



# The Vermont Backcountry Experiment

A new film documents the creation of backcountry skiing zones on public land.

by **Kirk Kardashian**

**Four years ago, three friends from Jersey got together** to make a series of short films about backcountry skiing in the Northeast. Their options were limited. The Appalachians are thickly forested, and plenty of people had filmed skiing Tuckerman Ravine. But then they got connected with a Vermonter named Angus McCusker who was leading a first-of-its-kind effort to legally cut backcountry skiing lines in the Green Mountain National Forest. A week later, Marius Becker, Dan Cirenza, and Kyle Crichton were driving north to a GPS point off a dirt road in Vermont. “We set up our tent on a cold fall night and woke in the morning to meet the RASTA crew,” Cirenza recounts.

They weren’t rendezvousing with a bunch of Jamaicans in the woods. RASTA is the Rochester/Randolph Area Sports Trail Alliance, a group of skiers that formed in 2013 to generate more outdoor recreation opportunities, and thereby spur economic development in central Vermont. RASTA’s first project was a backcountry ski area in Braintree Mountain Forest, a privately-conserved tract of high-elevation, northeast-

facing terrain held in partnership with the New England Forestry Foundation. That’s where, in 2015, the filmmakers joined up with dozens of chainsaw and lopper wielding RASTA volunteers. Around the same time, RASTA received approval to make another backcountry zone in the national forest at Brandon Gap. “On the drive back, we knew this was a great story,” says Cirenza. “These are great characters, this is something we should pursue.”

The result of their work is “Leave Nice Tracks,” a documentary premiering at the end of October. The film follows RASTA’s progress over four years as they build a coalition of like-minded skiers and volunteers. Through interviews with RASTA leaders such as McCusker and Zac Freeman—and plenty of skiing footage in Braintree and Brandon—the film melds RASTA’s original vision with the successful outcome. An independent production, the filmmakers have set up a Kickstarter fund to help them finish. Becker has made the film his sole focus. “Being able to have a living wage from the Kickstarter campaign would be nice,” he says.

Aside from the feel-good aspect of seeing

people working together to carve fall-line skiing out of the forest primeval, the filmmakers want their work to be a model for communities that want to get more folks into nature. “Not everyone is going to fly to Alaska to go skiing,” says Cirenza. “But there could be a skiable hill down the road, and if you get a little bit of snow, and make a couple of snips here or there, you could have some good skiing. The message is: whatever you have near you—whether it’s a rock, a mountain, some woodlands—you can make it accessible.”

The thing is, that work has got to be done the right way. Partnering with state and local experts can help. Mountain bike trail cutting used to be a clandestine affair, but it was pushed to improve—with proper grades, berms and drainage—when it needed to be approved by land use regulators. The main reason the forest service allowed RASTA to create gladed skiing areas is that other people were doing it illegally, and without regard to the health of the forest ecosystem. The most egregious example of this was the huge “Gash” taken off the backside of Jay Peak in the mid-2000s, but that type of rogue



pruning was happening on a small scale around the state. RASTA gives skiers a place to backcountry ski, so they don't have to trim on the sly.

RASTA also serves an educational role. According to Holly Knox, the District Recreation Program Manager for the Rochester and Middlebury ranger districts, a survey by the University of Vermont showed that some backcountry skiers don't think clipping lines is a concern. But it is. "Even minimal clipping can impact the forest understory," says Knox, "impacting the structure and composition of the forest and making the stand more susceptible to windthrow, insects, and disease." When RASTA and the forest service designed the Brandon Gap zone, they stayed away from areas already cut, because they were damaged. Instead, they created "braided channel" lines that intersect each other and feature islands of trees. They also removed or retained specific tree species with

an eye toward habitat management. While it's too early to draw environmental conclusions, early signs indicate that moose appreciate these openings in the forest that are rich with young shoots.

What's more certain is the economic impact. According to a study sponsored by the Catamount Trail Association, which acts as a parent organization to RASTA for membership dollars and volunteer coordination, the Brandon Gap zone draws nearly 4,000 annual visitors, generating \$2.1 million in sales, and supporting 34 full-time jobs.

Other areas in Vermont and New Hampshire have followed RASTA's lead. Most notably, the Granite Backcountry Alliance worked with the White Mountain National Forest, using Brandon Gap as a design standard, to create backcountry zones on Baldface and Bartlett mountains. They've also added three other zones on state and local land.

The Adirondack Powder Skiers Association, a 1,000-member organization founded long before RASTA, hasn't been as fortunate. Strict land use laws in the

Adirondack Forest Preserve have continually thwarted their efforts to cut a single branch. It wasn't the biologists and foresters stopping them—they quickly concluded the glading would have almost zero environmental impact. Instead, "It's a wall of attorneys we've been dealing with," says the group's founder, Ron Konowitz. "They think it's a slippery slope, and that if they allow backcountry skiing trails wider than eight feet, it could increase access for snowmobiles and even someday include ATVs."

It might just be a matter of time, though, before groups like RASTA and the Granite Backcountry Alliance gain more power. "Leave Nice Tracks" might help bring attention to the cause. And regardless, the Forest Service and the USDA see backcountry skiing participation increasing substantially between now and 2060 (although it's unclear where climate change fits into all this). Before you grab your chainsaw to curate your own stash, think about others like you and the "Leave Nice Tracks" crew, pining for more backcountry skiing. They are out there and probably willing to help do it right.



### Lessons Learned from RASTA

Holly Knox was the first Forest Service employee to oversee the creation of gladed skiing terrain on federal land. If you want to follow RASTA's example and create a backcountry ski zone near you, here are Knox's top three tips for getting through the approval process.

**Be patient.** Movement overnight is not realistic. The forest service has to comply with the National Environmental Policy Act, which includes public involvement, and to me that's very important.

**Get organized.** RASTA had enough people where we knew if we wanted to add this amenity to the national forest, we'd have somebody there to help us do it. We have a really small staff, so we rely on community collaborators and volunteers.

**Be understanding.** There are often valid reasons why you can't glade in certain areas. Land managers are going to say yes to some things and no to some things. Being willing to work with them is key.

**Kricket Fellows McCusker sneaking in a few backcountry laps late at night ; the LNT team.**