Mountain ‘Resort Communities’ as an Element of Regional Development: Lessons from British Columbia’s Transitioning Economy

Alison M. Gill

Abstract

In response to the effects of global change on the resource-based economy of British Columbia, Canada, the provincial government, stimulated by the legacy opportunities offered by hosting the 2010 Winter Olympic Games, has pursued regional tourism development by supporting the creation of ‘resort communities’. While recognizing that each community is unique, these newly designated governance structures draw upon the successful model of the Resort Municipality of Whistler that was created in 1975. The new legislation offers various financial tools, such as a hotel tax to support development; the creation of destination marketing agencies; and, assistance in developing sustainable planning for the resort communities. The key aspects of the BC Resort Strategy are described as a framework for a discussion of how Whistler’s experience in two key aspects of resort community development – issues of affordable housing and comprehensive sustainability governance and management – offers lessons for other resort communities.

Zusammenfassung

„Resort Communities“ in Berggebieten als Element der Regionalentwicklung: Ansätze aus British Columbiens Übergangswirtschaft

Mountain ‘Resort Communities’ as an Element of Regional Development: Lessons from British Columbia’s Transitioning Economy

1. Introduction

In recent years the effects of global change (economic, environmental, technological, political, demographic and social) have resulted in the widespread restructuring of economies (Dwyer et al., 2009). At one level the tourism industry has been a beneficiary of these changes as postmodern society has embraced consumerism and the service economy has overtaken the industrial economy. However, the forces of global change present new challenges in developing sustainable futures. While there are many advances in developing more interactive and collaborative means of addressing these challenges, Janschitz and Zimmermann (2010, p. 134) observe that in an EU context, these are not ‘tackling [the] question of regional identities and values’. In this article I focus on how British Columbia (BC) is employing the concept of ‘resort communities’ as a strategy to support sustainable regional economic growth through tourism.

The Resort Municipality of Whistler, established in 1975, serves as a prototype of provincially initiated and supported resort community development. Until recently this represented the only such governance model that was specifically designed around the special needs of a mountain resort community. In 2004, following an intensive task force study, the province of British Columbia introduced the British Columbia Resort Strategy that established the actions and initiatives to be undertaken in the designation of resort regions within which new resort communities could be established. Drawing upon my two decades of research on mountain resorts, especially in Whistler, the objective of this article is to examine the new initiatives around key themes relating to the integration of resort and residential needs – especially affordable housing; and, sustainable governance approaches – with the intent of offering lessons from the BC experience. To provide broader context for the discussion I first present an overview of literature on resort evolution, including the impacts of global change on resort destinations. This is followed by an overview of mountain resort development in BC, including reasons behind the establishment and subsequent evolution of Whistler. An overview of the BC Resort Strategy is presented next to frame the subsequent more detailed discussion of the key issues noted above. The article concludes by highlighting key lessons learned.

2. Resort Evolution

Butler’s (1980) resort lifecycle model stands out as the seminal work for understanding the overall characteristics of various stages of destination evolution. The model conceptualizes growth of destinations as initially slow, but, after reaching some stage of critical mass, tourism numbers and related infrastructural development grow at an accelerated, and often exponential, rate until a level of carrying capacity is reached. At this point growth levels off and may result in declining numbers of visitors unless some form of rejuvenation of the destination occurs. Over the past 30 years, this simple model, based on the product lifecycle, has been examined extensively in a wide variety of empirical settings and its conceptual rigour widely critiqued. In a two-volume edited publication of work related to this model, Butler (2006a, b) presents a critical overview of the impact of the model on an understanding of resort evolution.

An increase of research on resort destinations has led to recognition of the diversity of resort types and the contributing factors to this diversity. For example, Weaver (2000) has proposed a ‘broad context model’ that suggests four categories of destination based on the intensity of tourism and the degree of regulation. Low intensity and low levels of regulation are characterized as, ‘circumstantial alternate tourism’ often equating to early stages of tourism development. With increased regulation the destination may evolve into either a ‘deliberate alternative tourism’ site (e.g. low volume ecotourism destinations) or sustainable mass tourism destinations (e.g. some well-managed snow sport destinations). Where regulation is low ‘unsustainable mass tourism’ may occur (e.g. some tropical beach destinations). The introduction of the regulatory element into the evolutionary model is useful in highlighting the importance of planning and management to the sustainability of the trajectory. It also recognizes that, contrary to Butler’s model small alternate tourism destinations do not necessarily develop into larger resort destinations.

