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# Skiing-with snow – exploring proximate ethnographies

Monica Nadegger<sup>a</sup> , Outi Rantala<sup>b</sup>  and Peter Varley<sup>c</sup> 

<sup>a</sup>LMU Munich, Munich, Germany & MCI - The Entrepreneurial School, Innsbruck, Austria; <sup>b</sup>University of Lapland, Rovaniemi, Finland; <sup>c</sup>Northumbria University, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK

## ABSTRACT

In this paper, we propose *skiing-with* as an ethnographic methodological exploration of being proximate with snowy landscapes and the crisis they face. Skiing is a traditional way of moving across and on snow. Skiing also sits at the heart of winter tourism and much is based on extensive fixed infrastructure, and driven by growth-oriented business models. However, the environment and business of skiing are threatened due to climate change and snow uncertainties. By building on the tradition of walking-with methods, we explore how skiing-with as a proximate ethnographic methodology helps us to re-think the current challenges around sustainability from an onto-epistemological point of view. Through skiing-with, we develop a new repertoire for knowing and (re) shaping ski-tourism priorities in the snowy landscapes. In so doing, we illustrate a feminist and posthuman ethnographic methodology for tourism research.

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## Introduction

When he still recalled his dreams,  
he told me how the world was melting,  
but no one can imagine

*ratti skoarádat suovdnji šuoħmir*

The absence of our footprints,

how the tundra flowers press into bog  
with the sting of snow's memory.

*On this cold night he evoked the words:*

*Winter way made by driving reindeer (in harness) over the snow.*

*The kind of going in which one hears a grating noise as the sleigh*

*or skis pass over a rough surface.*

**CONTACT** Monica Nadegger  [monica.nadegger@lmu.de](mailto:monica.nadegger@lmu.de)  LMU Munich, & MCI - The Entrepreneurial School, Munich, Germany.

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*Grazing hole dug by reindeer in the snow.*

*Particles of ice in the shape of a needle..."*

Excerpt from the poem "A thousand words for snow" by Vivian Faith Prescott (2022, p. 10)

It is odd, at the closing stage of the first quarter of the twenty first Century, to be speaking about sustainable tourism at all, and perhaps even more so when the discussion centres on skiing and snow sports. The melting of snowy landscapes, glaciers, and polar ice sheets make the climate crisis tangible and *felt* on a personal, emotional, embodied and spiritual level, as the poem by Prescott (2022) illustrates. Icy, snowy and cold landscapes are melting. The Arctic is warming four times faster than the global average (Rantanen et al., 2022). The temperatures in Alpine regions rise twice as fast (Willibald et al., 2021). The fast-paced rise of temperatures is linked to the *man*<sup>1</sup>-made climate crisis. It intersects with many other adverse consequences such as biodiversity loss, pollution, social and economic inequality. Such drastic developments also pose a threat to the livelihood of local and Indigenous people in circumpolar regions (Cameron, 2012; Vogel & Bullock, 2021). At the same time, these anthropocentric challenges confront business-as-usual in snow-based tourism industries (Nadegger & Wegerer, 2024) in both Arctic and Alpine regions. The shortening seasons, snow scarcity and related safety issues such as avalanches, landslides and flooding pose significant risks for the snow-based tourism industry in the North and the Alps (Demiroglu et al., 2024; Haanpää et al., 2015; Landauer et al., 2015; Steiger et al., 2019).

These drastic changes in the winter tourism industry and the interrelated questions on its sustainability have attracted significant academic attention (see Steiger et al., 2019 for an overview). With a set of predefined parameters such as season length, capacity of snowmaking, altitude of the respective ski areas or snow depth (see, eg Chi et al., 2025; Steiger & Scott, 2020), quantitative approaches estimate and predict the decline of potential "optimal ski days" (Witting & Schmude, 2019), the snow security of specific regions and their link to technical snowmaking (Knowles et al., 2024), their economic viability related to demographic change (Steiger, 2012), as well as the energy use and emission intensity of ski tourism (Knowles et al., 2024). Another strand of research in this area investigates the impact of variable snow security on skiing demand, vulnerability, and tourism behaviour through predictive models, surveys and questionnaires among potential target groups (Berbeka, 2018; Cocolas et al., 2016; Landauer et al., 2015). Other studies zoom in on the managerial dimensions of how to develop and innovate in an increasingly fragile industry (Bonzanigo et al., 2016; Krzesiwo & Mika, 2024; Rech et al., 2019). These studies show macro-scale developments and quantify the impacts of climate crisis as well as the contribution to the very same through the skiing industry lens. They stimulate managerial questions and illustrate various (un)successful adaptation strategies in destination-specific case studies. Clearly, climate, and thus also snow, have considerable agency, but anthropocentric intention continues in vain to attempt to manage, control and limit those agentic effects.

However, the literature does not engage with the ontological and epistemological premises that underpin mainstream assumptions on sustainable (winter) tourism such as the capitalist "logics" of endless growth accumulation and development (see

Fletcher, 2019). Further, the studies remain distant from the practice of skiing itself, and the underlying tensions between the skiing industry and sustainability. As such, they miss out on place-based, relational and entangled connections that skiing fosters and disrupts. The anthropocentric worldview (i.e. nature as valuable only in relations with humans) is unquestioned, and thus the potential of an ecocentric (ie an interdependent, entangled world of all human and other-than-human organisms) understanding of the value of snow landscape and entanglements is ignored (Booth, 2024). Therefore, we argue for a need to reaffirm ethnographic methodologies that interrogate and stay with these tensions in the soon-to-be-melted landscapes, especially when we turn our gaze towards questions of sustainability. In this paper we ask: How could skiing, as an ethnographic methodology, help us to rethink the sustainability of winter tourism through place-based, relational and entangled ways of knowing in the era of climate change?

