

THE SKIER: HIS CHARACTERISTICS AND PREFERENCES

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ABSTRACT. Skiers are young and becoming younger, with increasing proportions of unmarried and female skiers. Many are students and roughly half of the remainder earn their livings as professionals (doctor, lawyer, teacher). Skiers have higher-than-average incomes. Most skiers never go away overnight to ski and seldom travel great distances. Forty percent of the skiers have skied 3 years or less. Day skiers ranked proximity as the most important reason for skiing at a particular area. The physical quality of ski slopes (not including snow quality) was ranked second by the day skier and first by skiers planning weekend and vacation trips.

SKIERS ARE such a small part of the total population—not more than 2 percent—that it is difficult to collect a sound sample. Consequently, few publications contain original data about skiers, particularly skiers distributed over a large geographical area. In this paper we will draw primarily upon the only three sources of regional skier data: Sno-Engineering (1965) for the Northeastern States in the 1962-63 and 1963-64 seasons; Herrington (1967) for the Western States in the 1964-65 season; and Leuschner (1970) for the Midwestern States in the 1968-69 season.

Surveys by *Ski* magazine in the 1964-65 and 1967-68 seasons were reported by Pitts (1968). But as Pitts pointed out, these were surveys of subscribers, so they probably were not entirely representative of the average skier in the United States. For example, one would expect a higher percent of high income and student skiers because of the subscription cost and re-

duced student subscription rates. However, wherever possible we used Pitts' data because they are original.

The comparison of data from surveys made in different regions in different years causes a problem because differences among the surveys may be due to interregional differences, or may be due to year-to-year changes in skiers—skier population trends. Even more disconcerting in making comparisons is the unknown influence of differences due to sampling procedures and analyses. We tried to isolate interregional differences and population trends by inference and by substantiating evidence wherever possible, but the reader should remember that many statements depend heavily on the authors' judgment.

SKIER CHARACTERISTICS

Most skiers are young. About two-thirds of those studied are 30 years or less and a fifth to a third 18 years or younger. These

Figure 1.—Age distribution of skiers by region, in percent. (N.R. = no response.)

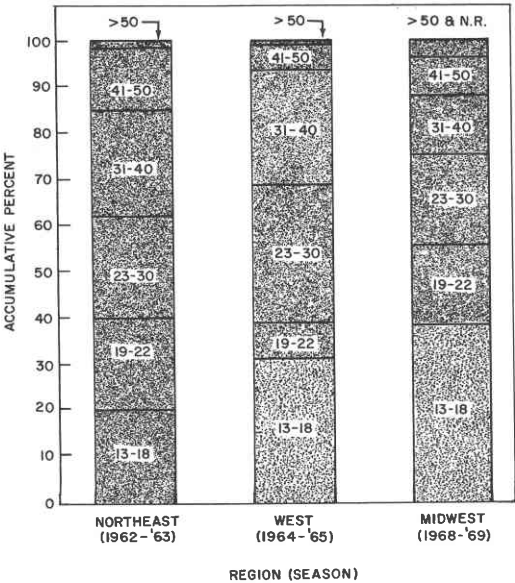


Figure 2.—Years education of skiers, by region, in percent.