Flagstad and Hope (2001) recognize the importance of governance as a distinguishing factor in identifying the type of resort development that occurs. They suggest a spectrum from community-focused tourism destinations to corporate-directed extremes. The specific type of governance arrange-
ment and the degree to which local interests are represented within the stakeholder mix is highly variable and often place-dependent. For example, as Murphy (2008) observes in a mountain resort context, corporate domination of resorts is more evident in North America than in Europe or Australia. Many of the larger ski resorts developed in the 1960s and 1970s in North America do operate as municipalities with democratically elected councils, although unlike Europe where many ski operations are community managed – large corporate interests carry a great deal of power due to the dependency of resort communities on the success of the mountain operations (Gill and Williams 2005). However, in well-managed destinations, such as Whistler, BC, corporations increasingly recognize the need to build collaborative relationships with the communities in which they are located in order to acquire a ‘social license to operate’ (Williams et al. 2007). Recently, there has been an increasing interest in destination governance, with studies emerging in Europe (Nordin and Svensson 2005; Svensson et al. 2006); Australia (Dredge 2006) and North America (Gill and Williams 2011). This appears to be in response to the need to rethink growth strategies in the face of global change (Gill and Williams 2011). Governance approaches reflect neoliberal ideology that has resulted in the downsizing of government and an offsetting of responsibilities in a shift from ‘government’ to ‘governance’ that has blurred the roles of public and private sectors in policy-making (Dredge 2006).

Two of the major challenges that face resort destinations revolve around the growth of real estate associated with amenity migrants (Moss 2006; Williams and Gill 2006); and, issues of climate change (Gössling and Hall 2006). First, in the case of real estate development, fluidity of people and capital has contributed to a boom in the flow of both second-home and permanent residents to amenity-rich areas (Clark et al. 2006; Keller and Bieger 2008). This has stimulated resort development with, in many resorts – especially in North America – community needs being financed on the backs of the developers who are assessed ‘development charges’ that are then used to provide infrastructure and community services. However, growing awareness of the problems of overdevelopment, especially if it stresses carrying capacity, raises questions about how resort interests intersect with the needs of community residents when growth is slowed or stopped. New governance mechanisms that more comprehensively embrace economic, environmental and social needs from a sustainability perspective are being called for (Beritelli et al. 2007; Bodega et al. 2004; Gill and Williams 2011).

Second, especially in mountain resort destinations, the challenges of responding to threats of climate change are necessitating new approaches especially in the areas of infrastructural change, product diversification and corporate restructuring (Gill and Williams 2005; Gössling and Hall 2006; Scott 2006a, 2006b; Viner and Nichols 2005). Climate change is an issue that must be addressed in a comprehensive and multi-scalar manner. With both public and private sector rhetoric increasingly focusing on sustainability, there is a need to engage with a broader range of stakeholders, not just within the resort community but also beyond at the regional, national and even international level. Increasingly the voices of non-governmental agencies and aboriginal peoples are critical components of collaborative decision-making (Erkus-Osturk and Eraydin 2010).

3. Mountain Resort Development in British Columbia (BC)

The province of BC is predominantly mountainous terrain, made up of several distinctive mountain ranges including the Rocky Mountains along the Alberta border in eastern British Columbia, the Coast Mountains in the west and the Columbia Mountains in the southeast, all of which have ski operations. There are 17 major ski destinations throughout the province offering skiers and snowboarders a range of terrain and snow conditions. In total there are about 60 ski and snowboard facilities in the province, although many of these cater to the local population, whereas the major resorts attract locals, domestic tourists, and international visitors alike.