We argue that a proximate ethnography in the context and place of skiing allows us to open an alternative repertoire of understanding; tourism as a relational phenomenon (Pernecky, 2023a); potentially offering worldmaking capacity (Tucker & Shelton, 2018); and staying proximate to the trouble of tourism (Rantala et al., 2024). We propose *skiing-with* as a novel methodological approach in and with the entangled, messy, snowy landscapes. We conceptualize *skiing-with* inspired by feminist and posthuman approaches in ethnographic methodologies in tourism. In practice, this means that our embodied and sensorial application of ethnographic methodology draws from walking-with and non-representational methodologies, where the core is to open oneself up to the entanglement of both human and non-human actors (Springgay & Truman, 2018; Vannini, 2015). In what follows, we provide a broad context of skiing practice, before introducing the methodological approach of *skiing-with*. We then illustrate *skiing-with* with three ethnographic lenses—*skiing-with tracks*, *skiing-with distance* and *skiing-with consumption*—from our fieldwork(s). Finally, we confront the epistemological and methodological assumptions and challenges implicit in considering the possibility of sustainable skiing as tourism.

## Skiing – leisure practices, histories, and tensions

Broadly speaking, skiing is a way of moving across and on/in snowy landscapes. It is central to winter tourism industries and a popular leisure practice across the globe. Cross country skiing, downhill skiing, ski touring, ski mountaineering, and fell skiing are just a few examples of how skiing connects tourists and locals to the snowy landscapes.

Skiing as a practice dates back over thousands of years, for example in Arctic regions and their hunter-gatherer societies. Rock carvings from 2600 BC suggest the use of skis, and over 8000-year-old remnants of ski's were found in Russia (Goksøyr, 2013). Skiing is also part of indigenous cosmologies. For example, the Siberian Ostyak tribe sees the milky way as a ski track that the god Tunk-Pox carved into the sky while chasing an elk (Huntford, 2013). Indigenous people in the Arctic, such as Sámi communities, share a long tradition of both cross-country and downhill skiing and “used skis for transport, hunting, herding reindeer and for play” (Pedersen, 2013, p. 580).

From an everyday activity, skiing then transitioned to a sports and leisure activity, with its roots in Norway as the cradle of skiing as a sport (Huntford, 2013). In the Alps, skiing developed at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the twentieth century (Hofmann & Martinelli, 2016), positioning skiing as a leisure practice and tourism project in remote places (Berkbe, 2018). Nowadays, the skiing industry is one of the key tourism sectors in otherwise remote and rural mountainous areas around the world. It forms a crucial part of the respective tourism economies, and in national culture in, for example, Austria, Finland and Norway (Goksøyr, 2013; Landauer et al., 2015; Müllner, 2013; Parviainen, 2002).

The dominant image of contemporary skiing as a glamorous leisure pursuit is nested in various tensions of coloniality, intersectionality, exploitation and the endless reach of commodification (Goksøyr, 2013; Mathieu, 2022). Skiing ideals are tied to dominant Western and Eurocentric cultures along intersecting systems of oppression and are part and parcel of the machinery of capitalism. Contemporary skiing for most is neither a means of hunting nor everyday mobility, but rather is free-time leisure, wrapped up in the anthropocentric power relations of a glamorous skiing industry. Modern skiing is traditionally anchored in masculine, heroic, white and ableist discourses and practices and as such is part of an institutionalisation of classism, elitism, racism and heterosexism in nature-based outdoor sports (Sailors & Weaving, 2024). Skiing as part of the tourism industry also increasingly faces scrutiny concerning the commodification of landscapes and the subsequent environmental damage (Booth, 2024; Gross & Winiwarter, 2015; Varley & Medway, 2011). Steel and concrete structures carry thousands every day into remote and fragile mountain areas—when there is snow. Technological advancements such as snowmaking are harnessed to keep the season running, and the co-dependent communities and businesses alive. With the possibility of mechanical snow production, skiing is becoming a commodity dependent sport, rather than a weather dependent one (Knowles et al., 2024; Ritner, 2022). Such commodification has led to the rise of expensive infrastructure, luxury destinations, “designer” ski-wear, mega resorts, the standardization of skiing landscapes and practices, and the accelerated growth of the skiing industry itself (Groß, 2017; Nadegger & Bosio, *in press*; Ritner, 2022). Thousands of jobs, and billions of dollars of investment as well as whole communities depend upon skiing and add weight to its necessary survival.

The tensions in skiing as a modern leisure sport and lucrative tourism industry seem to stand in contrast to ecocentric ways of being that promote entangled, caring, multispecies and place-based notions of sustainability (Booth, 2024). Yet skiing also has been a space to develop socio-ecological understandings of more-than-human landscapes (Løland & Hällgren, 2023; Nadegger, 2024), for emancipation (Hofmann & Martinelli, 2016) and in the reclamation of indigenous cultures and community (Pedersen, 2013).

As such, then, our question remains: Can skiing as an ethnographic methodological practice inspire us to consider the possibility of sustainable tourism and to stay critically proximate to tourism practices and phenomena in troubled times? Building on feminist and posthuman approaches, we propose *skiing-with* as a way to precisely attend and engage with such tensions.

## Skiing-with as an onto-epistemological exploration

We situate *skiing-with* as both an ontological move and a vital starting point for ethnography that is epistemologically concerned with difference, tension, and curiosity. The practice of skiing-with is to go beyond the understanding of skiing as a recreational activity, toward skiing as a mode of knowing-with, thinking-with and becoming-with a wider material realm. The emphasis on *-with* here is rooted in a feminist ethics of care that challenges anthropocentric human-nature dichotomies (Phillips, 2019; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). Knowing-*with*, thinking-*with*, becoming-*with* and subsequently, skiing-*with*, requires being open to subtle ways and diverse ontologies. We acknowledge a reciprocity and entanglement in shaping our subjectivities and worldings always in relation with (more-than-human) others (Haraway, 2016a; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2012). Such a critical feminist understanding of our knowledge-making practices has also recently been taking up in tourism studies (see, eg Pernecky, 2023b; Rantala et al., 2024; Ren, 2018).

Zooming in to the ties to ethnography, we situate skiing-with within the onto-epistemological discussions of proximate ethnographies. We see skiing-with as a methodology that stays proximate. Proximity here is understood both as a matter of “scale—a mode of staying geographically near—and an affective mode of closeness—being in contact” (Rantala et al., 2023, p. 6). Proximity is closely related to ethnographic approaches in post-human and feminist new materialist traditions that approach life in the climate crisis from a relational understanding (Haraway, 2016a; Tsing, 2015). The feminist new materialist and multispecies discussions seek to cultivate attentiveness to more-than-human relations and recognition of how knowledge is produced and shared in these relations (Bubandt et al., 2022; van Dooren et al., 2016). These discussions highlight material ways of being in the world and the processes through which knowledge comes to be (Alaimo, 2010; Ulmer, 2017). In line with this, proximate methodologies seek to activate the situated, affective, and corporeal aspects of knowing along multiple dimensions (Rantala et al., 2023).