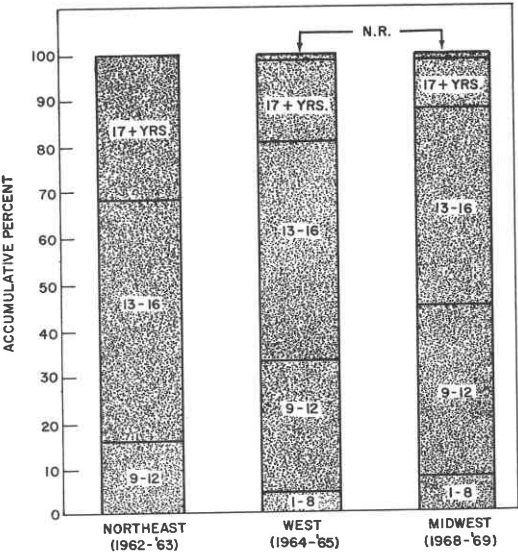
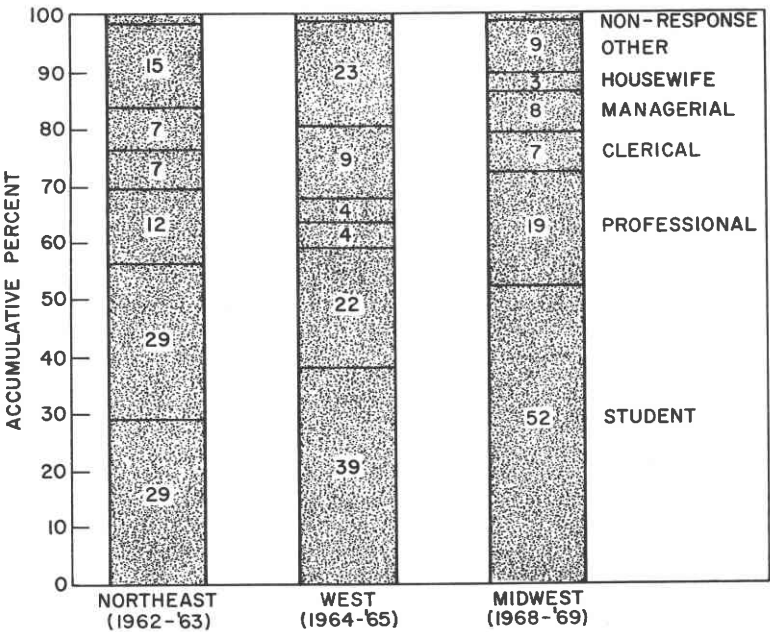


Figure 3.—Skier occupation by region, in percent.



proportions should be even higher because the studies did not include skiers under 12 or 13 years old. Skiers are either younger in the Midwest than the West and younger in the West than the Northeast, or the population has a trend toward younger skiers (fig. 1). A trend toward younger skiers is consistent with the national trend toward a younger population, the apparent decrease in the education level (fig. 2), and the increase in the percentage of students (fig. 3). A population trend toward younger skiers was also noted by Pitts (1968).

The indications that skiers are young and becoming still younger are supported by our general observations of the sport. Skiing is an active sport; it requires greater endurance and stamina than many other popular forms of outdoor recreation, and it is potentially hazardous. All these characteristics usually appeal more to teenagers and young adults than to older persons.

The proportion of unmarried skiers increased from about a third in 1964-65 in the West to about two-thirds in 1968-69 in the Midwest (table 1). Pitts (1968) also mentioned a shift toward unmarried skiers. The proportion of unmarried skiers in the Northeast may be due to young unmarried people being attracted to the large population centers for social and occupational reasons.

In all three studies the skier was found to be more affluent than the median in his region of the United States; in most cases his income was 25 to 30 percent higher.

There was an increase in the proportion of female skiers between the Western and Midwestern estimates. The oldest study reported 38 percent females in the Northeast, which contradicts a trend toward

more females. But Pitts (1968) in the newest study, notes an increase of about 5 percent. On balance, there seems to be a trend toward more female skiers.

The following general characteristics emerge. Skiers are young, and on the average becoming younger. Most are unmarried. There may be a trend toward a greater proportion of females. A large percentage of skiers are students—over half in the Midwest. Skiers have higher incomes than the average citizen, and, except for students, roughly half earn their livings in professions (doctor, lawyer, teacher), implying a higher-than-average educational level.

Past use patterns may help us predict how skiers will act in the future. In both the Western and Midwestern studies it was estimated that about 1 percent of the regional population skied, the percentages in individual states ranging from 0.1 to 3.1 percent. Thus the number of skiers in the United States is not likely to exceed 1 or 2 percent of the national population. Both of these studies showed that attendance grew nearly 20 percent per year during the last decade, but projections indicate a diminishing rate of growth.

Both studies showed that residents of the study-area states accounted for about 85 percent of the days skied in the study area. Although nonresident skiers do not account for a significant proportion of the total skiing for either region, they are a significant influence in some states, such as Colorado.

One question is: what kind of skiing trips were taken? Between 80 and 90 percent of all skiers took either single-day trips, weekend trips, or a combination of the two (table 2). In other words, most

Table 1.—Percent of skiers by region, sex, and marital status

Region (season)	Married			Unmarried		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Northeast (1962-63)	—	—	40.3	—	—	59.6
West (1964-65)	47.0	15.0	62.0	25.0	13.0	38.0
Midwest (1968-69)	21.4	14.3	35.7	32.1	31.1	63.2

Table 2.—Percentage of skiers taking various combinations of trips, Midwest and West

Year (region)	Day only	Weekend only	Day and weekend	Other	No response
1968-69 (Midwest)	58	15	17	7	3
1964-65 (West)	46	13	23	18	0

skiers never go away overnight to ski, and those who do seldom go for more than 3 nights.

