

# Winter Tourism in Alaska— Not an Anomaly

By Neal Fried and Holly Stinson

Some people may think winter tourism in Alaska is a contradiction in terms. However, the industry is very much alive in the state and slowly growing in spite of a three-year recession in the economy.

For the purposes of this article, 'winter tourists' are defined as all those who take advantage of winter recreation. A few winter tourists come from out of state; they are included in this brief study as 'winter visitors' no matter what their primary purpose for visiting might be. The words 'tourist,' 'visitor,' 'guest,' and 'traveler' have identical meanings.

Out-of-state guests make up a minority of those using winter recreation facilities in Alaska. It is those who are already here in the state who constitute the vast majority of people enjoying recreation, sporting events, festivals and other attractions during the winter months.

Although winter officially begins Dec. 21, Alaska's winter season begins much earlier. Activities staged in the state between November and March are discussed in this article, along with some activities that take place in the 'shoulder season' months of October, April and May.

Anchorage has been in the public spotlight lately for making two unsuccessful winter Olympic bids. This has created renewed interest in developing world class, two-season resorts near the city. Proposals for these resorts are examined in this article, as are other less extravagant options for future winter recreation opportunities in the state.

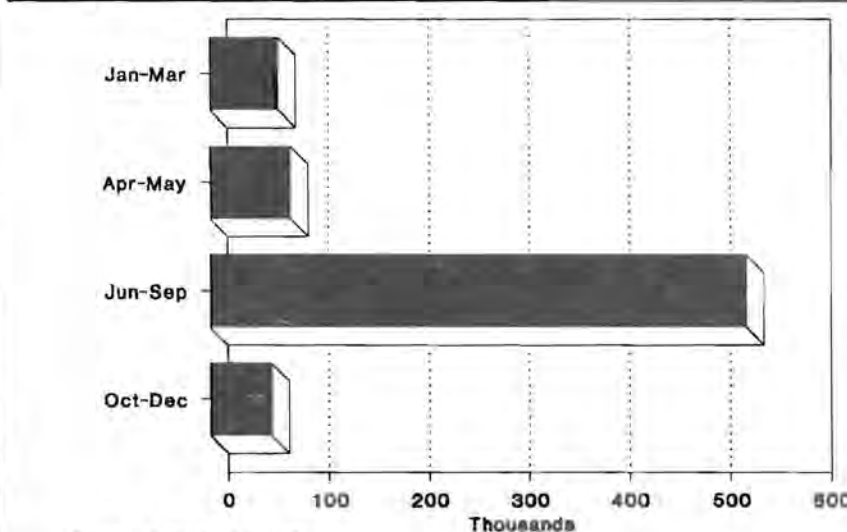
**There is a renewed interest  
in developing world class  
resorts near Anchorage**

## Out-of-state Winter Tourists Are Few Compared to Summer Tourists

Winter tourism certainly has a much lower profile than the summer tourist season of June through September. The number of visitors in the summer recently equaled or exceeded the state population: 533,000 in 1987, over 550,000 in 1986, and 473,000 in 1985. In contrast, winter visitor numbers are very small: at most they number 25,000 per month. (See Figure 1.) The number of winter visitors increases as the season passes; about 30% arrive in the fall months (October, November and December), 33% arrive in the winter (January, February and March), and 37% arrive in the spring months of April and May.

'Winter visitors' is defined as all people arriving from out-of-state, not just those coming for a vacation only. There are those who come to visit friends and relatives, to attend conventions, to conduct business, and those employed seasonally. While the summer months have the greatest percentage of guests coming here to vacation only, many visiting for other purposes in the winter make time during their trip for some type of recreational tour.

**Total Visitors to Alaska – 1987**



**Figure 1**

**Nearly one-half  
of winter visitors  
are here on business**

Winter guests differ from those of the summer in many respects. First of all, the number of vacationers drops significantly from one season to the other. (There were nearly 370,000 vacationers in the summer of 1987, but only 24,808 vacationers in the state between October and March 1988). Conversely, the proportion of business travelers is greater during the winter than the summer: business travelers make up almost half of all Alaska guests during the winter season. (See Figure 2.) During the winter, a much higher percentage of those traveling for pleasure are repeat visitors. Specifically, 40% of vacationers travelling to this state during the winter are repeat visitors, while only 15% of summer vacationers are repeat guests. And winter visitors are usually younger than those here in the summer. The average age of those visiting the state during the winter is 40; the average age of those visiting during the summer is 50. In addition, about 65% of the state's winter guests are from the western states — especially California and Washington.