First, being proximate is a “down-to-earth” approach (see, eg Jóhannesson, 2019; Rantala et al., 2023) that enables us to think with (rather than about) more-than-human others and local entanglements and differences which are otherwise obscured by large-scale and distanced views. Skiing-with disrupts our worlding as it is “experiential, corporeal and affective” and produces “(knowledge about) the world, seen as a set of relations and tasks” (Zylinska 2014, p. 97). Zylinska explains how such a relational understanding of worlding requires both attention for “extremely tiny and extremely complex” (ibid) processes and ways of being.

Second, to mobilize feminist ethics of care and proximity in the skiing-with as ethnographic endeavour, we situate it in epistemologies of walking-with (Rantala et al., 2020; Springgay & Truman, 2018). Walking methods embrace mundane practices of “going along” with others and experiencing landscapes, leisure, urban environment or mobility (see, eg Springgay & Truman, 2018). They have been applied widely in different disciplines, with varied approaches (see eg Bates & Rhys-Taylor, 2017; Hall et al., 2018; Ingold & Vergunst, 2008). Springgay and Truman (2018) have discussed and developed the methodology by focusing on the more-than-human dimensions of “land and geos, affect, transmaterial and movement” (p. 2). According to them, to

walk-with is to open oneself to relationality with the more-than-human. It demands that “we acknowledge our surroundings as vital agents with whom we walk, rather than a backdrop we merely walk in” (Einarsdóttir & Lund, 2024, p. 106). As such, walking-with methodologies underline the embodied nature of moving in and with different contexts and landscapes and how such motion-based ways of studying allows us to develop new sensibilities for landscapes, industries, and worldings (Cypher, 2022; Duffy et al., 2023; Pink et al., 2010). Movement in an environment immerses us in an embodied moment in which all of our senses connect with material plasticities (snow and skis), sounds (music blaring from snow bars), smells (pine, hotdogs, wet snow), etc. It is this movement-with, inviting rhythmic, temporal and affective dimensions to our social scientific inquiry and foregrounding the importance of becoming attentive and curious (Valtonen & Salmela, 2023) to the ordinariness of surroundings that we see as potentially vibrant in skiing-with landscapes, people, histories, mountains and snow.

Further, walking-with methodologies embrace an ontological turn that is anchored in relationality, while it also criticises the long-established dualisms in Western, Eurocentric thought inherent in sustainability (see, eg Ergene & Calás, 2023) that have separated and still separate the human/non-human, nature/culture, and mind/body in the first place (Springgay & Truman, 2018). Accordingly, Ulmer (2017) has noted that walking-with methodologies are connected to the posthuman and feminist inquiries that aim to “think-with” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2012)—grounded with objects, things, animals, elements, and theories, power and differences. Thus, it is important to emphasize that ethnographic methodologies of walking-with, and hence also skiing-with, are always entangled and situated in a particular positioning and remain critical to their own entanglements. Indeed, Springgay and Truman (2018, p. 11) state:

Walking-with is explicit about political positions and situated knowledges, which reveal our entanglements with settler colonization and neoliberalism. Walking-with is accountable. Walking-with is a form of solidarity, unlearning, and critical engagement with situated knowledges.

When we move from walking-with to skiing-with, we need to situate ourselves in the traditions and histories that underpin modern day skiing and our skiing ethnographies. Building on this posthuman and feminist new materialist thought, skiing-with as an ethnographic exploration can become a way of questioning prevailing orthodoxies such as growth, development or anthropocentrism and epistemological certainties such as distance, generalizability still nested in research on sustainable winter tourism. We now illustrate our new methodological proposition of skiing-with, with empirical material from the Alps and the Arctic.

## Methodology

In the ethnographic explorations that we build upon in this paper, we have engaged with skiing in the Arctic and the Alps in a European context, acknowledging that there are other locations and traditions out there. We have been skiing both purposefully for ethnographic research and during our leisure time. We skied on machine-made skiing tracks, on cross-country tracks, and downhill slopes; on natural snow and artificially made-snow; in protected woods and on alpine terrain; on

wetlands; on clear-cut forest areas; on industrial areas; and on the ice of lakes and rivers. We have used cross country skis (skating and classic), downhill skis, and diverse types of touring skies. We have skied in all weathers from whiteouts and rain to sunny “chocolate-box” settings, in powder, lumpy ice and melting slush. As able-bodied tourism academics of the Global North and West, we were privileged enough to live in or travel to places where skiing is possible and had the financial means to do so. With our bodies and socialization, we have profited from and do fit into leisure discourses and practices around skiing both in the Alps and the North. Monica has been growing up skiing near the highly developed ski resorts in the Austrian Alps. While the enthusiasm for skiing and winter sports was more determined by her family’s passion for the sport than her own in early childhood years, the combination of skiing, snowboarding and ski mountaineering as leisure activities and the friendships and adventures formed over the years, grew the passion for and connection to skiing as commodified leisure. Outi mainly practiced skiing with old skis at the family cabin when growing up, due to unpredictable winters in southern Finland and limited resources to buy cross-country skis or to participate in downhill skiing. Later, when moving to northern Finland, skiing became an important part of her life. Currently she lives next to a small ski resort and well-maintained cross-country tracks, and engages also in ski-touring with her family, friends, and colleagues. Peter has lived in Norway for extended periods of time, practising downhill, randonnee and cross-country skiing all pretty much as a novice. He currently resides in Scotland. There the skiing industry is under serious threat due to lack of snowfall and warming winter temperatures but at the same time embodies part of the brand and capitalistic logic for Scottish winter tourism.

Skiing for us is both commodified leisure and family history, connection to our homes and social life, and research practice. We buy outdoor gear, ski lift tickets, travel to ski resorts as part of the consumer culture around skiing, but we also just go outdoors in our backyards with friends and family, into the woods and in alpine terrain. As such, we have been involved in the colonality, intersectionality, and commodification (Goksøyr, 2013; Mathieu, 2022) that skiing in such a capacity entails. Yet we may feel that skiing for us, with friends, families and colleagues also exceeds such perceptions of skiing as capitalist excess. All these legacies both shape and limit our ability to remain “strange” to skiing, and it requires effort to unlearn taken-for-granted binaries (e.g., nature and skier) and categorizations (e.g., nature as a resource). In skiing-with, we try to unpack these messy relations, interrogating the limits and small openings that such a complicity and history nevertheless allow us.