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opportunities designed to boost tourism and attract residential amenity investment in various regions of the province. British Columbia’s resource-based economy has been heavily dependent on forestry, mining and fishing, all of which have suffered significant decline in the past few decades. Today, many mills and mines have downsized or closed, and many ‘single-industry towns’ are left straining to survive. To address changing land use priorities, BC established a Land and Resource Management Planning process in the 1990s, in which government, industry, and public representatives engaged in regional land use planning. It has been a complicated procedure, fraught with disagreement as divergent interests struggle to reach consensus. In some regions, where ski area development is proposed, concerns over potential ecological damage, social change, and First Nations (aboriginal) land claims are common issues of debate.

In addition to a number of ski area expansion plans, mainly related to creating diversification and year-round operations, there are currently (2011) two major new ski area proposals under review in BC. Both include village development and year round recreational opportunities. One is in the Coast Mountains, ‘Garibaldi at Squamish’, 66 km north of Vancouver and the other, ‘Jumbo Glacier’, is in the Columbia Mountains. Both of these proposals have been under review for several decades and extensive environmental, social and economic impacts assessments have been conducted. The Jumbo Glacier project, which plans lift access for year-round skiing operations on the glacier, has come under attack over issues of wilderness preservation, whereas, the Garibaldi proposal has faced environmental concerns especially around water supply. In both cases there has been considerable opposition from residents in the regions. However, with the new Resort Strategy guidelines, the approval process will be considerably refined and final decisions on these two developments should be forthcoming soon.

4. The Whistler Model

Whistler, located 120 km north of Vancouver, remains unique amongst the mountain resorts in BC. It is regularly acknowledged as the ‘number one mountain resort in North America’ as the result of its combination of spectacular mountain terrain, snow conditions, management, amenities and service quality. The potential of this location for downhill skiing was first recognized in the 1960s. At that time skiers, mainly from Vancouver, were using a rope tow to access the mountain, but there was no paved road and access was challenging, resulted in the disorganized development on Crown (public) land of overnight accommodation in the form of ski huts and chalets. The provincial government’s attention was drawn to the potential of the Whistler area as an international ski destination by Vancouver-based businessmen who (unsuccessfully) lobbied the government to bid for the 1968 Winter Olympic Games. During the 1960s, British Columbia’s provincial government had already embarked on a major regional economic development strategy that centred on private and public joint investment to create ‘instant resource towns’ to support forestry and mining development in isolated locations throughout the province. This provided a model for creating a new resort community although it required revaluation of mountain terrain from its traditional resource utility for forestry and mining to one in which landscape is valued for its recreational and aesthetic values. This involved adopting new perspectives on community planning and design. Design professions during this period of time were applying cutting edge ideas in ‘environmental design’ that emphasized not only environmental issues but also an understanding of human behavior (Alexander et al., 1977). However, in a resort setting as opposed to a mining or forestry town setting an understanding of tourists’ behavior in a mountain environment was necessary. For these skills the government drew on the expertise of planners and developers creating and managing new ski resort developments in the United States, such as Vail, Colorado. Whistler was built on a ‘greenfield’ site at the convergence of two adjacent mountains, Whistler and Blackcomb and incorporated state of the art design features. These features have stood the test of time and are still valid components of contemporary resort design.

The ‘Resort Municipality of Whistler’ (RMOW) was officially designated by the provincial government in 1975 making it the first resort municipality in Canada, and one with a new form of local government. Under the Act, the Province granted
Whistler special financial and taxation tools to help develop tourism. In conjunction with the newly elected Municipal Council the Province also oversaw the development of an Official Community Plan. Thus, right from the start Whistler was conceived as both a resort destination and a community with an elected council. Both the federal and provincial governments were instrumental in initiating growth by providing favorable tenure and investment terms to attract external private developers. In the early stages of development it was essential to strive for a critical mass of development, thus the early public-private sector governance model took the form of a growth machine, whereby all stakeholders were focused on resort land development, often at the expense of growing community needs (Gill 2000). However, this was controlled growth and developers had to comply with and contribute to the long term development and ‘build out’ of Whistler’s official community plan. Early development weathered the recession of the early 1980s and as conceptualized in Butler’s (1980) model, once a critical mass of development had occurred rapid tourism development ensued. By 1990 when the community had grown to around 4,000 persons and had become politically and socially organized, the residents demanded that their needs be met.

