



WHISTLER, BRITISH COLUMBIA

CASE SUMMARY

Whistler. It's Their Nature

Boasting over 7,000 acres of skiable terrain and rising up a mile above the valley, Whistler is located in the Coastal Mountains of British Columbia, Canada. Home to 10,000 residents and two extraordinary mountains - Whistler and Blackcomb – the town is widely regarded as one of the best destination resorts in the world.

Whistler attracted the attention of Dr. Karl-Henrik Robert who visited in March 2000 for a snowboarding vacation with his family. During his visit he addressed a number of Whistler audiences regarding The Natural Step and impressed business and political leaders with his clear and compelling explanation of sustainability.

A Matter of Time

The timing of Dr. Robert's visit was ideal. Whistler 2002 (the articulation of Whistler's vision and priorities) had laid the groundwork for introducing sustainability to the community. The resultant Whistler Environmental Strategy provided a comprehensive plan for environmental sustainability, but there was no clear and compelling message to the community about the fundamentals of sustainability.

The Natural Step provided the simple, common language necessary to communicate sustainability while still providing the required intellectual and scientific rigor.

Early Adopters Step Forth

Following Dr. Robert's visit a number of local organizations, businesses and individuals formed a group called 'Whistler's Early Adopters' began collaborating with The Natural Step staff and created the 'Whistler, It's Our Nature' program.

www.whistleritsournature.ca.

Together we held education sessions and co-hosted more than 300 delegates at the first-ever Whistler Sustainability Symposium. We helped the Early Adopters coalition 1) incorporate citizen feedback gathered from the Symposium into a sustainability speaker series and 2) build sustainability toolkits customized for households, businesses and schools, as well as a core resource toolkit with more comprehensive information.

A Run of Success

Whistler has been integrating environmental sustainability into resort operations for some time now and more recently has become the first destination resort to implement The Natural Step principles and approach into their community vision and strategy. Consequently, their efforts have produced a number of successes that are beginning to move them towards sustainability and in certain cases are producing financial gains as well. Some of these successes include:

- A transformed transit system that has grown over a nine-year period from five buses and 300,000 riders to a fleet of 24 buses and 2.2 million riders, the highest per capita in British Columbia.
- An award winning pedestrian-oriented village and clustered neighborhoods – which also allow service by the transit system.
- Approximately 4200 employee-restricted beds (1/3 of the total beds needed for Whistler employees) created through the establishment of the Whistler Housing Authority to address affordable housing issues.
- The Emerald Forest Conservation Project – the Whistler Village core area was the focus of re-development, rather than undeveloped private land, which resulted in the conservation of 139 acres within a larger protected areas network.

WHISTLER CASE CONTINUED...

- Financial returns given back to the community. Excess tipping fees from Whistler's landfill raise \$300,000 annually for the Environmental Legacy Fund. Interest on this growing fund (now \$1.2 million) goes toward funding local environmental projects.
- Pesticide-free parks and village. A chemical-free weed and pest control program employs biological methods and an aquacide/steam system rather than herbicides.
- A program to capture bio-solids from the local wastewater treatment plant which are then used to add nutrients to rejuvenate the soil – for example, 1000 cubic meters of bio-solids were used to re-vegetate a gravel pit.
- A water conservation program, including a fixture replacement effort, is underway.
- A computer controlled irrigation system waters only as much as the plants need. Connection to a weather station allows further adjustment of water use based on rainfall.
- A geothermal heat exchange system that heats and cools the Spruce Grove Community Building and the Beaver Flats resident housing project.

Lessons for an Entire Industry

The travel and tourism industry, which is expected to grow at a rate of four percent a year over the next two decades, depends upon inherently unsustainable technologies. Air traffic alone produces two and a half percent of human-generated carbon dioxide. Access roads built to accommodate tourism through pristine areas can lead to environmental stress and degradation. Through its work with The Natural Step, other local sustainability groups and committed community members, Whistler is demonstrating that operating a successful destination resort and preserving the integrity of the natural environment are interdependent goals — assuring that sustainability will always be a cornerstone of the Whistler experience.