The materials that form the basis for skiing-with in this paper were collected for different projects that referred to more-than-human and embodied engagements with skiing. Monica’s ethnographic work is based in the Austrian Alps. She studied tourism workers and their work with the snow in the skiing industry in two ski areas in 2021 and 2022. She shadowed their daily work practices and combined this with autoethnographic insights and archival and media data on downhill skiing in the Alps. Outi focused on back country skiing in Finnish Lapland in 2020–2021 by herself, with her family and with her colleague during the Covid-19 pandemic. Finally the Outi and Peter engaged in a dialogue by skiing both separately in Morzine, France, and Rovaniemi, Finland, and then together in Rovaniemi during the Winter 2023. Our

techniques for skiing-with comprise multiple different ways of “doing ethnography”: shadowing daily work practices in the snow, participant observations, fieldnotes, (informal) interviews, photographs and videos, and secondary material such as archival sources as well as autoethnographic techniques such as poetry writing, collaborative reflections or reflexive memos in the field. Importantly, this is neither an exhaustive nor obligatory list of techniques for skiing-with, but rather a set of practices that allowed us to get close and stay proximate with snow, built and natural landscapes, skiers and tourism workers.

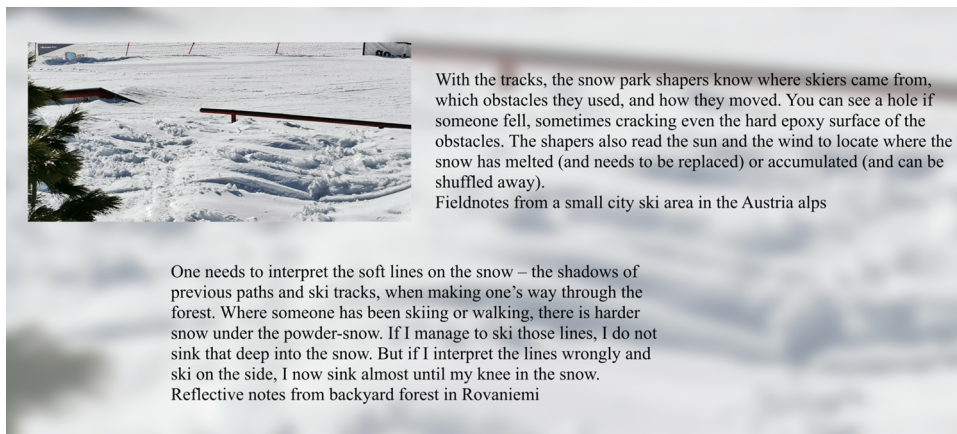
Our analysis will include so-called “sticky embodied experiences”. These are not exact extracts from the field per se but questions, epiphanies, and bodily experiences that stay with us and are developed through curious discussions with others (see, e.g., Valtonen & Salmela, 2023), as in this case, in the conversation both in the field and analytical discussions between the three authors here. A very practical reason for using sticky experiences comes from the fieldwork challenges: skiing with poles in our hands, in icy temperatures and also physically demanding environments. Writing notes has been difficult and for the most part we have not used technological devices except our smartphones for recording experiences. However, we do pull out notebooks from rucksacks when we stop to rest and discuss our thoughts, and we have slowly learned to trust that the most important experiences stick with us (Rantala & Höckert, 2025).

In what follows, we illustrate skiing-with through three different narratives: skiing-with tracks, skiing-with distance and skiing-with consumption. These narratives are constructed by combining our reflections from the three contexts. Throughout the narratives, we aim to illustrate the entanglement of micro-level experiences and sensitivities with macro-level global processes that collide in the moment of skiing-with, suggesting that the sustainability of (skiing) tourism is anything but a straightforward issue.

## **Skiing-with with snowy landscapes in troubled times**

### ***Skiing-with tracks***

The examples in [Figure 1](#) illustrate how tracks and tracking are crucial practices in everyday work and leisure practices in ski areas. As Du Plessis (2022) states, tracking is “a practice of interpreting and relating to the material semiotics of landscapes through the relational traces of more-than-human actors and the histories that their movements both make and reveal” (p. 113–114). Shiny surfaces indicate sun-exposed and soon-to-be-icy surfaces. If read correctly, skiers can then navigate around these tracks of the sun to avoid an unpleasant fall. The small snow dunes, almost looking like ocean waves, show the direction and speed of the wind. Skiing tracks indicate the frequency and movement of skiers on the slopes and in the forest and give an idea about the movements and skier pressure these areas face (see [Figure 1](#)). Other-than-human actors also leave their tracks at margins and at the heart of ski areas: dog paws near the top station of the cable car, a hare’s track on the edges of the slope or lichens growing in the less disturbed forest spaces. Such tracks as actual prints of human and other-than-human actors in the ground offer a first glimpse into

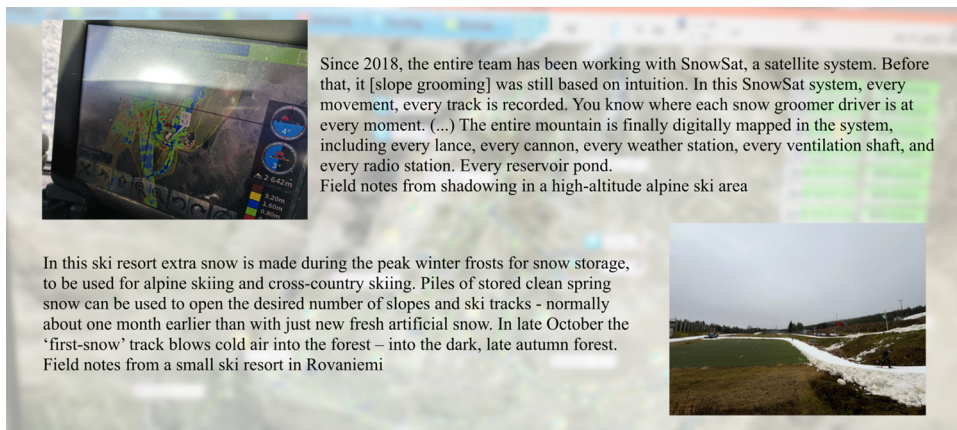


**Figure 1.** Fieldnotes. Photo: Several ski and snowboard tracks in a snow park in the Alps (Monica).

the stories of landscapes, beings and industries: who shares a space, who or what moves how and where, and who is missing. To interpret these tracks, however, one needs to be attuned to the landscapes, the weather, its inhabitants (human and other-than-human), and its technologies.