As a result, the community transitioned from a growth machine phase to a growth management phase (Gill 2000). The local government established growth management strategies that included a bed unit (development) cap, extensive public engagement, sound environmental management strategies, and a resort and community monitoring program, all of which served community and resort interests well. However, by around 2000 the resort community has committed (although not built out) all its available land resources and reached its agreed upon limits to growth (Gill 2007). Thus the resort needed to rethink its future strategic direction. The awarding of the 2010 Winter Olympic and Paralympic Games to Vancouver and Whistler offered new paths for development in Whistler. Whistler has recently transitioned to a comprehensive sustainable management and governance approach that involves a wider array of stakeholders in a new decision-making framework (Gill and Williams 2011). Whistler has sought to be a leader and innovator in many aspects of its resort community management practices including those relating to environmental management, public engagement processes, affordable housing and sustainability practices. These aspects will be discussed in more detail below with reference to the new BC Resort Strategy.

5. British Columbia Resort Strategy

In 2002 20% of the Province’s direct tourism expenditures came from resort tourism. Recognizing this as offering considerable opportunities for regional tourism growth the provincial government established a BC Resort Task Force in 2003. The Task Force was charged with identifying means of maximizing the potential of existing and emerging resorts and resort communities within a sustainable tourism environment by eliminating barriers to investment, development, and expansion. They undertook extensive consultation with stakeholders, as well as commissioning more detailed economic studies. A major objective was to support year-round operation of resorts as these were felt
to offer the best opportunities for growth and sustainability. Many of the current proposals being considered by the Province represent the expansion of single season ski resorts. As noted above, the establishment of resort communities has been, to date, an arduous and challenging process for developers involving high levels of uncertainty and risk especially in cases involving ski developments.

The focus in this paper is on mountain resort communities, although other types of resorts such as fishing resorts and eco-tourism destinations are included in the BC Resort Strategy (2004). In order to identify places that can be considered ‘resort communities’ and are thus eligible for the special revenue generating options or legislation, a formal definition was required. The BC Resort Task Force (2004a, p. 2) recommended the following definition: ‘Resort community – refers to a spatially contiguous area where the transient, publicly available room capacity, measured in bed units, is greater than or equal to 60% of the permanent census population. A resort community may be an unincorporated settlement within a regional district or an incorporated municipality or a combination of both. A resort community has a diversity of property ownership.’

The BC Resort Strategy and Action Plan (2004) endorsed the Task Force findings and identified key aspects of resort development that need attention (Tab. 1).

The Resort Municipality Initiative was created to provide resort-oriented municipalities with new finance, development and business promotion tools to enhance the resort sector in BC. By 2007 13 eligible communities had reached agreements with the Province regarding their new status as ‘resort communities’ of which 5 are mountain resorts with expanded ski development projects (Fernie, Golden, Kimberley, Revelstoke and Rossland). Amendments of existing legislation allowed the eligible municipalities to share a portion of hotel room tax to invest in local resort-oriented projects. Other distinctive financial tools enable resort-oriented local governments to provide high quality amenities for both residents and visitors, and guide resort development. For example, a local government could administer a development cost charge for the construction of housing for resort employees. These new initiatives are similar to those instigated through the original Resort Municipality of Whistler Act in 1975 (and its subsequent amendments), but they expand application beyond mountain resorts to other types of resort destinations. The new legislation also allows for a resort community to create a resort association to promote the destination.

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6. Lessons from Whistler

There is recognition by the provincial government that Whistler represents a unique situation. Whistler is a well-established comprehensively planned resort community, developed on a ‘greenfield’ site that benefitted from significant start-up support from both the federal and provincial governments. Development over its 30-year history has been carefully managed through official community plans and growth management strategies. As a highly successful destination that has sought to be innovative in its development and management strategies, it offers many lessons for the newly designated resorts in BC. Indeed, the BC Resort Task Force sought input from Whistler representatives along with a wide range of stakeholders associated with other resort destinations. In this section, I examine two issues – affordable housing, and sustainability planning and management as examples of lessons that can be learned from the experience gained in Whistler.

