



# A Thousand Cuts

As backcountry skiing  
goes mainstream,  
secret trail making  
poses a “moral dilemma”  
for the sport

By TOM SLAYTON  
Photographed by BRIAN MOHR



# B

ACKCOUNTRY SKIING — SKIING that seeks untracked snow away from established slopes, lifts and trails — offers some of the most beautiful experiences one can have on skis. In fact,

you could argue that an exhilarating ride on fresh powder down twisting, narrow trails and through high forested glades is the ultimate skiing experience.

Although it is hard to quantify, because no lift tickets are involved, all indications are that this form of skiing is on the increase. Several ski areas in Vermont are promoting it, and new, more sophisticated skis, boots and bindings have made backcountry ski adventures possible for more and more people.

However, with that increase in popularity have come problems.

Backcountry skiing is peppered with ironies, and perhaps the deepest of those is that this bracing outdoor sport is pursued by people who consider themselves deeply in touch with nature and the terrain they ski; many are environmentalists. But there is strong evidence that backcountry skiers may be causing environmental damage to the very backcountry they love.

Unauthorized trail cutting in the backcountry — secretive but long practiced — emerged from the shadows two years ago with the discovery of a massive scar slashed in a wilderness area on the steep slopes of Big Jay. Front-page news at the time, it sparked outrage about the specific incident and raised hard questions about secret cutting on any scale. The leader of one backcountry skiing organization in Vermont now calls the environmental concerns related to backcountry skiing “a moral dilemma” that must be faced.

**The controversy over unauthorized cutting often pits one group of environmentalists against another group of equally sincere environmentalists.**

Several other ironies surround the current popularity of backcountry skiing. Among them:

- It's generally conceded that this kind of skiing — which involves getting away from ski resorts — is actually a big area of growth for ski resorts. Several are promoting it. At Jay Peak, for example, there's even a “kids only” glade.

- The sport seems to attract rugged individualists who like to go their own way, but education and cooperation — both of which involve a tamping down of rugged individualism — are almost universally seen as the best way to solve the sport's problems.

- The controversy over unauthorized cutting often pits one group of environmentalists against another group of equally sincere environmentalists.

- Backcountry skiing, just coming to prominence as a “new” sport, is actually as old as skiing itself. In fact, when skiing was born in Vermont, all skiing was backcountry skiing.

In the 1920s and 1930s, most skiers were outdoorsy young men and women who climbed up their chosen mountains before skiing down them. Much of that activity centered around Stowe's Ranch Valley on the “back” side of Mount Mansfield and an old logging camp known as Ranch Camp that was owned by lumberman

Craig Burt of Stowe. The Ranch Valley is today the home of the Mount Mansfield Touring Center, and many of that area's trails are the historic downhill trails used by Vermont's first skiers.

Though those trails were ignored after ski lifts revolutionized skiing, more recently they have been rediscovered, cleared and used again by a new generation of rugged outdoorsy types — today's backcountry skiers.

Evidence of the sport's growing popularity in Ver-

mont can be seen in the fact that Jay Peak has been named several times as one of the leading ski resorts in the United States offering backcountry experiences. There are also backcountry ski trails at Stowe, Mad River Glen, Bolton Valley, Killington and elsewhere, including lots of territory not adjacent to any ski area.

The restoration and re-clearing of many such backcountry trails were legal and authorized. However, not all trail establishment on public land is approved, and state officials use blunt language to describe unauthorized cutting: “It's prohibited,” says Jason Gibbs, commissioner of the Vermont Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation. “That means it's illegal.”

The environmental damage is usually not caused by skiing itself — when snow melts in the spring, the skiers' tracks go with it. Most damage comes, instead, if skiers decide to improve the glade they're skiing through by removing some of the troublesome, ubiquitous undergrowth. Or if they cut a new ski trail without authorization.

There are indications that both these things are happening. And at its extreme, it left the ugly gash on Big Jay, carved by two men intent on creating a backcountry trail.

Like everyone — everyone — interviewed for this article, Jay Peak President Bill Stenger decried the Big Jay slashing. “That's a disgraceful thing they did,” he declared. “It gives responsible backcountry skiers a bad name.”

The two men, Paul Poulin and Alan Ritter of the Newport area, were convicted last winter of felony unlawful mischief for cutting down more than 800 trees and creating a 2,000-foot scar up to 60 feet wide down the side of the mountain, on environ-

mentally protected land. Poulin and Ritter received a suspended jail sentence of 18 to 36 months and served 60 days on a community restitution furlough program.

“It is good to see a felony conviction in this case,” Agency of Natural Resources Secretary Jonathan Wood told The Burlington Free Press. “This was one of the most serious cases of damage to public lands that we have seen.”

Everyone agrees the Big Jay cut was an egregious example of the worst kind of environmental damage. No one condones it. But state officials and environmental advocates are concerned that a subtler kind of long-term damage is being done unintentionally by skiers who simply snip a branch or take out a shrub here and there to improve a downhill line. One branch may not matter, but over time, a single branch here and a bit of undergrowth there adds up. And what it adds up to is ecological damage.

