



LINE

THE RULE OF THUMB

A CLEAR-CUT IN VERMONT EXPOSES MORE THAN JUST THE DANGEROUS SIDE OF THINNING GLADES

SNIP/DUCK. SKIER: BEN KUBAS. PHOTO: JUSTIN CASH

Reinhold Messner, the most famous mountaineer of all time, is considered by many to be climbing's ethical authority on land preservation in the mountains. His anti-bolting philosophy is rooted in the notion that by destroying our land to suit our needs, nearly anything can be climbed. He referred to these acts as the "murder of the impossible."

On August 3, Paul Poulin and Alan Ritter, both Vermont locals, were arrested for allegedly clear-cutting a 60-foot-wide, three-quarters of a mile long gash down the east face of Big Jay, a 3,786-foot peak in northern Vermont. State law enforcement officials are releasing little information about the incident that was first discovered by the summer tram attendants at neighboring Jay Peak Ski Area, who reported the noise of chainsaws in the distance. Their reports to the Green Mountain Club and Vermont Fish and Wildlife led to an investigation and subsequent arrests.

Juicy details of the vandalistic event weren't available as of press time, but locals reported "trees bigger than dinner plates" were lopped off and moved to the sides of the swath. It is alleged that the two men worked alone, and carried out the act "over at least a few weeks," according to Vermont Fish and Wildlife's Cornel Rocks. If convicted, the two men face five years in prison and \$5,000 in fines for destruction of state property. They will likely face civil charges as well.

Big Jay is a favorite destination for Eastern backcountry skiers. The trailless peak holds the region's best stash of deep powder, perfectly spaced glades and consistent 40-degree slopes. Small cliff bands hide in the birch groves, their blue, ice-plastered faces sparkling out of the forest canopy on sunny days. Powderhounds find these gems, and others, after the half-hour skin from the summit tram station on Jay Peak.

On Big Jay, and surrounding areas, there's a longstanding tradition—almost an unspoken obligation of the local backcountry community—to prune the glades here. Technically it is illegal, but it's been done in a covert, subtle and responsible way for years, allowing countless skiers to enjoy skiing off of the manicured resort trails.

Many known accomplices prune the local areas in New Hampshire as well. They clean blow-down, clip saplings and push over standing dead, but do not down trees. They do it by hand. When Poulin and Ritter annihilated over five acres of forest, leaving what Rebecca Washburn of the Green Mountain Club referred to as "a powerline," they violated the Eastern thinning code of ethics: The Rule of Thumb. If a tree is bigger than your thumb, leave it alone.

... offer a stellar backcountry



STOWE'S HELLBROOK BASIN IS A NOT-SO-SECRET STASH THAT WOULDN'T BE SKIABLE WITHOUT A PRUNING. PHOTO: DON LANDWEHRE

"PEOPLE WANT TO BE KNOWN FOR THINNING OUT THE BEST GLADE OR CUTTING THE GREATEST NEW LINE."

problem. "We authorized a small group of volunteers who were trained in proper thinning techniques," Wimble says. "Led by an individual with a degree in forestry management, they clean up the off-piste 'bands' every summer. Since we started doing this, we've had no rogue cutting."

According to Washburn, the pruning issue on Big Jay has also been brewing for years. "We are working with the state to come up with a land management plan that would suit everyone," she says. "Supervised pruning very well may become part of that plan."

As backcountry skiing has gotten more popular, it seems more people want to be known for thinning out the best glade or cutting the greatest new line. New England's old-school forefathers who cleanly, politely and quietly trimmed up a remote hillside and kept it secret from the rest of the world are seemingly being replaced by a new breed with a new attitude: murder the impossible.

In an attempt to prevent erosion, salvage the peak's lynx habitat as well as that of the endangered Bicknell thrush (which may not cross this now open clearing), Jay Peak will be contributing manpower, equipment and transportation to the recovery effort. The Green Mountain Club will pitch in heaps of manpower. And the State of Vermont will spend time and tax dollars trying to reverse damage that is, in all likelihood, irreversible. — **BRIAN IRWIN**