7. Sustainability Governance, Planning and Management

A basic principle underlying the work of the BC Resort Task Force and the subsequent Strategy and Action Plan was that of sustainability. In BC there has been widespread commitment in principle to adopting this approach. This was reinforced with the hosting in the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympic Games with host members, including Vancouver and Whistler, highlighting the principles of sustainability in all their games-related infrastructural and management practices.

Working towards sustainability is a difficult challenge and involves private and public sector stakeholders to share a common vision of how the resort community perceives the future and the sustainable practices that can be implemented to achieve this goal. Once again Whistler serves as an innovator in this area. The resort community has an excellent record of award winning ‘green’ practices by both the municipality and the mountain resort operators. However, issues such as affordable housing and other social concerns became more prominent when the resort reached its long established planned limits of growth and thus, attention turned to the more comprehensive notion of sustainability. Underlying the new comprehensive sustainability model, known as Whistler 2020, was the adoption of the ‘Natural Step’ model (TNS 2010). The Natural Step is an international non-profit research, education, and advisory organization that uses a science-based systems framework to help organizations, individuals and communities take meaningful steps towards sustainability (TNS 2010). The Whistler Centre for Sustainability, an arm’s length not-for profit organization, was established to coordinate the process that included the already established resort and community-monitoring program. Within the comprehensive sustainability planning approach, any action undertaken for a specific purpose must consider wider upstream and downstream implications. For example, while creating affordable housing is an important sustainability task for both economic and social reasons, these facilities must be accommodated in places readily accessible to the workplace for social purposes, and in environmentally appropriate locations for ecological reasons. This more holistic approach developed around action priorities that include: enriching community life; enhancing the resort experience; protecting the environment; ensuring economic viability; and partnering for success. The sustainability initiatives are guided by the perspectives of 15 Task Force Working Groups comprised of a wide range of stakeholders (including representatives of private and public institutions as well as individual community members) from both within and beyond the community. The Task Forces themes are: arts, culture and heritage; built environment; economic; energy; food; learning; materials and solid waste; natural areas; recreation and leisure; transportation; visitor experience; water; resident affordability; health and social; and, resident housing. Whistler 2020’s interactive and informative website provides on-going progress reports to the broader community on the implementation of recommended Task Force priorities, as well as ongoing efforts to engage locals in ‘owning the plan’ (WHISTLER 2020, 2011).

While it is unlikely that smaller resort communities have the personnel or financial resources to establish such a complex and sophisticated system of sustainability planning and management, the Whistler Centre for Sustainability is assisting the 13 resort communities in BC with the development
of common indicators and a reporting system on their tourism development initiatives. They are also providing support to these municipalities in developing their individual programs to promote a successful and sustainable tourism economy.

8. Affordable Housing

One of the most ‘wicked’ problems to solve in resort destinations is the provision of affordable housing for employees. Resort destinations attract not only tourists but also amenity migrants who seek the quality of life offered by the scenic, environmental and recreational amenities that such places offer (Moss 2006; Williams and Gill 2006). Amenity migrants include not only second-homeowners but also full-time lifestyle residents, some of whom are seeking permanent residence and others who may wish to work and experience life in the resort community for a period of time. In some instances, second-homeowners become permanent residents, e.g. due to retirement. As a result of this, demand is driven by forces external to the resort community and, as resort housing can demand premium prices due to the additional amenity value, developers if allowed free rein, will develop market-driven housing. Further, many jobs in the tourism sector are less well paid than, for example, the resource extraction or industrial sectors, further widening the affordability gap.