#### **The Local Market: Alaskans Touring Alaska**

The number of winter travelers during 1986-87 was down by 16,000 from the number arriving one year earlier. And the figures for the winter of 1987-88 were down by about 1,000 over the previous year. It is interesting to note,

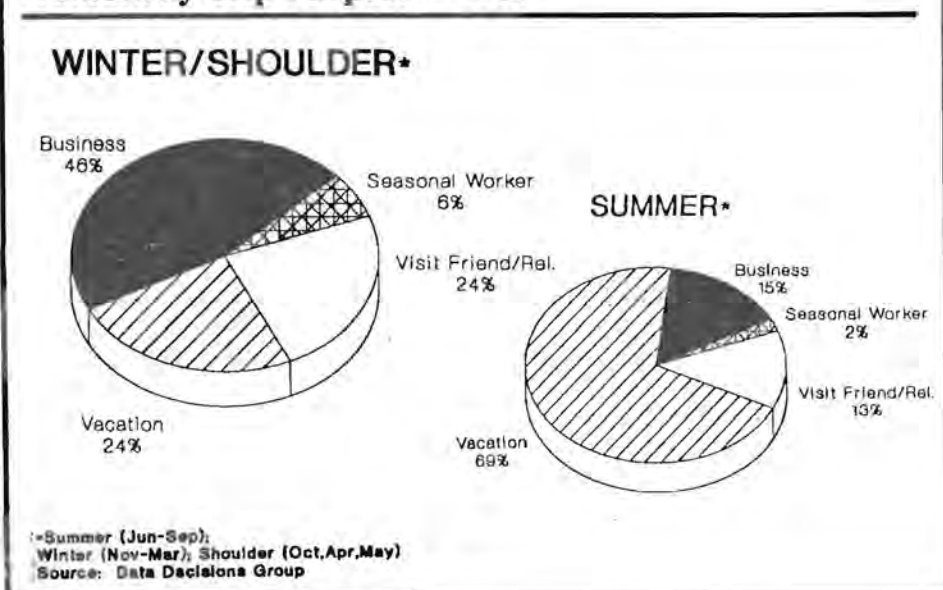
however, that ski resorts and other winter recreation facilities reported increased usage during those same years. Since visitors from out of state have not increased in number, but use of the facilities have, it is clear that the vast majority using facilities are local Alaskans. A look at the difference between the typical Alaskan and the typical non-Alaskan American explains why winter sporting and recreational activities are so heavily used by people living in this state.

Americans have become more health conscious in the 1980's, and Alaskans are no exception. Alaskans are younger and more outdoor-oriented than residents of other states. Also, Alaskans are involved in outdoor recreation of all kinds at almost five times the national average. They participate in winter sports at two-to-eight times the national average. For example, 26% of Alaskans — versus 3% of other Americans — are cross-country skiers; 20% of Alaskans — versus 3% of other Americans — use off-road vehicles for recreation; and 14% — versus 6% — are alpine skiers. Alaska offers a long season and an almost ideal climate for winter recreation. Alaskans take advantage of this in large numbers.

#### **Going to the Dogs**

Sporting events attract the largest portion of winter visitors to Alaska. They come as spectators, as well as participants. Dog mushing enjoyed remarkable growth in the 1970's and the 1980's. It was declared the official state sport by the legislature in 1972. Dog sled races of sprint distance (20 to 30 miles in length) have been the backbone of winter festivals in Fairbanks and Anchorage for decades. Because of the short time period in which these races are run, people are able to watch both the start and finish of a race. Often, local businesses are patronized by the spectators during the slack periods as they await the teams at the finish line. The sprint race staged during Anchorage's winter festival, Fur Rendezvous, remains one of the largest spectator events in the state. Almost 40,000 people turn out to watch it in person. Many more watch it on local television.

**Figure 2**  
**Visitors by Trip Purpose – 1987**



Long distance races—from 200 to over 1,000 miles in length—have made a comeback in Alaska. After a heyday in the earlier part of this century, long distance races faded away until the Iditarod Sled Dog Race was developed in the 1970s. The Iditarod has created renewed interest in and growth of the sport. Further, it has spawned a host of other "Iditaraces" along the historic Iditarod trail: races involving skiers, snowshoers, bicyclists, and youngsters driving dog teams. Officials with CBS television estimated that almost 5 million people nationwide watched the finish of the 1985 Iditarod. Such widespread coverage can only help kindle interest in Alaska as a tourist destination.

With the success of the Iditarod, other long distance races have developed, including the Kuskokwim 300, which runs from Bethel to Aniak and back, and the Yukon Quest, which runs between Fairbanks and Whitehorse, Yukon Territory. Although a small group travels to Alaska from the Lower 48 for these races, local Alaskans turn out in large numbers. Another trend in the sport of dog mushing is in the growing number of small races run in local communities and villages throughout the winter months.

