

MAKING A PUBLIC BACKCOUNTRY ZONE SHARED BY A CAT SKIING OPERATION AND A VARIETY OF OTHER USERS SAFER THROUGH A SIMPLE AWARENESS CARD WITH PERTINENT INFORMATION.

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It's a bluebird mid-February day and the snow crystals are sparkling in the sunshine as I watch the third skier of our group make perfect turns down the slope towards myself and the other clients. It doesn't get much better than this: great skiing, stoked clients and perfect weather. Then, out of the corner of my eye, I see two skiers emerge from the nearby saddle. Together they cross the slope directly above our group and drop in, crossing the boundaries established by the guides to keep our group out of a known danger zone. The pair drops down together and cuts back racing past us. It's then we notice they have no packs, seemingly no avalanche gear and most likely, no idea what they just did. I radio up to the tail guide who is waiting to send the remaining clients. We acknowledge the risk, reassess hazards and conditions and attempt to get on with our business of providing the best day of skiing ever for our clients.

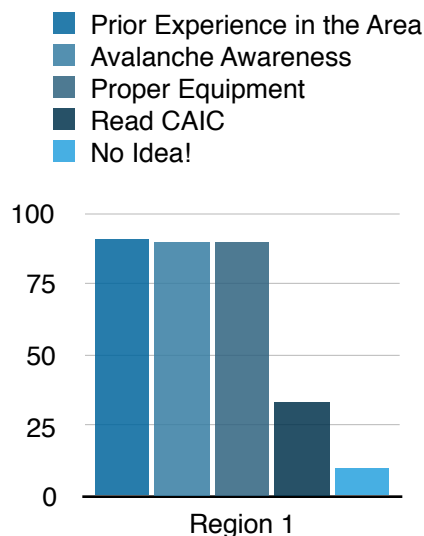
I work as a guide with Powder Addiction Cat Skiing, a small cat skiing operation situated in the Arapaho National Forest and nestled in an area known as Jones Pass, Colorado. Jones Pass sits along the continental divide, just north of Loveland Ski Area and just south of Winter Park Ski Area about an hour drive west from Denver. In the snowy months it is a winter wonderland with high peaks, large, wide open aprons, perfect glade trees and long rolling descents. Powder Addiction has the exclusive permit to run a guided ski operation at Jones but shares the area with the general public. The close proximity to Denver leads to a great diversity of the type and level of user encountered while out skiing and riding with clients. With this variety of users comes a great set of challenges and unfortunately, the incident I described previously is something that is beginning to occur with more frequency throughout the season.

It is no secret that the number of skiers and riders venturing out into the backcountry is on a steady rise. Snow Sports Industries Association consumer trends reports show sales of backcountry gear has increased in double digit percentages each year for some years now and easy to access backcountry zones such as Jones Pass are feeling the impact. Interested in the

changing user group I set out to conduct an informal survey. While checking clients in before the days trip I stopped people as they made their way by, asking each skier, snowshoer and snowmobiler I encountered a series of questions. I asked each person these four short questions:

- if they had any prior experience in the area
- if they had any avalanche awareness or education
- if they had the proper equipment (beacon, shovel, probe)
- if they had read the Colorado Avalanche Information Center (CAIC) forecast for the day

Of the roughly 50 persons surveyed, the majority



of them had prior experience in the area, had avalanche awareness as a minimum and had the proper equipment. Additionally, nearly a third of them had read the CAIC forecast that morning. Although these results were both refreshing and surprising, the smaller minority of users had no idea what I was talking about with reference to my questions, albeit some of them did say they had been in the area many times before. Not included in the survey however are the interactions with skiers, riders and snowmobilers on the slopes where I was cursed at, flipped off, told "you guys don't own this mountain!" and of most concern, a pair of young skiers who stated "that we just keep

our fingers crossed man” when asked if they had any avalanche education. On top of that there were a handful of people who refused any interaction at all. I found these encounters to be particularly interesting as there was almost a sense of me insulting them for wanting to ask them a few questions regarding backcountry awareness and to discuss safely operating in avalanche terrain. In addition, although my rough data showed that the majority of people I had contact with actually had awareness of what they were doing I strongly felt there was a need to be able to pass on general safety information and to promote better awareness without having to stop each person without taking up too much of their time.

Our guides generally consider ourselves as stewards of the area, promoting safe travel and experiences in avalanche terrain, it is the difficult interactions and unsafe encounters that are proving to be so troubling. As we guide our clients through the terrain we speak on safe practices and having the right mindset when venturing out into the backcountry with the hope to instill a strong appreciation for good decision making and a healthy respect for the mountains. This is always challenged however when an instance like the one I described in the beginning occurs.

After many frustrating and failed attempts at trying to reach out to others to promote good backcountry ethics and practices I came up with the idea of the what I call the BC Card. It is a small plastic card with pertinent information for anyone heading out into the backcountry to reference and make their trip safer by providing tips and safe practices to follow as well as resources for where to find more detailed information, classes and even local shops outfitted with the proper gear.

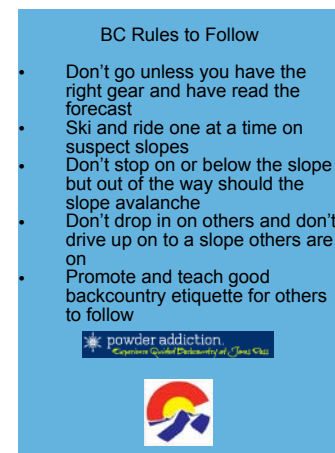
The card will have on one side the Know Before You Go steps as well as KBYG.org so people can reference the educational video and other resources offered by the #KBYG campaign. The Know Before You Go program emphasizes the following steps in preparation for being in avalanche terrain:

- Get the Gear
- Get the training
- Get the forecast
- Get the picture
- Get out of harms way

The other side will have a short list of backcountry rules to follow such as:

- Don't go unless you all have the right gear and have read the forecast.
- Ski and ride one at a time on suspect slopes.
- Don't stop on or below the slope but out of the way should the slope avalanche.
- Don't drop in on others and don't drive up on to a slope others are on.
- Promote and teach good backcountry etiquette for others to follow.

In addition, the card will have the logos and website addresses for CAIC to access local forecasts, Avalanche.org as a resource for education and information as well as a few local shops who have offered to be a part of the BC Card. The BC Card will serve as a simple, easy way to pass on vital information for the backcountry user, whether advanced or beginner. A simple example is below:



It is my hope that when encounters like the one I described in the opening paragraph occur in the future, a guide can approach the pair and can offer two cards from their pocket with all the information the pair need to better prepare themselves for the backcountry as well as how to properly ski and ride in avalanche terrain. Should the opportunity present itself for further and more beneficial conversation then it is there but if it doesn't, all the pertinent information is there for the pair to reference. It is then up to them to begin the process of learning and moving forward with the information given them. I believe the card takes any territorial attitude out of the conversation and encourages nothing more than safe practices, awareness and education.

In summary, this project was born from the recognition of a need to get the most important information out regarding education, awareness and safety to fellow backcountry users in as simple and non-confrontational a way as possible. I truly strive to embody the ethos of inclusiveness where multitudes can share and enjoy the wonderful benefits of gliding on snow or just being out in the snowy mountains and I feel this is a means to work towards that safely. I believe the BC Card can act as a catalyst for many who simply lack the direction or just don't get the message of how important it is to be aware and travel safely in avalanche terrain.