every day assigning a particular

task to each guest: some have to wash the dishes, others dispose of the rubbish or tidy the tables. This system also contributes to the feeling of being in a community.

It is evident that a solid tradition, shared by all members, has developed out of Broken River's more than eighty years of uninterrupted community events and habitual activities. A sense of attachment to the place has been generated over time by members and guests and it shared feelings about club field skiing. The interviews clearly showed the extent to which people's sense of place - both in terms of belonging to a community and in relation to their attitude to Broken River as a special place that embodies a set of meanings and values - influences their attachment to the club field. Respondents emphasised their understanding of place meaning, their attachment to the place and the satisfaction linked to these feelings. In addition, the physical environment of Broken River, characterised by its unusual access route through the Craigeiburn Forest and its attractive landscape and morphology, also elicits a range of feelings that can be traced back to a sense of place that is further enhanced by the guests' (members and non-members) participation in shaping their own holidays.

Another key aspect of the club fields is their focus on environmental protection. Discussions about ski areas often highlight their significant environmental impact. In this respect, club fields clearly differ from large ski resorts and can, in fact, be guaranteed to have a limited environmental impact and thus provide significant benefits to the territory in terms of liveability and low pollution levels. The principal reasons for this are the club fields' small size and remote settings, and therefore the limited numbers of skiers who actually access them: these factors allow club fields to limit their ecological footprint (for the type of service offered). Moreover, Broken River, unlike other club fields, has electrically powered ski lifts and has introduced a number of energy-saving policies and incentives for environmentally friendly practices.

Financially, club fields face challenges and struggle to meet their running costs, and therefore depend on volunteers. Their financial situation would almost undoubtedly be strengthened if they attracted more tourists and upgraded and expanded the area so that more people could be accommodated and more income generated. This, however, is not what the members want, as the club fields' simplicity and small size is what they value most about them. Both the interviews and the questionnaires showed that the respondents do not want major changes; many wanted the "Broken River tram" to start operating again, but no other innovations or changes were suggested. There is therefore a demand to maintain the club fields' current infrastructure and status quo in general. They thus face a huge challenge because the right balance has to be found between generating more income in order to ensure efficient management and not becoming too commercial by attracting too many skiers, since, as we have seen, the absence of crowds is one of the most valued characteristics by Broken River skiers.

6. Conclusions

The research presented in this paper reveals the created and perceived experience of a small ski area in New Zealand, and provides an in-depth exploration of how a community association is currently managing the area. The results highlight the differences between this boutique destination and large ski resorts, while providing a detailed picture of what skiers/customers value most about the former.

The study confirms that several physical-environmental factors which have been discussed in other studies on snow and winter leisure are important determinants of choice with regard to ski destinations: good snow conditions (preferably fresh), challenging terrain, wide open spaces, uncontaminated landscapes. On the other hand, many factors that usually score high in the responses collected in ski resorts (groomed slopes, snowpack, quality of lifts) do not appear to be relevant here. Opinions/feelings about the services that are available in the ski area show an even bigger divergence from what people value in a large resort. Unsurprisingly, not only do old-time members express these different sets of preferences, but new guests also appreciate the “clubbies’ experience”.

The sort of people that one can meet in the area, the easy and direct communication with both staff and other skiers, participating in the club field’s daily routines - these are a few examples of what people appreciate about the Broken River experience besides the area’s physical-environmental features. Members and staff appear to be successfully co-creating experiences and thereby developing a common sense of place attachment that other skiers pick up on and share. This affective response gives the club fields intrinsic value, which is manifested, in the case under analysis, in a sense of belonging and a desire to return. Another dimension which emerges from our research is the ease with which a harmonious balance is created between the tourists’ values and those of the destination. Staff, members and guests all do their very best to respect the environment and this concern enhances the synergy between demand and supply. It also allows club fields to continue to offer sustainably managed winter leisure which, although entailing economic challenges every season, brings advantages in terms of a reduced environmental impact and a strengthened social fabric, neither of which is easily achieved in larger commercial resorts.

While club fields like Broken River are attracting both new and returning visitors to the Selwyn District, their value for the surrounding territory is also constituted by the traditions and praxis that have become a cultural treasure and a precious element of New Zealand’s skiing heritage over time. The “clubby” spirit favours the development of a family atmosphere, and the fact that young people are encouraged to get involved in the fields’ management facilitates the handing down of customs and habits. It is, therefore, interesting to compare Broken River with ski areas that have adopted an entirely business-oriented management strategy. In the European Alps, for example, small mountain villages have been completely by-passed and ignored as commercial towns designed to accommodate the greatest possible number of tourists and to provide them with every

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possible comfort were built. Although these towns are often run by large business groups, they are increasingly ending the winter season in the red while simultaneously impoverishing the local culture and social heritage. The club fields' model - which is adapted to the morphological, climatic and cultural characteristics of the Alps - could be a way to address some of the challenges faced by other smaller ski areas, challenges which climate change is finally forcing us to confront. Indeed, unless we tackle these issues now, both the small ski areas and the surrounding mountains will inevitably be abandoned. A club field's offer would certainly differ from that of larger resorts, but it is precisely in this difference that the value of this proposition lies.

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