Other winter sporting events, held at indoor arenas and rinks, also draw large numbers of spectators. Hockey, basketball, and curling are all popular in the state. Sports promoters in Anchorage, Juneau and Fairbanks regularly draw teams and their accompanying staff and boosters from Outside by hosting national and international competitions. The majority of spectators, though, are again local Alaskans. Basketball plays a big role in many bush communities during the winter months. When competing teams travel to other communities in the state, members of the teams become winter tourists themselves.

### Skiing: The Winter Sport

Skiing in its various forms—downhill, cross-country, and telemarking—draws the most participants of any sport in the state. It is this sport which holds the most potential for bringing in guests from the Lower 48, Europe or Asia during the winter months. Cross-

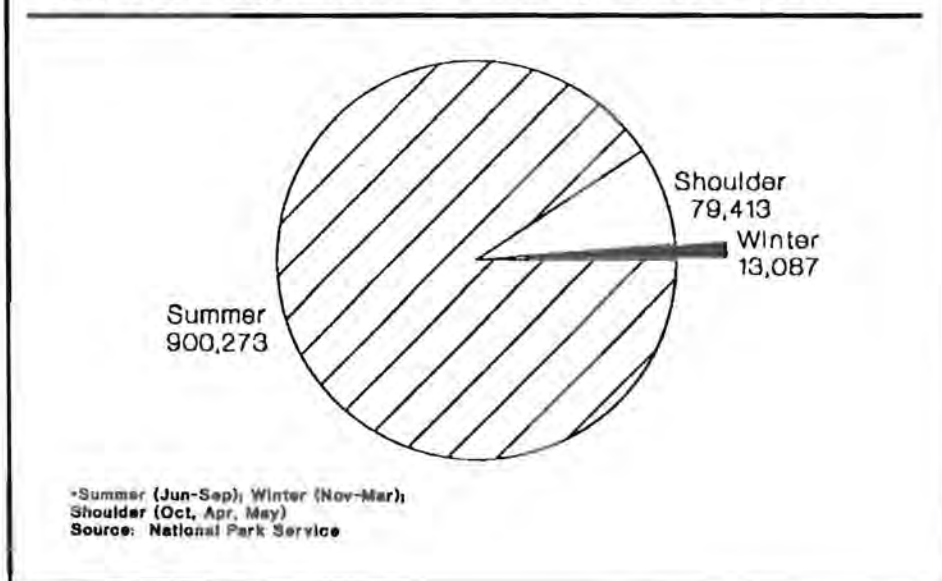
country skiing, which surged in popularity during the last two decades, is responsible for the growth of many small lodges which cater to these skiers. Many of the lodges offer trails groomed for skiing, hot meals, showers, and saunas and hot tubs. The lodge operators find their market almost exclusively in Alaskans who want to get away to be weekend tourists.

The owner of Hatcher Pass Lodge in the Talkeetna Mountains says that he can count on his fingers the number of non-Alaskan tourists who have in recent years vacationed at his lodge. But business at his lodge has grown 10 to 20% per year over the last several years. He estimates that winter activity in the Hatcher Pass area has doubled, or even tripled, in the last 15 years. On any given winter weekend, the area is used not only by cross-country, telemark and downhill skiers, but also by winter enthusiasts who mush dogs, parasail, snow machine, sled, and snowboard.

The numbers of people visiting 'all parks' in the state drop during the winter months, compared to the summer months. (See Figures 3 and 4.) ('All parks' means, for the purposes of this article, both 'unofficial' parks [state lands which are not dedicated park lands but are used for that purpose by the public] and the official state and federal park lands.) Trail systems in the parks are used extensively in the winter by cross-country skiers, dog

**Skiing holds the most potential for drawing the international tourist here during winter**

**Figure 3**  
**Visitors to Major National Parks by Season - 1987**





mushers, and by those using snow machines and snowshoes. Probably the lone exception to this trend of fewer winter park visitors is the Alaska Chilkat Bald Eagle Preserve near Haines. When the greatest number of eagles flock to the Chilkat River for salmon (during the months of October, November and December), the greatest number of visitors flock there, also.

While downhill ski resorts have great potential for drawing tourists from outside the state, it is mostly Alaskans who currently patronize them. The largest downhill resort, Alyeska, is just 40 miles south of Anchorage and pulls about 99% of its skiers from the Anchorage, MatSu, and Kenai Peninsula region. The number of "skier visits" (lift tickets sold) has grown steadily over recent years. During the 1987-88 season, Alyeska registered 160,000 skier visits. (Expansion plans currently underway at the resort are discussed later in this article.) The few other facilities scattered around the state are also heavily used. The number of skiers at Hilltop in Anchorage increased from 38,000 in its first year of operation, 1983-84, to 53,000 in the 1987-88 season. That increase came in spite of a recession in the economy and a considerable drop in that region's population. It is statistics like these that lead many people to believe that there is a market for additional ski facilities in Alaska.