We also see snowcat tracks—the dense parallel lines that stand for perfectly maintained, “fresh” slopes—they indicate where a slope is freshly groomed. Such track maintenance in ski areas is inherently nested with technology. As illustrated in the pictures and field notes above, the mountain, the snow, and the water get measured and managed, to ensure snow security and allow track making and slope grooming. Such snowcat tracks tell us about the technologization and the industrial component of the skiing “project”, but we also see how they are nested in both climate change and the public discourse surrounding it. For example, the satellite system mentioned above (see [Figure 2](#)) is starting to fail, especially in former permafrost areas where the ground is now beginning to move and loosen up. Following such tracks, skiing-with them beyond what is immediately seen, can help us to get a glimpse on skiing not only as a touristic project, but also as a political and geological one.

At the same time, our micro-level ethnographic work means getting more than acquainted with ski tracks themselves: becoming friends with (for example, lines and lichens) but also being polluted by others (such as microplastics, ski wax and sewage). We realize that some long established tracks cannot easily be covered or eradicated. Large-scale infrastructure projects have altered mountain areas for centuries ahead, the carbon footprint that skiers (and also we as researchers) leave cannot be undone. Tracks of pollution such as microplastics from geotextile fleece that covers snow depots or chemicals from ski wax will have a long half-life in water, soil and life cycles. By following and attending to such tracks, we start to notice their nuances (Vola et al., 2024). By skiing-with tracks, we do not merely observe these worldings from the outside. Instead, we get drawn in, and yet are complicit with their tensions (Cypher, 2022): We feel the pull and excitement of moving on freshly groomed pistes, while also feeling the violence and exploitation that comes with it. As such, skiing-with as an ethnographic practice also stays critical about knowledge-making and the knowledge-makers and must consider situated knowledge



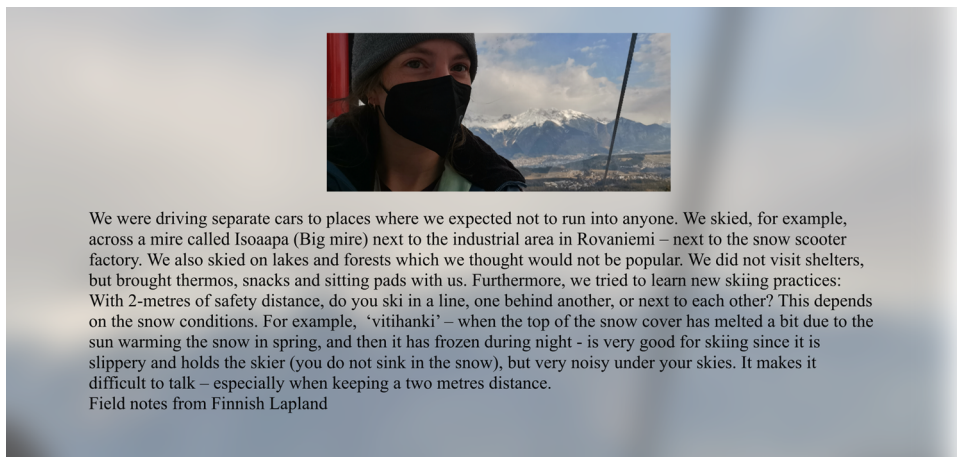
**Figure 2.** Fieldnotes. Upper Left: Screen of the SnowSAT system used to prepare the slope in one of the snow cats in a ski resort in the Austrian Alps. (Monica); Bottom Right: Skiing tracks made with stored snow from previous season in a small ski resort in the North of Finland, October 2024 (Outi).

(see Haraway, 1988). How do we know and how have we been or still are complicit with the histories and conditions that such politics create? Reflexively, we acknowledge, it is not only the tracks, lines and grooves of others that we see in the snow, but also our own.

We see skiing-with the tracks as a sensitivity of moving in, through and with all human and non-human actors (such as technology, snow, workers, weather, mountains) that allows us to understanding the worlding that unfolds through skiing as a historical tourism “project” (Cypher, 2022). Following Cypher (2022), we do not see skiing as an isolated practice or leisure activity, but as a project with world-making affects: its histories of infrastructure expansion, the situated knowledge of mountains and terrain in tourism workers and winter tourists. All of these practices leave tracks, and by skiing-with such tracks, we can try to pay “careful attention to the conditions through which assemblages of relations may gather to make life possible for a given entity or a set of relations” (Du Plessis, 2022, p. 114). As such, we gain a partial understanding of hidden or overlooked dimensions of skiing as a world-making project through a critical description of ordinary, mundane, and daily stories. We must reflexively situate and locate our knowing in the tracks of local histories, landscape ecologies and materialities, as well as (more-than-human) life stories. Skiing-with the tracks places us and our responsibility in the web of interactions that we, as researchers and skiers, are part of while “feeling the duality of conquest and belonging - feeling affection and disaffection, alienating and being enmeshed in the project” (Cypher, 2022, p. 228).

### ***Skiing-with distance***

As the quotes in Figure 3 exemplify, the COVID-19 pandemic as one of the major global and human crises marked a significant rupture in ski tourism, and in our fieldwork. With lockdowns and closed borders, tourism came to halt internationally.



**Figure 3.** Fieldnotes. Photo: Safety measures for fieldwork in the Alps in March 2021 (Monica).

In addition, negative press around “super-spreader” events in ski areas such as Ischgl led to renewed discussion if skiing as a form of mass tourism is acceptable, sustainable, or even bearable (Mayer et al., 2021). However, these now empty spaces and ruptured tourism rhythms of these places also gave way for new concepts of backyard tourism. Feeling the emptiness and quiet in such regions was not taken negatively by all—despite the economic instability related to it. “Empty” ski areas with no traffic jams in the valleys and parking lots created a new enthusiasm for local skiers.