A single-day trip is defined as one in which the skier travels to the ski area and returns home the same day. A weekend trip is one in which the skier is away from home at least 1 night but less than 4 nights, for the primary purpose of skiing. A vacation trip is one in which the skier is away from home 4 or more nights for the primary purpose of skiing.

Skiers generally are not willing to—or do not have to—travel great distances to do their skiing (fig. 4). The Midwestern skier travels farther than his Western counterpart. This may be due to improved high-

ways in the years between the studies; location of ski areas in relation to population centers; or, in the case of vacation trips, to the Midwesterner traveling East or West to ski.

At the time of the surveys about 40 percent of the skiers had been skiing 3 years or less, and almost three-fourths had been skiing 8 years or less (fig. 5). Moreover, these figures are amazingly consistent over all the surveys.

There is a large difference between regions in the number of days skied per skier, the Northeast reporting an average of 17.7, the West 10.3, and the Midwest 5.7. There is little additional evidence indicating whether this is an interregional difference

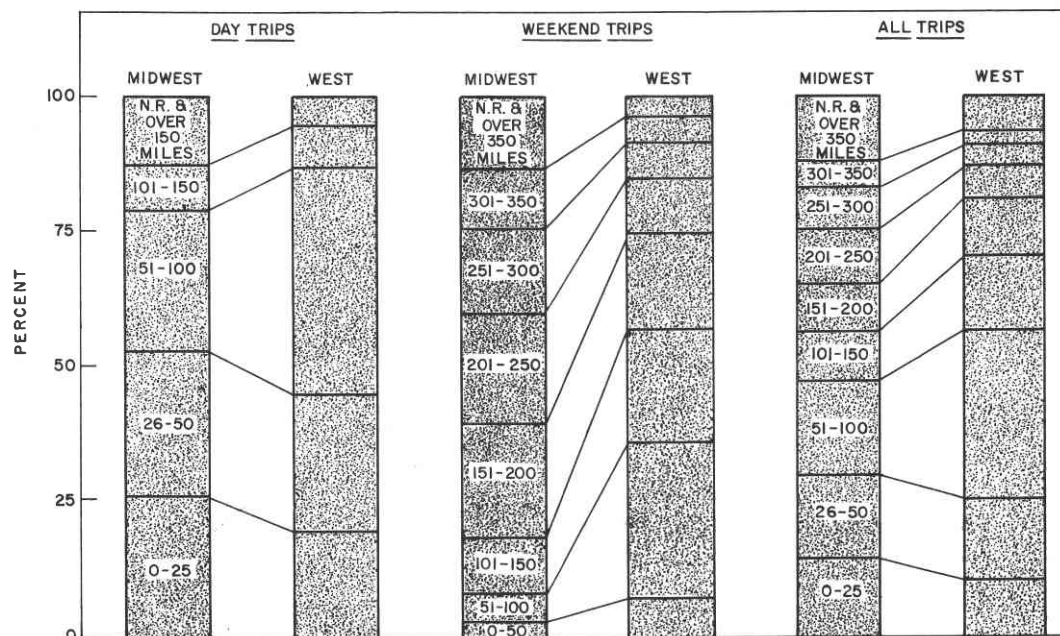
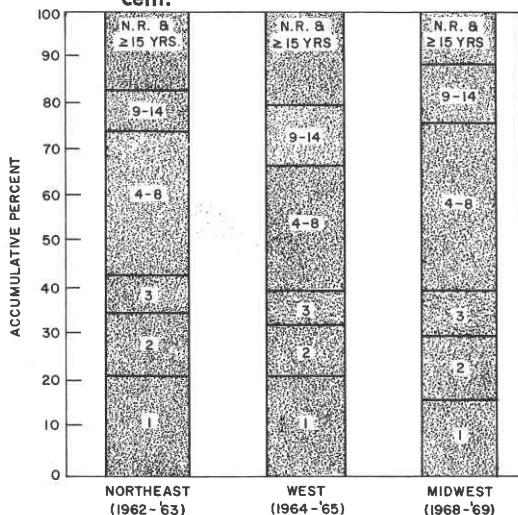


Figure 4.—Percentage of resident skiers traveling by auto, by one-way distance, class, and type of trip.