An important goal of many winter resorts is to improve their profitability by increasing and diversifying their facility's use. Snow-making equipment can help stretch the skiing season to some extent. Another way to increase use of a facility is to operate the ski lifts year-round. Alyeska, for example, operates a ski lift during the summer months; 35,000 summer tourists rode the lift in the summer of 1986 to gain a summertime scenic view from the mountaintop. If a winter facility can diversify by selling both summer and winter recreation, it can prove itself a more profitable enterprise.

### There's More: Luge, Northern Lights....

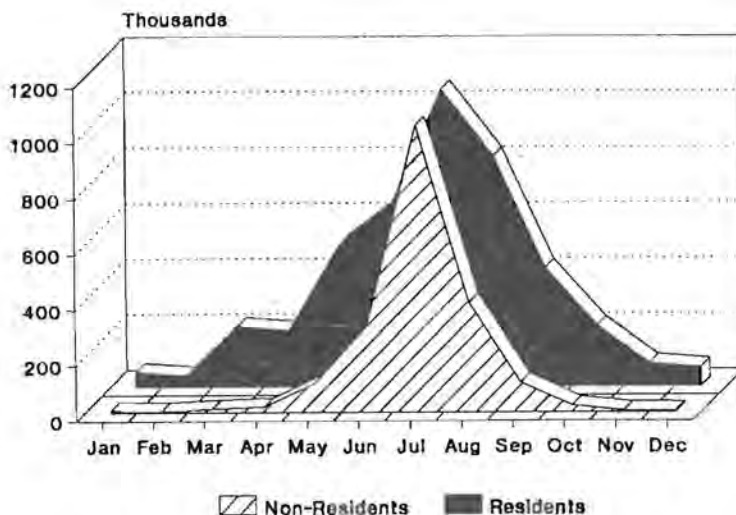
In addition to the common winter sports, Alaska also hosts unusual winter activities. The luge track in Fairbanks is one of only three such tracks in the U.S. The Fairbanks club that operates it offers rides to the public between Thanksgiving and March. Heliskiing — flying to the top of a mountain or icefield in a helicopter and then skiing to the bottom — is becoming popular and can be enjoyed year-round. Recent negative cost factors, however, have reined in customer traffic for both heliskiing and another popular winter activity, hot air ballooning. It has been huge increases in insurance rates which have slowed the growth of these sports.

The aurora borealis, or northern lights, is a phenomenon unique to the northern regions and a possible resource that could be exploited for the purposes of boosting winter tourism. The northern lights have become a marketable item for hot springs resorts located near Fairbanks. Area resorts there promote their facilities in the winter not only for cross-country skiing and for the springs themselves, but also as excellent vantage points for the viewing of the famous phenomenon.

Further, operators of Chena Hot Springs report that their customer base is diversifying. Increasing numbers of Japanese are patronizing the springs, and more people on organized tours are stopping there. In past years, Chena Hot Springs' primary customer has been the Alaskan.

## Year-round use a goal for winter resorts

**Figure 4**  
**State Park Visitors – 1987**



Source: Alaska DHR, Div. of Parks

And ice climbers from around the world have adopted Valdez as a favorite destination for the 50 frozen waterfalls located near that city in Keystone Canyon. Climbers from as far as Austria and New Zealand have been drawn to Valdez's Ice Climbing Festival. The festival is an annual event that has been staged every February since 1983 by the community of Valdez.

Another trend in the business of Alaska winter tourism is the burgeoning popularity of 'adventure trips.' These adventures include heliskiing, skiing Mt. McKinley, and travelling and camping via dogsled over considerable distances into the backcountry. One adventure business in Fairbanks offers a variety of trips, including a two-hour sled dog tour of the local area and a \$2,200 package of glacier skiing for seven people. The number of travelers drawn by 'adventure trips' is probably quite small now. There may be, though, significant future traffic in this niche of the tourism business.

