



Melting Away

Can Sustainable Skis and Snowboards Save Winter Sports?

By DREW POGGE

Ski and snowboard companies are finally beginning to recognize the fallacy of relying on winter for business while simultaneously contributing to its destruction. From solar-powered factories to sustainable materials; carbon offsets to rainforest preservation programs—some companies in the wintersports industry are making sustainability a priority.

In the Factory

All skis and snowboards are made from some combination of wood, foam, fiberglass, plastic, steel, aluminum and carbon fiber. The finished ski or board is a sandwich of these materials, chemically bonded by epoxy resin, and virtually impossible to separate or recycle. It's for this reason that almost every ski and snowboard ever made still exists today, and, sadly, that many new skis will continue to clutter landfills.

Several ski and snowboard manufacturers are addressing one part of the problem by using sustainably grown

and harvested wood for skis and snowboard cores. Movement Skis uses all Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) or Program for the Endorsement of Forest Certification (PEFC) certified wood for their cores. Some Karhu skis have plantation-grown Paulonia wood cores. And Arbor Snowboards uses all farmed aspen, poplar, cork, oak and bamboo. "We're always looking for greener materials," says Arbor International's Ken Perkins, "and the natural world will always be able to provide."

New Zealand-based Kingswood Skis recently became the world's first carbon-neutral ski manufacturer, winning the 2007 Southern Sustainable Product Award. The company builds farmed bamboo core skis, and operates a ski service business specializing in major repairs—keeping existing skis in service longer. But using bamboo from China and plastics and steel from Europe leaves Kingswood with a significant transportation footprint. The company counters this reality by combining imported products into a single annual shipment. And since bamboo regenerates so quickly, says Kingswood co-owner Alex Herbert, its sustainability "outweighs the carbon footprint of its transport."

Silverton, Colorado-based Venture Snowboards also uses sustainable materials, and tries to find those materials close to home—all its wood is farmed in Pennsylvania. "We want to support our local, regional and national economies," says Venture's Lisa Branner, "and we're looking to reduce petroleum-intensive



Kingswood Skis (above) recently became the first carbon-neutral ski-maker; Karhu (left) makes skis with sustainable wood cores.

"There's no point in making a 'green' snowboard if it can't take its licks and ends up in the landfill." —Lisa Branner, Venture Snowboards

transportation."

But greener materials aren't the only way to make a better product—the processes for making skis and boards are improving, too. All of Arbor's factory machines are wind-powered, and boards are shipped factory direct to minimize transportation emissions and costs. The Venture factory has been wind powered since 2004, and also recycles nearly everything. Wood scraps become signs or birdhouses. Sawdust becomes horse bedding, which is composted. Shipping boxes are used and reused until they fail, then recycled. Branner says, "We always try to incorporate sustainability."

Looking Ahead

Unfortunately, many of the necessary materials used in ski and snowboard manufacturing don't have eco-friendly alternatives—yet. "What we've found



most challenging is finding suitable, durable, vegetable-based alternatives for the petroleum-based plastics and resins," says Venture's Branner. But that may be changing.

Kingswood is investigating a flax alternative to fiberglass—a component used in almost every ski and board made today. Arbor is looking into alternative sugar-based resin to replace the harsh epoxies now used, and is also researching corn-based plastic. "We're trying to build a totally organic board," says Perkins, "and corn-based plastics will happen."

But while the world waits for new technologies to emerge, there are other ways companies are making a difference. Kingswood's carbon emissions were measured by the third party organization carboNZero, which invoiced the ski maker for an appropriate number of offset credits. And Kingswood is actually double offset (carbon positive) for 2007. At first, the company purchased credits for the entire year from an organization in the U.S. Then, says Herbert, "I was told by carboNZero that the credits were not 'Kyoto compliant' because the U.S. has not signed the Kyoto protocol." So the company purchased compliant credits in New Zealand at additional cost.

Global giant Head has also recently jumpstarted a program designed to eliminate its carbon footprint. The ski and snowboard maker is offsetting 10 times its annual carbon emissions (as measured by them) through partnership with the Cool Earth charity. The partnership will protect more than 7,000 acres of mature South American rainforest annually. It's also launching a "Don't Pray for Snow. Do Something." advertising campaign featuring Head athletes like Olympic skier Bode Miller.

Doing Your Part

How can consumers know if the ski industry's "green" movement is real and not just greenwashing wizardry? Arbor's Perkins says the most important thing is to "be more conscious of where your consumer dollar is going. Some companies trying to 'go green' still make their products in China and other places where fewer regulations mean both lower prices and greater environmental impact." Venture's Branner agrees, but doesn't feel threatened by skeptics. "It's the reason we got started, and a deep-rooted conservation ethic has always been a part of our



All the wood used in Venture snowboards comes from local sources.

company," he says. "These efforts aren't a marketing tactic—they're just part of who we are."

Some companies are surely capitalizing on the marketability of "green" skis and snowboards without believing in, or improving upon, sustainability ideals. But for others, making skis and boards sustainably is a labor of love. Kingswood's Herbert says, "Sure, it's good for business to take sustainability measures, but there is also a deep satisfaction that comes from doing these things for the right reason." Venture's Branner says, "There's no point in making a 'green' snowboard if it can't take its licks and ends up in the landfill. It's a difficult proposition, and we're

not environmental angels by any means, but we feel that we are headed down the right path."

The bottom line is ultimately a shared love and passion for winter. "Even if you were a skier with a completely selfish, amoral viewpoint who took no interest in the overall health of the planet, or human beings' responsibility to look after it," says Herbert, "you'd have to be concerned about global temperature increases. To think you watched the snow melt away and did nothing...How could anyone who passionately loves skiing live with that?"

CONTACTS: Arbor, (310)577-1120, www.arborsports.com; Head, www.head.com; Karhu, www.karhu.com; Kingswood, www.kingswoodskis.com; Movement, www.movementskis.com; Venture, (970)387-5078, venturesnowboards.com; carboNZero, www.carbonzero.co.nz; Cool Earth, www.cool-earth.org; Forest Stewardship Council, www.fscus.org; Program for the Endorsement of Forest Certification, www.pefc.org. **E**

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