Russ Ford of Berkshire, a Jay Peak ski patroller who is also a graduate student in ecology at the University of Vermont, an avid outdoorsman and a beef farmer, says he and other experts are now seeing long-term, damaging changes in mountain glades where skiers have snipped

and cut, a little at a time, for several years.

“They're converting the glades to even-age stands,” Ford said. Since all trees eventually die, Ford and others pointed out that when those even-aged stands start to die, the forest is breached and gaps in the forest cover appear. “We see places where the glades are being converted to openings,” he said. Not only does this damage the forest, he added, “the skiing sucks also.”

Susan Shea, director of conservation for the Green

**Backcountry skiing, just coming to prominence as a “new” sport, is actually as old as skiing itself. In fact, when skiing was born in Vermont, all skiing was backcountry skiing.**



Mountain Club, said that photographs taken of the side of Big Jay nearly 20 years ago — before the advent of modern backcountry skiing — show an unbroken forest. But photos taken of the same places more recently show openings in the forest. These are almost certainly caused by unauthorized trimming of tree branches and shrubs by backcountry skiers, she said.

And so the question must be asked: Are backcountry skiers damaging the very backcountry forests they profess to love? The answer, ironic though it may be, appears to be “yes.”

**T**he Catamount Trail, a 300-mile cross-country ski trail that threads through Vermont from Massachusetts to Canada, was established 25 years ago. It now bills itself as “the gateway to backcountry skiing in Vermont.” Leaders of this trail organization are concerned about widespread damage to the under-story of Vermont’s forests.

They say they have found stashes of tools — saws and clippers — in the woods and have noticed that artificial glades are gradually being clipped into existence on both sides of traditional ski trails like the Teardrop Trail on the western, undeveloped side of Mount Mansfield.

“When we clear a section of (the Catamount) trail, we try to have the least impact possible — and we get landowner permission,” said Catamount Trail Association (CTA) Executive Director Jim Fredericks.

Fredericks is well aware of the current growth of backcountry skiing. The CTA organizes winter events that ride the crest of that wave, like the organization’s annual tours and the Get Out and Backcountry Ski Festival that the CTA co-sponsors with Bolton Valley ski area.

Like others, he attributes much of the rising popularity of the sport to stiffer boots, skis that turn more

nimbly than ever, and bindings that allow both uphill climbing and fast downhill runs. “The new equipment allows for an enhanced skiing experience,” Fredericks said. “But with that enhanced experience has come an enhanced moral dilemma.”

Adam Howard, editorial and creative director of Backcountry Magazine in Jeffersonville — a leading publication about the sport — wrote in an editorial published soon after the cutting on Big Jay that although trimming Eastern ski lines has gone on for a long time, unauthorized trimming poses a threat to the sport’s future:

“Clearing trail is tradition,” he wrote in Backcountry. “But it’s time for a clean slate. Backcountry skiers need to unify again, as their forefathers did, and work with the states to create legitimate backcountry options ...”

A strong advocate for the sport, Howard grumbles that trails like the Madonna Vasa running from Underhill State Park to Smugglers Notch, established without permits decades ago, would be impossible to clear today. “What’s different today?” he asks rhetorically.

But he, like others, sees education and organization as the way to resolve the problems. It’s a point just about everyone agrees on.

• • •

Jay Peak has recently put special emphasis on a backcountry environmental education campaign against unauthorized cutting of underbrush, using the slogan “If You Can’t Hack It, Don’t Hack It.”

Jay Appleton, a longtime backcountry skier, former chairman of the board at Mad River Glen and author of that ski area’s Forest Management Plan, says that backcountry skiers may be “loving the for-

est to death” in some spots, especially near downhill ski areas. But by creating “islands” of trees that remain untouched, glades can be managed to regenerate themselves. He says skiers and the ski resorts will need to become aware of these forest management techniques if they are to catch on. “What we’re doing seems to be working,” Appleton said, “but frankly, it’s an experiment.”

Forest, Parks and Recreation Commissioner Gibbs and other state officials express concern about the surge in backcountry skiing but do not see it as a crisis. They believe that educating skiers — essentially establishing a backcountry code of ethics — can make all the difference.

Green Mountain Club Executive Director Ben Rose, a strong advocate for “skiing without a saw,” agrees. He doesn’t want the club to become the “fun police” and believes the ultimate answer is for the skiers themselves to organize and establish a backcountry code of ethics. The idea has worked before: When Vermont’s Long Trail came under siege in the ‘60s and ‘70s, the club responded with a code of ethics for hikers that today is taken for granted.

For backcountry skiing, such a code would include basic principles such as safety first, camping and traveling only on snow or durable surfaces, disposing of waste properly and not cutting vegetation to improve a ski trail or line — unless you own the land or have permission.

“I would hope that we could have a conversation,” Rose said, “and in 10 years backcountry skiers would agree — that you leave it as you found it.”

“Education is the key,” he said, “education and dialogue.” ❁

**Like everyone — everyone — interviewed for this article, Jay Peak President Bill Stenger decried the Big Jay slashing. “That’s a disgraceful thing they did,” he declared. “It gives responsible backcountry skiers a bad name.”**