### Winter Festivals and Conventions, Too

An alternative for tourists seeking entertainment other than outdoor winter recreation are the festivals and carnivals held in both large and small towns throughout the state. Fur Rondy in Anchorage, Taku Rondy in Juneau, and the Fairbanks Ice Festival host sporting events but also offer many other tourist-drawing activities — including parades, fur auctions, arts and crafts exhibits, snow and ice sculpting competitions, dinners, dances, and more. Some guests from outside Alaska are attracted to these festivals. One survey showed that over 13% of airline passengers arriving in Anchorage during the month of February were coming to attend or participate in Fur Rendezvous. Festivals smaller than the ones held in Anchorage, Juneau and Fairbanks, but just as important to their townspeople, include the Iceworm Festival in Cordova and the Beaver Roundup in Dillingham. Another, the Festival of Native Arts in Fairbanks, an annual event in its 16th year, last year attracted 13,000 people from throughout Alaska and Canada.

Conventions bring a measurable number of visitors to Alaska in the

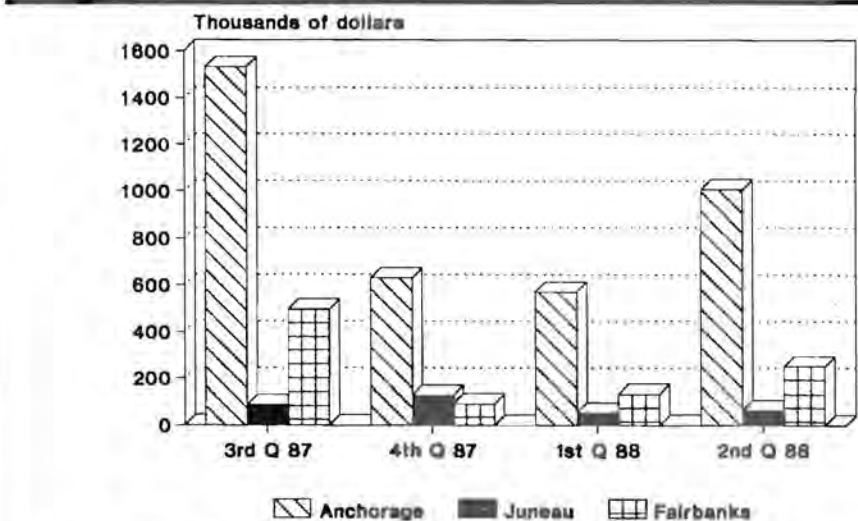
winter, too. Fairbanks, Anchorage and Juneau all host conventions during both the winter and summer seasons. Revenues raised in Anchorage via that city's hotel/bed tax have been twice as great in the 2nd and 3rd quarters of 1988 and 1987 than in the 1st and 4th quarters of 1988 and 1987. (See Figure 5.) Juneau's revenue picture is different. That city's bed tax revenues have been highest in the October/November/December quarter. (Again, see Figure 5.)

Even smaller towns bring in considerable numbers with conventions. Sitka hosted over 2,000 conventioners last winter. And Kodiak hosts each winter a commercial fishery trade show which draws over 4,000 people.

The winter tourism industry is dominated by small business operators and is currently patronized mostly by Alaskans. It is primarily the small business operators who lay the necessary groundwork for attracting additional winter visitors. A recent study conducted for the Municipality of Anchorage identified winter recreation as the key to stimulating that city's tourist industry during its traditionally slow winter season. Meanwhile, as the small winter business operators continue to see

### Winter tourism industry dominated by small businesses

Revenues from Bed Taxes



Source: City Finance Depts.

Figure 5

increases in their client numbers, a handful of large projects are being proposed in Anchorage to further boost winter tourism.

### **Will the Olympics Torch Be Passed to Alaska?**

Alaskans first contemplated making a bid for the international winter Olympics 32 years ago when George Beyers, then the mayor of Anchorage, traveled to Chicago to offer his city as a host for the 1960 Olympics. Mayor Beyers returned without making his pitch because he didn't think Anchorage was quite ready. It was years later, in 1984, when a number of Anchorage residents attended the winter Olympics in Sarajevo that the city was deemed ready to bid for future Olympic games.

recent report that tourist dollars expended in the state could be as high as \$1 billion eight years after the Olympics.

### **World-class Developers Eye Alaska Ski Slopes**

Even without the prospect of the Olympics, Alaska's winter tourism industry has the potential of changing dramatically. It could go from an intrastate-dependent industry to one drawing mostly international travelers. It could go from an industry dominated by small independent operators to one dominated by international conglomerates. It would be the 1998 Olympics, however, that would provide the ultimate future backdrop for Alaska's winter tourism industry.

## **Winter Olympics: An economic jump start for winter tourism**

Since then, Anchorage has offered unsuccessful bids for the 1992 and 1994 games. But city leaders proclaim that they plan to try again in 1991 for the 1998 Olympics.

