



Photo by Susan Bibeau

The Adirondack Powder Skier Association seeks to increase opportunities for backcountry skiing in naturally open woods.

Powder to the people

By Dean C. Schneller

I AM A LAWYER BY TRADE, but when my tie is undone, the real work begins at my rustic cabin. There is wood to chop; hens to water; raised beds to weed; and a dozen daily tasks necessary to keep my growing family warm and fed.

During long summer days, between the daily chores, we have many options for fun: hiking, kayaking, mountain biking, or fly-fishing. But during winter the list of chores is as short as the days. When it snows I'm too excited to sit by the fire. The snow-covered peaks are calling, reminding me why I made this park home: glorious powder turns in the Adirondack backcountry.

Earning one's turns is simple in theory: climb a mountain, then ski down. To me, backcountry skiing epitomizes the Adirondack spirit. This sport requires a deep respect for nature, strong muscles, self-reliance, and, of course, an appetite for excitement. For centuries, hunters, trappers, and conservationists used skis to access the Adirondack backcountry, and many "trails" in the old days were ski trails. Unfortunately, this historic birthright was lost, and now, due to regulatory shortcomings, there are minimal safe opportunities for this type of skiing in the Park.

In early 2012, I met with several local backcountry skiers to discuss the status of our sport in the Park. Out of this meeting was born the Adirondack Powder Skier Association (APSA), a not-for-profit group dedicated to studying, protecting, promoting, and enhancing low-impact human-powered snow sports on the Park's public lands. Our aim is to work with state agencies, environmental groups, and municipalities to develop responsible guidelines for maintaining backcountry ski routes, access to slides, and other backcountry-skiing resources. If we succeed, the Adirondacks will welcome backcountry skiers, to the benefit of the local economy and powder hounds.

First, we need to define certain concepts. Especially

troublesome is the word *glade*, which creates an unavoidable association with the developed and sparsely wooded "glades" at ski resorts. What we are proposing is different, much lower impact, and preserves the wild-forest character inherent to our sport. Thus, we are seeking authorization to manage "backcountry ski routes"—by which we mean several parallel ski lines with large understory islands between them. These are not glades.

While a skier in search of powder can legally access public lands, there are minimal opportunities for a safe and fun backcountry ski experience in the Park. Most boulder-strewn trails are designed for hikers: they are narrow and the snow is quickly compacted; the understory adjacent to the trails is impenetrable; and hikers and snowshoers—who also use these trails—may be standing behind every turn or tree.

Notably, backcountry skiing is allowed by the Adirondack Park State Land Master Plan. To quote from the plan's Wilderness section: "The following types of recreational use are *compatible with wilderness* and *should be encouraged*...ski touring... and other forms of *primitive and unconfined* recreation" (emphasis added). Backcountry skiing is essentially ski touring so this is a permitted use that should be encouraged. The problem is the lack of management guidelines to promote and regulate this use.

Safe backcountry skiing requires the maintenance of natural openings in the woods. Of course, any management within the Forest Preserve must conform to Article 14, the forever-wild clause of the state constitution. Our proposal must comply with this important clause. We've determined that the carefully planned and supervised selective cutting of lateral and dead branches and small vegetative growth in naturally occurring openings in mature forests—which would be necessary for safe skiing—is consistent with Article 14 as long as it does not occur to any material degree.

The APSA met with stakeholders to discuss our proposal and address concerns. Within a year, we've received resolutions of support from numerous towns and

counties; a positive reception following our presentation to the Forest Preserve Advisory Council; and invaluable advice from environmental groups.

We then received permission from DEC to flag a backcountry-ski route on a naturally open slope in the Forest Preserve. Thus we were able to show interested parties that the carefully planned and selective cutting of a few branches, a few saplings, and some witch-hobble could supply a few parallel lines for skiers and yet not rise to the "material level" prohibited by Article 14. Common impressions were "this appears to be very low impact" and "not at all like the glades at the resorts."

Our next step is to draft guidelines for managing backcountry-ski routes, relying on the existing framework of the State Land Master Plan. To be clear, we are not proposing to "glade out" the Forest Preserve. Rather, we would delineate appropriate sites based on their capacity to retain powder. Generally, this will mean north slopes with naturally occurring openings under a mature canopy.

Not a single living "tree" will be removed. Cutting would be limited to "leaners" (dead trees that have fallen against other trees), lateral branches, witch-hobble, and a minimal amount of saplings. Depending on the site, several parallel ski lines would be managed within a defined zone with large understory islands between these lines. Since we ski on top of the snow pack, dead material would be dropped in place, and there would be no need to move rocks, harden the trail, or impact the surface water. All work would be performed by APSA volunteers, without mechanized tools, under the guidance of DEC foresters and within brief seasonal windows.

A visitor would be hard-pressed to observe these backcountry-ski routes in summer; and in the winter, the hearty stock eager to skin up a mountain would have the opportunity to take part in a human-powered eco-sport that does no harm to the Forest Preserve.

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