Figure 5.— Number of years skied at time of survey, by region, in percent.



or a population trend. We suspect, but cannot prove, that the 17.7 days per skier reported for the Northeast may be the result of the weighting system used in analyzing the sample.

SKIER PREFERENCES

In the Midwestern study, skiers were asked why they skied at one area instead of another. The day-skiers ranked proximity as the most important reason for skiing at a particular area. The physical quality of the ski slopes (not including snow quality) was ranked second by the day-skier and first by skiers planning weekend or vacation trips (tables 3 and 4).

Cable lift facilities were considered desirable but clearly less important. The day-skier next considered low ticket prices and the area's reputation among other skiers. The weekend-vacation skier considered the area's reputation, the expected amount of crowding, and after-ski entertainment.

Operators of ski areas were asked what factors limited attendance at their areas. Weather variables were ranked first by operators as limiting attendance. Inadequate tow and lift capacity and not enough skiable area, both of which relate to crowded-

ness, were ranked next. Inadequate service facilities and overnight accommodations were ranked fourth and fifth, followed by skier preference for cable versus rope lift facilities. Operators ranked crowdedness variables higher than skiers did, and cable facilities lower.

The reader should use caution in interpreting these results. For example, the low price of tow and lift tickets may not attract a skier, but a high price may drive him away. Also, advertising may not convince a skier to attend a particular ski area, but it may be important to inform him of the days and hours the area is open or of events of special interest, such as discount evening ski schools. Finally, these results do not show why the skier goes skiing on a particular day, but why he goes to a particular ski area.

Although the Northeastern and Western studies did not include questions about motives, the Western study contained comparable expenditure data, which may indicate skier interests (table 5). The consistency in the percentage distributions of skier expenditures between the Western and Midwestern studies is also noteworthy.

Expenditures for lift tickets constitute about a quarter of the average daily expenditure for all skiers and about one-third of that for the day-skiers. Skiers are apparently willing to pay for the quality of the slopes and the tow and lift facilities they use, both in the West and the Midwest. The moderate expenditure on after-skiing entertainment also seems to support the moderate ranking that skiers gave it on the motives question. On the other hand, on-site eating, drinking, and lodging places were ranked low, but accounted for a high percentage of expenditure. This may be due to the monopoly position of a ski area selling food to skiers or may reflect the importance of off-site eating, drinking, and lodging facilities.

These findings may be substantiated by those of Echelberger and Shafer (1970), who used factor analysis to examine the relationship between several variables and annual attendance at 26 ski resorts in northern New England and New York State. They found that, in a bad snow year, attendance was positively related to the ad-

Table 3.—*Motives for choosing ski areas for single-day trips,
in the Midwest, 1968-69 season*
[In percent]

Motive	Importance of motive					Sum of 1-3
	First	Second	Third	Fourth	Fifth	
Closeness to residence	44.7	15.9	11.4	6.5	4.6	72.0
Physical quality of slopes	26.9	20.5	14.1	7.8	3.1	61.5
Presence of cable facilities	5.9	17.2	16.1	14.1	6.5	39.2
Low price of tow and lift tickets	3.5	13.8	13.2	7.0	7.2	30.5
Area's reputation with skiers	6.3	7.9	9.6	7.6	9.0	23.8
Expected amount of crowding	2.5	7.9	11.7	9.1	8.6	22.1
Reputation for after-ski entertainment	1.4	4.8	4.3	4.6	5.4	10.5
Other	5.6	3.1	1.3	.6	.4	10.0
Advertising	1.1	1.5	3.8	3.7	6.7	6.4
On-site eating, drinking, and/or lodging facilities	.6	2.6	2.8	4.7	7.2	6.0
Number of other ski areas in vicinity	1.4	1.2	1.7	2.4	1.9	4.3
No motive mentioned	—	3.6	10.0	31.9	39.4	13.6
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	300.0

Table 4.—*Motives for choosing ski areas for weekend or vacation trips,
in the Midwest, 1968-69 season*
[In percent]