Many believe the Olympics would 'jump start' an international winter tourism industry in Alaska. It's difficult to imagine that a world event of Olympic stature would not forever change the face of winter tourism in Alaska. New facilities would be built, and the worldwide exposure would be a dream come true for marketers of winter tourism in this state. An economic consulting firm, Economic Research Associates, was recently hired by the Anchorage Olympics Organizing Committee. The firm projected that 38,300 out-of-state travelers would attend the games in Anchorage. Approximately \$317 million would be expended, and more than 14,700 jobs would be created before and during the games. Although the year after such an event would be anticlimactic, cumulative effects on tourism would endure for years. Though there is no way the post-Olympic impact can be accurately projected, Economic Research Associates estimated in its

Anchorage's failed bids for the 1992 and 1994 Olympics did succeed, nevertheless, in catalyzing worldwide interest in Alaska as a potential destination for world-class ski/summer resorts. Indeed, two development firms are considering building two world-class, year-round resort complexes; and a third firm is planning on expanding an existing complex. If any one of these three developments moves forward as presently envisioned, winter tourism in the state will be forever changed. Following are brief descriptions of the three contemplated developments.

The most moderate proposal is the planned expansion of Girdwood's Alyeska Ski Resort. This facility is owned by the Japanese company Seibu Alaska, Inc. Alyeska is presently installing a new \$2.6 million detachable quad chair lift capable of moving more than twice as many people than it now moves. In addition, the company is also adding \$900,000 worth of snow-making equipment, trails, and other new features during this current ski season.

Future plans have Alyeska building a new 300-room hotel at the bottom of the mountain, along with a new 60-

passenger aerial tram, and additional chair lifts. The company also plans to double the size of the eating facilities located at the top of the mountain so that 350 people can be accommodated. Planned for next summer is the construction of roads, a sewer system, and the foundation for the hotel. Completion date for these improvements is late 1991. An estimated 150 jobs and \$3.1 million in payroll will be created with these projects if they are implemented. Phase two of Alyeska's expansion plans is on the drawing board. It includes more hotel space, more lifts, and additional facilities. No firm date has been set for the start or completion of this second phase.

Any comprehensive look at the Alyeska resort is incomplete without mentioning the potential development of Winner Creek Mountain. This mountain is located one mile northeast of the present Alyeska resort. Some skiing aficionados and the U.S. Forest Service believe that this mountain provides the greatest potential for major new downhill ski expansion. They believe this site would offer the best skiing because of its terrain, tree cover, size, snow, and views. And the site would complement the Alyeska resort. The two sites could be tied together providing skiers with the variety necessary to attract international business, ski team training, and competition. Throw in a golf course and other summer amenities, and it could become a major international summer/winter destination. (The potential of Winner Creek Mountain was addressed in a recently released Alyeska Resort Master Plan.)

The two new resorts being proposed are the Eagle Valley Resort by Robert Rogner of Austria, and the Hatcher Pass Alpine Ski Development by Mitsui & Company of Japan. Both of these proposals are ambitious, world-class, year-round resorts. Rogner has experience in resort developments; Mitsui is the second largest trading company in Japan. Many details remain preliminary, but the two development companies have provided enough information to provide a basic sketch.

The Eagle Valley Resort would be located in the vicinity of Eagle River, an Anchorage bedroom community located 10 miles north of that city's



downtown area. Plans call for building a resort village from scratch, which would include two first-class hotels with a total of 500 rooms, nine apartment-like buildings with 1,000 units, a convention center, and a Russian Orthodox church. Commercial space for restaurants, retail shops and other tourist facilities would also be available. An integrated lift system would be built to support a comfortable carrying capacity of 11,450 skiers. Cross-country skiing, sleigh rides, sledding and other winter activities would be offered. And a wide range of summer activities are also planned to ensure year-round patronage. When completed, it would employ 900 full-time and 300 part-time workers. Total cost of the project is estimated at \$230 million. The primary clientele is seen as coming from Europe, Asia, North America and Alaska. Because the Rogner group is requesting loan guarantees from the state, the state and the Rogner group have jointly hired a consulting firm. The firm is now conducting feasibility studies of an Eagle River Resort and of other possible resorts elsewhere in the state.

The other proposal, this one envisioned by Mitsui & Company, would be built at Hatcher Pass, a site located in the MatSu Borough 60 miles north of Anchorage. In March of this year Mitsui signed a 55-year lease with the state for 11,400 acres. The entire project calls for eight ski lifts, a gondola, a 300-room hotel and 900 condominiums. A golf course and other summer amenities are included, once again, to create a winter/summer resort. When all phases of the project are complete, Mitsui predicts that peak per-day traffic would be 750 out-of-state guests and 1,750 southcentral residents. Phase 1, scheduled to be finished by April 1993, would employ 344 people. When all phases are complete, Mitsui officials predict employment to reach 501. And University of Alaska officials estimate that additional spin-off development projects would create roughly 300 more jobs.