In our fieldwork, we were privileged to be locked-in places that allowed us to go skiing in our backyards, once the restrictions were lifted, but borders remained closed and travel was uncertain. Skiing in these temporarily “empty lands” full of familiar culture introduced a new distance to our skiing endeavours and the boundary between tourist and local suddenly became blurry. We stayed physically and geographically close to familiar places, but also got a sense of a distance and strangeness creating a new point of view—“differently, looking for the unknown” (Diaz-Soria, 2017, p. 99). Such notions of proximate tourism (Diaz-Soria, 2017; Rantala et al., 2024; Salmela et al., 2021), where familiar places close by are experienced through a distanced tourist lens—that of the stranger, have recently been suggested to purposefully shift from carbon-heavy to more micro-practices of tourism. The COVID-19 pandemic, as our notes show, also introduced such a new way of staying close while becoming distanced more violently. Skiing-with distance for us meant becoming unfamiliar with otherwise familiar and taken-for granted rhythms, places, and surroundings, while staying close to them in our research and leisure practices. Of course, becoming distanced and being close stood in friction, with “different strata grinding against one another” (Springgay & Truman, 2018, p. 5). Such frictions heighten our senses towards new openings and points to structural changes: How can we understand skiing and travel in the context of the climate, but also geopolitical crises when such travel restrictions or challenges become more frequent? How can we take such a rupture to build back differently and think about the actual needs and barriers for sustainability?

The head of the technical team welcomes us with a coffee in his office. We chat about the work with the new cable car infrastructure, the difficulty to find staff and apprentices in this industry, but also the challenges of the winter season during the COVID-19 Pandemic. The season 2020/2021 is a total failure, with a 100% decrease in overnight stays and skier days. The staff that joins today is here voluntarily, they are all on mandatory short-time work due to the pandemic.

Field excerpt from snow production trials in a high-alpine ski area in Austria

The statement from the fieldnotes exemplifies how locals and tourism workers are also bound to skiing beyond its economic activity, and stay close with its seasonal rhythms and landscapes. Despite the closing of the ski area and the pandemic-related short-term work introduced by the government, tourism workers still came to the ski area to do small jobs and for the social aspects. At the same time, some ski areas decided to open up their slope as a space for leisure and physical activity for the local population, despite the revenue declines and uncertain economic outlook (Steiger et al., 2023). These forms of backyard tourism were not only an opportunity in the time of crises to reach new (or forgotten) markets, but also played a major role in the construction of tourism—or in this regard skiing—subjectivities (Diaz-Soria, 2017). During this period, standard economic concerns of profitability, efficiency and demand were pushed aside. Local well-being and the day visitors suddenly became the focus along with discussion on decent work conditions and the long-term perspective for workforces. Our ethnographic engagement allowed us to recentre and be part of such emotional debates. Skiing-with distance in the pandemic paradoxically allowed distance enough to skiing business-as-usual to get closer to the proximate and locally situated dimension of skiing in contrast or in spite of it.

The unpredictable ways of the virus also impacted the fieldwork, as we were never sure if we could continue, how the distancing measures would impact our work and those of others, and, of course, the worries about the disease itself. During this time, we were also required to wear masks in the cable cars (see Figure 3) and not get “too close” to someone else, while trying to come very close, or stay very close, with

Our field work was interrupted by the pandemic. In Lapland schools and offices were closed, but that spring 2020 we had wonderful weather for skiing: lot of sunshine, lot of snow and no tourists.  
Fieldnotes from Finnish Lapland, Spring 2020



I remember the first ski tour after the lockdown (where you were not allowed to go out and do sports) was over. I took my mum's old neon-orange touring skis and bought a pair of new boots. Before that, I mainly enjoyed the luxury of going up with the cable cars and riding down the slopes and only did tours now and then. On this day, we, my partner and I, drove to a closed ski area near our home. It felt very eerie and ghostly to be in such a quiet place, that is usually so busy. At the same time, it was so amazing to get out on the slushy spring snow, hike up one part of the already closed slope - kick-turn after kick-turn - and just sit on a wooden bench in front of a closed hut. It felt almost like a taboo to be out there again, all alone. The ski slopes were still kind of in good shape, because until March 2020, everything was up and running.  
Personal reflection from the Alps, April 2020

**Figure 4.** Fieldnotes. Photo: First tour after the lockdowns in 2020 at the empty slopes (Monica).

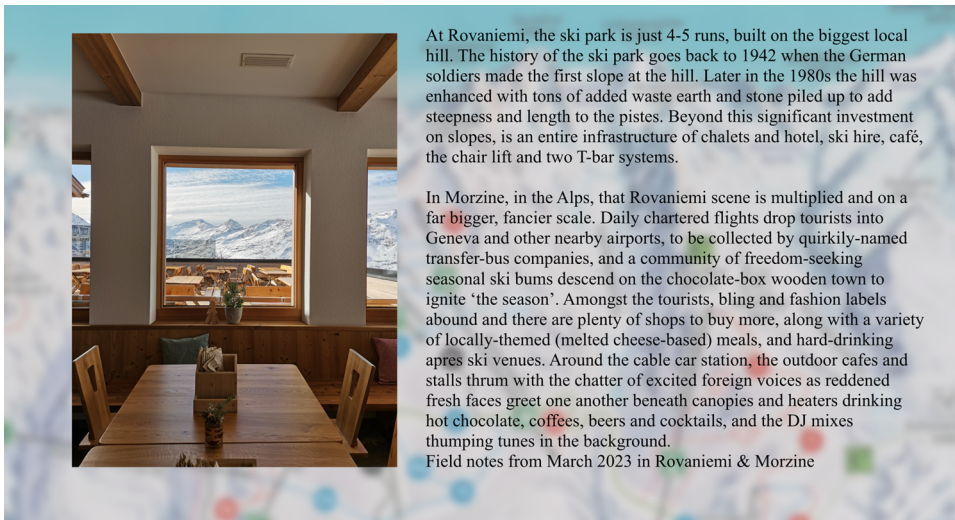
the snow, skiing, and all the practices and processes related to it (see [Figure 4](#)). Zooming in, yet skiing-with distance allows us to understand skiing as practice that is related to our and other human bodies, but also the atmospheres, air, landscapes, and non-human others. We see that being a tourist, a skier or also a tourism worker is bound to neglected materialities such as air or dust (Jensen & Barry, 2024)—or as in our case, a virus that is transmitted *via* air. The rupture that such a virus introduced into our relations with skiing, and with the world served to unfold the transcorporeality and interrelatedness in skiing-with.