The BC Resort Strategy permits the local government to institute development charges from developers to support construction of employee housing. Whistler has considerable experience in the development of affordable housing and over a period of almost 30 years they have refined their strategies and researched practices of affordable housing elsewhere so that they now possess a wealth of knowledge concerning best practices in resort communities (Dickinson, McKeever and Zucht 2009). Initially the Whistler Valley Housing Society, established in 1983 as a non-for-profit association, was able to access federal government support from Canada Mortgage and Housing to construct employee housing. However, this fell far short of demand. In 1990 the municipality enacted the ‘Employee Housing Service Charge’ that required developers of commercial tourism and industrial land to either build employee accommodation or contribute cash-in-lieu to a housing fund. Unfortunately, the amount set for cash-in-lieu was far too low, a common problem in resorts (Wake and Curran 2008), and no homes were constructed for several years.

As a result of restructuring, The Whistler Housing Authority (WHA) was created in 1997 as a wholly owned subsidiary of the municipality. The WHA began by conducting extensive reviews and site visits around North America. An important lesson learned was that each case was contextually specific and that it is important to understand and meet the specific needs of one’s own community residents (Dickinson et al. 2009). In Whistler, an annual ‘Employee Housing Needs Assessment’ survey is conducted (as one component of a more comprehensive resort community monitoring program) and provides the basis to strategize affordable housing development. Demand for affordable housing has always outstripped supply in Whistler, and the resort community has tried various approaches in its attempt to be equitable in its allocations. Whistler did not institute a points system (e.g. based on length of time in community, years of employment, number of dependents etc.) as it can be cumbersome and resource intensive (Dickinson et al. 2009). Instead, they initially adopted a lottery system that was unpopular before turning to a simple ‘first-come, first-served’ waitlist for employee residents in the community, with separate lists for rental and ownership.

Whistler now houses 80% of its workers within the community and has developed one of the most successful affordable housing strategies within North American resorts. However, reaching this goal was facilitated by the recent addition of the Olympic Athletes Village accommodation. As a result of negotiations with the Olympic Organizing Committee, the Municipality was able to argue, on the grounds that the resort was already committed to the principles of sustainability, that permanent housing units within municipal boundaries that would subsequently serve as affordable housing for the community, were necessary conditions.

A major challenge in managing affordable housing schemes that has still not been resolved in Whistler is ‘resale price control’. This control is designed to ensure that the housing units remain affordable by restricting appreciation. Since 1997 three different formulas have been used based on prime bank
lending rates, housing price indexes in Vancouver, and most recently core consumer price indexes. All of the affordable housing challenges that Whistler has faced provide useful lessons for the new resort communities. **Dickinson et al.** (2009, p. 19) conclude that, ‘the paramount lesson learned from this experience is the importance of municipal Council’s unwavering support, adherence to a well-defined vision and courage of their convictions’.

9. Conclusion

As **Minger and Miller** (2006) have observed in other contexts, good resorts are good communities. In creating new ‘resort communities’ the BC provincial government has recognized the importance of the necessary symbiosis between the community and the resort industry. Stakeholder relationships in resorts are complex, involving private sector enterprises supported by various levels of public sector engagement and regulation. Of critical importance, is the engagement of the community from an early stage in planning and development in order to provide the tourism sector with a ‘social license to operate’ (Williams et al. 2007). Whistler has served as an excellent case of best practice for many of the newly designated resort communities in the province. Two examples, affordable housing strategies and comprehensive sustainability planning, management and governance have been presented to illustrate cutting edge ideas that have been developed through many years of experience in Whistler. Every resort community is unique and the solutions to the challenges they face are place specific. However, the basis of the new Resort Municipality Act is grounded in the Whistler experience.

The **BC Resort Task Force** (2004a) identified many challenges ahead for the new resort communities. These include improving infrastructure and transportation; making the process of development more efficient and transparent; and improving marketing. Building partnerships with First Nations, who in the past have on the whole been opposed to resort development, is now an urgent imperative as the province seeks to facilitate land-use settlements with the aboriginal population. Ultimately, the success of the resort communities will lie in a resort community’s ability to work collaboratively with a wide range of stakeholders including the tourism sector, the resort operators, First Nations, provincial and regional government agencies and investors (BC Resort Task Force 2004b).

**References**