## **Are These Big Development Plans Feasible?**

Many Alaskans question the feasibility of these development plans, considering their size. Alaskans have seen over the years many grandiose plans that never materialized.

Will any, all, or at least one of these resorts be built as presently envisioned? There is no real benchmark to use for Alaskans to make a clear judgment because no world-class resorts are now in place in this state. But there is a vast international ski market out there that only a few local residents understand. Some believe that more than 100,000 'skier visits' could be generated from Alaskans alone if more intermediate ski slopes were available. But even

## **Japanese skiers could be on Alaska slopes in one day**

with this additional local patronage, there is a general consensus among many 'in the know' that all three developments could not turn a profit if they were all available for use simultaneously. So, which project is more feasible? A partial answer to this question might be provided by the joint feasibility study now being conducted for the state and Rogner group. Ultimately, the question will not be answered until a major financial commitment is made by one of the developers.

Compared with the other two proposed developments, Alyeska's plans are the most modest. Some of the expansion plans are already underway. But even with its Phase 1 expansion complete, the development would not fit the definition of a world-class resort.

There is a general consensus, again among many 'in the know', that until Alaska has a world-class ski resort the state will probably not put a dent in the international winter tourism market. Over and over again experts have said that without a first-class ski facility

equivalent to those found elsewhere in the world, the international ski market will simply fly over Alaska.

## **Will the Japanese be Alaska's Primary Winter Tourist?**

Will the Japanese, Koreans, Europeans and North Americans patronize an Alaskan resort in significant numbers? Only international markets can support a world-class winter/summer resort developed by a Rogner or a Mitsui. Can Alaska compete with the resorts of Vail and Aspen in Colorado? With Whistler-Blackcomb in British Columbia? With European ski resorts? Or will the lore of Alaska's long, cold winter nights remain a major barrier? Theories abound. Let's explore a few of them.

Many believe the North American market is an unlikely source of jumbo jetloads of skiers bound for Alaska. The long trip in getting to this state, coupled with stiff competition from other resorts, may be barriers too great to overcome. But the same group of skeptics believes that Europe is off limits for the same reasons. Adventure-seeking tour groups departing from various locations in North America and Europe may be attracted, but these groups initially will not be large enough to support a world-scale resort.

However, Japan as a market is quite another story. On the one hand, just because Alyeska and Mitsui are Japanese-owned companies does not automatically guarantee a customer base from Japan. Underscoring this impression is the experience of Victoria Limited, the largest Japanese manufacturer of ski equipment. The company recently purchased Breckenridge Ski Resort in Colorado. Victoria Limited has no immediate plans to market the resort in Japan. Alyeska has been owned by Seibu for years and its customer base has remained strictly southcentral Alaska. On the other hand, however, these companies have a clearer understanding of the potential of the Japanese market. The companies have the business contacts. And equally important, the companies have the financial clout to exploit the potential market.

## Alaska's arctic climate a marketing challenge

Further, a compelling advantage for the Japanese investors is Alaska's location relative to the Japanese market. Skiers from Japan could theoretically ski Alaska slopes on the same day they leave home. Alyeska and the other two proposed resorts are within 90 minutes' drive time of the Anchorage International Airport. With the exception of British Columbia, most of the international ski resorts require one or two full days' travel from Japan.

Another new development makes even more feasible an increasing Japanese presence in Alaska. The new Visa Waiver Pilot Program, which began in December, makes it easier for the Japanese to visit Alaska. Japanese travelers will no longer need visas to enter Alaska, and they will be allowed to stay up to 90 days.

Skiing is growing in popularity in Japan. The 1972 winter Olympics held in Sapporo undoubtedly helped boost interest in the sport. There are an estimated 10 million-plus skiers in the island nation. These skiers are believed to have not yet made a dent in the international market. According to Victoria Limited, only 10,000 Japanese travelled to North America or Europe last year for the primary purpose of skiing. Most of these skiers ended up in British Columbia, in Calgary Alberta, and in Europe. This could mean that there is a giant, untapped international market for Japanese skiers, or that there might be resistance among the Japanese to go international to ski.

Because Japan is now flush with cash, investors there have the financial wherewithal to make a large investment if the opportunity were right. As Alaska's largest foreign investor, Japan has had considerable experience with this state. For these and the other aforementioned reasons, if there is ever to be an international ski resort in Alaska its market will primarily be Japan and, eventually, other nations on the Pacific Rim.

