

Interview with Andy Newell, US Olympic cross-country skier

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The 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, Russia, marked a new low in snow conditions during major games. Temperatures were above freezing for majority of the games, rather than sub zero. Athletes complained about the conditions of many events, which were hard to keep cool enough.

During the Games, [a letter](#) was signed by over 100 winter Olympians calling for action on climate change. Lead author, US cross country ski medallist Andy Newell, spoke to The Climate Institute as part of the [Sport & Climate Impacts: How much heat can sport handle? report](#), released in January 2015.

What drove you to write the Sochi letter?

For a long time climate change wasn't on the radar for me, but definitely within the last five or six years I've become more involved. I think one of the reasons was as a professional skier, I'm outside every single day and experiencing the changes. I'm much more in tune with the environment that your average citizen, just because we're out there every day and we're seeing the snow conditions ... I was seeing a lot of change.

When you started racing in Europe 10 years ago, was artificial snow common? How has that changed over the course of your career?

[Lately] we tend to be racing in areas where there's not quite as much natural snow, and obviously these venues want to continue to keep holding races. So they try to use more and more man-made snow, which is kind of a double edged sword. It just seemed like things were getting somewhat out of control.

We have about 35 World Cups a year in something like 14 different countries. I would say that nearly half of those are on some kind of man-made snow, where they use that to develop a big base of snow and guarantee coverage for the World Cup.

I can remember back in 2007 was another big turning point and that was when we did some of our first races in China, and I remember warming up for a ski race ... and the organisers told us to wear medical masks because the air wasn't safe to breathe. Which I think I think happens quite often in China ... I couldn't believe it, here we are racing a World Cup ski race and we are in this city of Chen Chung China ... not too from where the 2018 Olympics are to be held, and I couldn't believe it the amount of smog that settled on the snow and settled in the air. You could totally feel it in your lungs.



Is there much difference in the quality and safety of skiing on artificial snow?

It depends on the conditions around. Obviously warmer weather can play a huge role in snow conditions – that was a hot topic this year or this past winter in Sochi at the Olympics ... where we were seeing temperatures above freezing for majority of the Games, which really had a negative effect on the snowboarding competitions because they couldn't mould the half pipe the way they should've. It caused a tonne of people to crash.

On the cross country side, they couldn't set the track as firm as they would have liked. Tonnes of people crashed. Three out of the top six people crashed in the sprint race in the men's final. So the medals were for sure decided, you know as skier we have this mentality where it's like we race no matter what the conditions, but some of the medals were for sure decided because conditions were not optimal.

And these concerns formed the basis for your decision to pen a letter to calling for action?

Yep. I would say that [another] catalyst for trying to get that going is that I'm from Vermont, which is on the east coast of the US and the skier, writer and environmentalist called Porter Fox wrote this book called *Deep* and when he was writing this book he did a tonne of research especially about ski resorts in the north east.

One of the big conclusions that he came to ... was that nearly half of the 300 something ski areas on the north east [of the US] would have to close in the next 30-50 years if we continue on the same path. So that was a real eye opener too ... so many jobs and tourism are dependent on the ski industry and [climate change] was going to have huge impact on where I live.

Why did you decide to do speak up?

I think I've obviously learned a lot in the last two years. I didn't go into this process being incredible educated on environmental issues and still everyday I'm learning things. So I like to use myself almost as an example that people can grow and people can learn ...

I feel like so many of us do the little things, we can continue to live a more sustainable life, try to reuse, recycle and reduce our carbon footprint. But unless we can get the folks that can really make these big decision to come up with better legislation, that's where the big change can happen.

And I guess I'm more of a big picture thinker. I was tired of seeing everyone kind of putter along doing the small things, and we should for sure continue to do that, but we wanted to target for one politicians who could make the big change ...

I realised over the last two years that athletes in particular shy away from getting politically involved for a number of reasons. First because they don't want to put their foot in their mouth ... but number two, we've seen how broad the reach can be these days with social media. These days an athlete can get on Twitter and Facebook and can reach several hundred thousand people with the click of a button ... I and the people at [Protect Our Winters](#) see is this letter transform into something athletes are not shying away from becoming politically involved because that's where the big climate change issues are going to be tackled is on a political scale, and not being afraid to voice their opinion on social media.

I'd like to create a way for athletes to become more educated and not be afraid to send that tweet that say "we expect more from so and so" and "we expect this person to make this decision" because it's going to affect how we can help fight climate change.

Is momentum growing, do you think?

What I would like leading up to the UN Framework Convention in 2015 and even beyond ... is athletes to have a place where they can go, whether it's a website or an environmental organisation that they're involved in, and be able to pinpoint specific political leaders or bills and laws that are being passed in their area that they can get behind and use their social media reach to make those decision happen easier.

Have you thought about the vulnerability and adaptation on the local scale?

We are seeing little steps, just today [October 14, 2014] at the US Ski Team we had a ribbon cutting for 126 solar panels which we now have installed on the top of US Ski Team Headquarters here in Utah. There's a number of Nordic areas that have gone solar ... there's a big one in Vermont that's big on using solar to power some of their snowmaking operations.

Cross country skiing in itself is a very green activity and I'd encourage more people to cross country ski and get away from the resort lifestyle and get out on your own in the woods to experience nature.

I do a lot of school talks with elementary or high schools about climate change, and one of the big messages that we try to get across to them it that it's so easy be negative about all of the changes we're seeing ... The message for those kids to walk away with it that it can be possible [to address climate change] and that scientists have proven that if we make responsible decision than we can reverse the effect of man-made climate change. So I think as long as people remember that, and remember to use their voice when they go to the ballots, that's almost the most important thing ...

We want people to make changes because they see that it's going to improve their safety and their wellbeing, and it's more of a social issue or a humanitarian issue, rather than trying to save winter so that the elite upper middle class can continue to have a good time out on the snow. We want our people to find their own platform, what makes them tick, what gets them motivated to try and make a difference. For me it's skiing ... this is my platform and I can have the biggest voice with what I do and I love ski racing so I'm going to continue to do it.

The full Sport & Climate Impacts report and associated content such as infographics can be found at www.climateinstitute.org.au/sport-and-climate.html