However, our fieldnotes show that we are necessarily entangled in the tourism worldings both on a micro-scale with air, dust, pollution and viruses and a macro-scale with governmentally introduced distancing policies and global health concerns. Rather than trying to dissect these messy relations, skiing-with allows us and almost mandates us to make sense of them together—while being in the field, while skiing. Taking such an interrelated approach to skiing-with, we also see that the responsibility in this meshwork of relations extends far beyond our bodies. We feel the trans-corporeal (Alaimo, 2010) dimension of skiing-with others: particles, air, landscapes, humans and non-human beings. In skiing-with distance, we realize that our skiing is always constituted by many encounters as it “meshes worlds” (Valtonen et al., 2020, p. 10) and allows us to care at “the right distance” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017; Valtonen et al., 2020) for these worlds by staying in touch and in friction with them, literally and metaphorically.

Beyond this, the pandemic disrupted the seemingly unstoppable anthropocentric machine driving the skiing industry - capitalism - further emphasising our inescapable interrelatedness with a disruptive, always-in-flux more-than-human universe.

### ***Skiing-with consumption***

Skiing is big business. In skiing-with consumption we notice that modern skiing is nested with many other forms of consumer culture that are entangled with privilege, luxury, and elitism (see [Figure 5](#)). This sets a contrast to the field notes from the times of pandemic, when skiing in our backyards and reflecting on ways of keeping distance and getting close. Skiing indeed can be seen as a perfect example of how the “elitization” of consumption is seen to bring more income to tourism regions and, at the same time, a polarized intervention that places tourism development and resident needs at the opposite sides of the spectrum (Milano et al., 2024). Furthermore, the “business” does not stop with skis, or even other parts of the equipment, clothing and paraphernalia. Blocks of chalets, restaurants, hotels, bars, an entire apres ski sub-industry, infrastructure such as transport, coaching, guiding, equipment hire, and beyond this all of the ancillary stuff that goes with tourism—building and home maintenance companies, taxi firms, food suppliers, nomadic seasonal workers—all cling to the promise of large amounts of the precious floating flakes or at least cold-enough temperatures for technical snowmaking arriving on schedule at the start of the season and lasting until the end. This is no longer snow and skiing as a mode of transport or means to hunt in the winter season, but skiing as a significant aspect of national economic activity and consumer culture in an annual rush for the white gold.



**Figure 5.** Fieldnotes. Photo: View from an alpine hut and newly renovated restaurant just before the season starts. (Monica).

For skiing-with consumption, we notice the intricate relation of skiing and commodification in the small details: the new chairlift seats with their integrated heating and smooth surface mimicking luxury armchairs, or the new ski fashion styles served up as cultural signifiers for a particular skiing tribe. Such an understanding of skiing-with consumption is nested in an anthropocentric understanding of nature sports that privileges “participants’ interests, wants, desires, and ends” (Booth, 2024, p. 191). However, in skiing-with consumption, we realize that such consumption is not only present in the material goods such as skis, food, drinks, but also manifests in the relation between snow, technology and the rhythm of nature in itself.

There are several contact points to sell lift tickets throughout the ski area at nine terminals and six automated ticket machines. What’s important here is to emphasize how all these logistics stay hidden from the guests’ experience. The frontstage experience for guests is the perfect ski area with freshly groomed slopes. Backstages, there is a whole operation that deals with the business models, staff logistics and so on. Only when the ski ticket prices are raised again, debates around the “worth” of skiing emerge.

Field notes from one of the high-alpine ski areas in Austria

Always ready, on-demand perfect snow—the commodification of snow itself has massively shifted the skiing industry (Groß, 2017; Ritner, 2022)—and in skiing-with consumption, this commodification becomes starkly evident through our ethnographic explorations. In the field, we still feel the tension, waiting for the first snowfall of the season, but there are other means now to keep the business running. The advent of industrial time, work holidays, weekends, seasons and school holidays have ushered in a somewhat different clock which regulates the rhythms of skiing. Rather than guaranteed winter weather, in which ice, snow, freeze and thaw are mixed together and must be taken as they come, the modern consumer demands their conveniently wrapped package to be reliable and guaranteed—hence the phrase “snow sure resort” for example. Nowadays the skiing conditions need to be *made* perfect when people

need it, for many there is no time to learn the skills enabling an adjustment to the rhythms of nature. Instead, human ingenuity has delivered all the infrastructure to artificially make snow, to store snow, to transport snow, to make slopes, to make snow parks.

Skiing-with consumption and its ready-to-order rhythms, we feel the underlying growth imperative that guides this industry as a tourism project. Such endeavours often remain implicit and skiing is still considered a nature-based activity rather than a billion dollar service business in an industrial landscape. In terms of cable car infrastructure, snow making infrastructure, and the digital data monitoring between all these different areas to maximise efficiency, our encounters in skiing-with consumption seem very far away from skiing as a nature-based practice. The snow experiences that foster ecological thinking and a deep sense of connection may not usually be accompanied by the fetishised distractions of the spectacle of tourism and place-commodification such as trendy clothes, noisy bars, and souvenir shops (Varley & Barry, 2025). However, without these infrastructures, there may be little downhill skiing in these areas, as consumers arrive expecting a vibrant social scene. Some technological aspects are related to a battle for a kind of anthropocentric and economic sustainability that chimes with green washing agendas: using less water to produce snow, maximizing efficiency to “reduce” the carbon footprint per skier and not “wasting” any resources like energy. These are prominent discourses in the ski areas we skied in, but they do not challenge the development or justification for new development per se. Nor do they confront what Haraway (2016b) terms the “bounded utilitarian individualism” of the Anthropocene—all development bows in service to capitalist expansion and profit maximisation. In other words, this development focuses on increased comfort and luxury in ski areas, as ski areas (in principle) can no longer grow in a spatial sense: The development of new slopes and an expansion of the area is heavily regulated and confined by retreating snow lines. However, they “grow” in other places: charging higher prices; creating more net value per skier; bigger, faster and higher cable cars creeping up the mountain; and more comfort and luxury.