### Does the Weather Keep Visitors Away?

Will the lore of Alaska's long, cold, dark winter nights dash Alaska's ability to create a viable international winter tourist industry? Many contend that

Alaska's weather is a major stumbling block to virtually all economic development in the state, not just to winter tourism. The Alaska Division of Tourism is constantly fighting Alaska's image of the "land of snow and ice." They believe that this damaging image remains a major barrier for all tourism in the state. The recent international media coverage of the ice-trapped whales near Barrow might have reinforced this erroneous image of Alaska.

Most people in the tourism industry regard Alaska's arctic climate as a marketing problem, but conclude that it can be surmounted and even used to the industry's advantage. The tough months to sell are between November and February. Optimists argue that there is plenty of natural light even during these mid-winter months. There is enough natural light, they contend, for the rapidly moving lifts to allow the average skier his usual five hours' time on the slopes. The optimists also point out that Alaska has, at the very least, a six-month skiing season. That length of time compares favorably to most other locations, which average only four months.

Other observers of Alaska's winter tourism industry have focused their marketing ideas on the spring skiing months — between late February and May. The weather is milder then, and the days are longer. Additional spring attractions for Alaska tourists are, for example, the Iditarod, the Fur Rendezvous, the Yukon Quest, and the Fairbanks Ice Festival. And during the latter part of the winter ski season, tourists' skiing experiences could be complemented by yet other activities, such as rafting, hiking and fishing.

Summer snow-skiing offers additional potential. While it is still a small industry, it has become quite popular in recent years at Mount Bachelor and Mount Hood in Oregon. Alaska's potential for this niche of the market is almost limitless because glaciers are required. Winner Creek, for example, offers fine summer skiing opportunities. This year, a new training center facility was built at Eagle Glacier, providing the world's lowest altitude, on-snow site for summer biathlon and nordic ski training.



## Winter Tourism Without Big Resorts: Gradual Instead of Rapid Growth

What will happen to the winter tourism industry without any of these major developments? It will grow slowly at best, and the source of its growth will come from increasing local demand.

Some people envision networks of snow trails that could be travelled via cross-country skis, snow machine, and dog sled. The trails would be connected by huts and lodges. Some lodges already offer downhill skiing, a feature which allows them to exploit other future development possibilities. Much of the snow trails and lodge infrastructure is already in place. In many cases, coordination may be the only thing needed to complete a comprehensive network. As far as the marketability of this type of development, international customers and investors could be attracted. Norway and other countries have similar developments which draw a mixed local and international crowd. This type of development is an evolutionary one, occurring over a span longer than three or four years.

Despite the state's current poor economic climate, recent trends appear to justify increased development of winter recreational facilities. The demand on the Hatcher Pass facilities continues to grow. And the Willow Creek Ski Association of Fairbanks plans to develop a new alpine ski site on Ester Dome. This development is aimed at the regional market.

There are plans to develop more land in Denali State Park — South Denali — that would offer even more winter recreational opportunities. Developing the park would provide more access to visitors and would relieve the growing pressure on the park's summer season. Possible development of South Denali would also offer a variety of winter sports opportunities, particularly for accommodating the growing popularity of cross-country skiing. The park, accessible by road and train, offers extraordinary views of the Alaska Range.

An increasing number of communities in the state are promoting their towns as destinations for the winter months, as well as the summer. This marketing effort should give rise to additional winter recreational opportunities in the communities. In many of these Alaskan communities, individual investors are laying plans for the development of small scale resorts, again aimed at the winter recreational user.

### Is There Change in the Wind?

Today, Alaska's winter tourism industry caters largely to Alaskans. Many of the current winter events and recreational opportunities are regionally oriented, catering only to the local area residents. A sizeable winter tourism industry is in

## Recent trends might justify further development of winter recreational facilities

place in this state primarily because Alaskans make more time for play in the winter months than do other Americans elsewhere in the U.S.

Indeed, Alaska does attract nonresident winter tourists, but their primary purpose in this state is oriented toward conducting business in Alaska or toward visiting relatives. Few visitors come to exclusively avail themselves of this state's winter recreation facilities.

If any of the aforementioned developers' plans discussed earlier in this article actually materialize in the not-too-distant future, increasing numbers of nonresident winter tourists would be wooed here. The primary reason for many of the winter tourists' visits to Alaska would then be to take advantage of the winter recreational opportunities.

If, on the other hand, these large developments do not pan out, further development of the winter tourism industry will surely occur, but it will evolve much more slowly.

### About the Author:

Neal Fried is a labor economist employed for 10 years with the Research & Analysis Section, Administrative Services Division, Alaska Department of Labor. He is based in Anchorage.

Holly Stinson is a labor economist employed for three months with the same Anchorage office.