Motive	Importance of motive					Sum of 1-3
	First	Second	Third	Fourth	Fifth	
Physical quality of slopes	54.5	17.0	6.5	6.9	3.2	78.0
Presence of cable facilities	4.4	19.2	19.6	9.9	6.2	43.2
Area's reputation with skiers	13.9	9.4	7.4	9.7	5.8	30.7
Expected amount of crowding	1.8	10.8	16.6	11.5	7.9	29.2
Reputation for after-ski entertainment	5.6	12.2	8.3	4.8	8.2	26.1
On-site eating, drinking, and/or lodging facilities	2.0	9.5	9.3	8.2	8.1	20.8
Advertising	5.5	4.2	5.8	4.8	4.2	15.5
Closeness to residence	5.3	4.9	5.2	6.7	5.8	15.4
Low price of tow and lift tickets	1.8	3.2	9.1	6.1	8.8	14.1
Number of other ski areas in vicinity	.9	5.2	4.1	4.9	5.0	10.2
Other	4.3	1.8	1.7	1.0	.9	7.8
No motive mentioned	—	2.6	6.4	25.5	35.9	9.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	300.0

Table 5.—*Skier expenditure by region, type of trip, and item*
[In percent]

Item	Average for all trips		Single-day trip		Weekend trip	
	Midwest (1968-69)	West (1964-65)	Midwest (1968-69)	West (1964-65)	Midwest (1968-69)	West (1964-65)
Lodging and meals	28.3	27.9	17.6	13.4	38.0	33.7
Lift tickets	24.1	23.8	34.9	35.9	16.6	20.5
After-ski entertainment	8.5	11.0	8.0	7.4	9.7	14.0
Transportation	16.5	18.7	15.8	22.5	15.5	15.9
Other ¹	22.6	18.6	23.7	20.8	20.2	16.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

¹Includes equipment rental and repairs, lessons, package plans, and other miscellaneous items.

vertising budget. In a good snow year, attendance was positively related to miles of intermediate trail (possibly a quality factor), was negatively related to travel time, and was also related to some compound variables including those two already mentioned plus percent of slopes rolled and packed and the number of ski instructors. Data averaged for the 2 years showed positive relationships with advertising and a positive relationship with distance, which leveled off as distance increased.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MANAGERS

Whether new ski areas should be built or existing ones should be expanded is a complex question, beyond the scope of this paper. We assumed that the ski-area or recreation manager wished to provide as much skiing pleasure to as many skiers as possible and did not consider questions of net welfare maximization or cost. The findings of these studies pose several implications for managers.

- In all likelihood the total skier population will grow as the population grows during the next few years, and attendance may double in the next 5 to 10 years. This may indicate a substantial future demand, particularly at lower cost public areas.
- The large population of skiers with only a few years experience, combined with skier dropouts, indicates that a substantial part of the skier population will continue to have only a moderate degree of expertise. This implies that many slopes should be in the beginner and intermediate categories and that good ski schools are needed. Further, if attendance reaches projected levels, the number of novice skiers should increase. There is probably an opportunity for some ski areas near large population centers to specialize in providing ski slopes and instruction for the beginning skier.
- Stated skier preference, average distances traveled, and the large proportion of single-day ski trips all indicate the importance of locating a ski area near population centers. The trend toward a younger skier population, if continued, may further decrease the distances traveled and increase the proportion of single-day trips. The development of snowmaking equipment makes rural location for snow much less important.
- Slopes and trails should be varied, interesting, and challenging within their respective difficulty classes to meet skier preferences for high-quality ski slopes.
- If there is a trend toward fewer days skied per season (or if a ski area is in a lower use region) it may be appropriate to investigate ways of increasing annual use per skier. This will more fully utilize fixed-cost items (to the extent overcapacity exists) and could help the private sector increase profitability.
- The large proportion of day and weekend trips implies that managers of new or existing ski areas should re-examine plans and programs depending on vacation trips because the vacation market is relatively very small. The area managers may decide to either emphasize or de-emphasize vacation skier programs. (This statement applies only to the proportion of vacation trips. It may be that increasing numbers of skiers will offset a low or decreasing proportion of vacation trips.)

These are merely some of the implications, and they are directed primarily toward publicly owned areas. The concerned and imaginative manager will think of others. For example, the decreasing age of skiers should decrease the relative importance of after-ski activities. Research can discover and interpret information, but the administrator must apply it to his own unique situation.

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