The competitiveness of these resorts and the pressure to perform in a debt-based economy for making profit and sustaining local economies in the valleys and peripheries mediates snow’s and skiing’s relationship with us, and entangles our ethnographic work in frictions between consumption and sustainability. It becomes part of capitalistic logic; its own unstoppable and often illogical mandate. This also makes it tricky for us and others to think-with skiing from a sustainability perspective. How can we disrupt such an accepted growth-based logic in our quest for more sustainable winter tourism? We see potential of ethnographic explorations here in staying-with and skiing-with the trouble of consumption. We similarly feel the joy and comfort of riding in the resorts in the Alps and in the North, while such a close entanglement also reveals how deep our own skiing is nested with expansive, destructive growth and fervent consumption in apparently nature-based activities (Booth, 2024; Sailors & Weaving, 2024).

Right now – after spending the weekend skiing, and after engaging intensively with our notes the few past days, we are mainly struggling. We ask ourselves, so what? Is our

engagement with the dynamic materiality of skiing hinting that it will be the end of ski tourism – or is it emblematic of the end of local ski cultures? Or is it something else that is happening here?

Fieldnotes from Rovaniemi & Morzine, March 2023

## Concluding thoughts

We position skiing-with as a methodological possibility for ethnography to become socio-ecologically embedded (Løland & Hällgren, 2023) and further advance our conceptualization of sustainability through a feminist, post-human lens. Building on proximate ethnography and walking-with methodologies, the three vignettes in our findings show how the connections, sensibilities, and reflexivity anchored in such ethnographic explorations allow us to unravel tensions and differences of skiing in the tourism industry and potentially take “feminist commitment to stay with the trouble seriously” (Rantala et al., 2023, p. 25). Skiing-with as a methodology is thus one way of interrogating the often taken-for-granted anthropocentrism and dominant dualities nested in more conventional approaches of sustainability (Booth, 2024). The “worlding” implicit in our proximate ethnographies of skiing-with offers an alternative to the often universal certainties of positivist studies gathering apparently hyperclean data in order to generate knowledge of the world. Our proximate ethnographic research of skiing-with illustrates that tensions and complexities, as well as underlying assumptions often stay hidden if we approach winter tourism and sustainability as quantified, separated phenomena and singular hypotheses. In contrast, the frictions and tensions in skiing-with tracks, skiing-with distance and skiing-with consumption show how they need to be examined as intertwined—entangled—in and with the world we constantly engage with, as researchers, skiers, travellers and human beings. With-trees, with-mountains, with-rivers, with-animals, with-viruses, with-technology, with-rain, with-snow and with-money.

The onto-epistemological grounding in relationality and a feminist ethos to acknowledge and care for multiple, messy, and troubled worldings bring us closer to skiing-with sustainability. We share the worries and concerns (Booth, 2024; Fletcher, 2019; Pernecky, 2023b) on if or how skiing as a practice that is closely tied to and even perpetuates accelerated growth and commodification can ever foster ecocentric practices and repertoires of tourism. For example, skiing-with consumption has shown that a dusting of snow continually reawakens ours and others’ excitement and the entrepreneurial fervour of a gold rush. It’s snowing! Open the cafe! And we do not propose skiing-with as a solution nor a romantic hope of diminishing these commodifying tendencies, even under the guise of sustainability (Gross & Winiwarter, 2015; Nadegger, 2023, 2024; Phillips, 2019). We see the potential of skiing-with sustainability in recognizing that skiing, for now, is and never will be pure or detached from a capitalist tourism logic, but that we and others can situate our knowledge and practice within those relations, their tensions and consequences and lay them open for interrogation. Similarly, we do not wish to hide that the excitement, passion, and mundane commitment with snow and skiing also make us hopeful (Tucker & Shelton, 2018) in midst of the climate crisis.

We feel the tensions and privilege of skiing. In skiing-with tracks, we see how our entanglement is contributing to ever-increasing carbon emissions. In skiing-with distance, we start to notice what it means to stay close and how quickly taken-for-granted subjectivities like those of tourists or locals or home and away can shift. And in skiing-with consumption, we unravel how commodified leisure often stands in stark contrast to the potential of skiing as an ecologically embedded practice of knowing. Skiing-with highlights such frictions and their sense-abilities through proximate ethnographies. These attunements are at the heart of developing a different repertoire: a situated critique as well as care and responsibility for skiing as practice in a world that is not ours.

We see potential pathways for future research and tourism practice in how skiing-with might suggest more sustainable winter tourism. First, we see skiing-with as one possible methodology that unfolds the potential of ethnography as a critical tool for knowledge-creation, anchored in feminist and posthuman thought. However, such exploration is not limited to skiing-with in the contexts that we have proposed nor to the practice of skiing. Further, other tourism industries underlie the same patterns of anthropocentrism, growth, and (un)sustainability (Booth, 2024; Sailors & Weaving, 2024). Inquiries of hiking-with, surfing-with, swimming-with, biking-with, camping-with, and many more could broaden our view of such place-based, affirmative and critical explorations of sustainability. Second, skiing-with can help us to dive into specific tourism destinations and traditions and shatter the taken-for granted consumerist logic, opening up conversations on how to shift our faltering notions of sustainability through proximate and local being-with. Moving instead to a logic of care and collaboration with our more-than-human cohabitants moves beyond general anthropocentric recommendations (such as decarbonization and moving to climate neutrality, see Scott et al., 2019). Skiing-with can help illuminate the tensions but also propose what reimaged winter tourism might look like. Finally, with the rise of global temperatures, winter tourism with its fixed structures and place-based economies has had its day, and will require ever more investment and innovation in pursuit of a diminishing resource. Perhaps, like the fossil-fuel industry, we should seek alternative answers. Our proximate ethnographic enquiries might yet provide some of the answers as to what those alternatives might prioritise.

## Note

1. We emphasize *man* here through italics, as we refer to the Global North, Western, White, Colonial, Capitalist, and Masculine responsibility for the current crisis all life on Earth now faces. The same critique applies for the notion of the Anthropocene, as it is not all humankind that is and was driving the current crisis.

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## Author contributions

CRedit: **Monica Nadegger**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Outi Rantala**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Peter Varley**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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## ORCID

Monica Nadegger  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2489-7065>

Outi Rantala  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2340-9522>

Peter Varley  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2203-8096>

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