



A Natural Step Case Study the Whistler story



ON THE ROAD TO SUSTAINABILITY

Unlike many Canadian communities, Whistler, British Columbia has never had to deal with the question of its identity. Located in the Coast Mountains, a two hour drive north of Vancouver, Whistler was conceived as a mountain resort in the 1960s, built as a mountain resort in the 1970s and, to no one's surprise, thrives today as a world-famous, four-season destination mountain resort. What might come as a surprise is that Whistler is arguably one of the most committed of all Canadian communities to becoming truly sustainable.

In the late 1960s, about 500 people lived in a scattering of houses up and down Whistler Valley. Today, this town of 10,000 permanent residents hosts a seasonal population of about 4,500, another 9,100 second-home owners from around the world, and over two million tourists who flock to Whistler each year to enjoy recreational activities as diverse as skiing, snowboarding, hiking, fishing, mountain biking and golf. Residents – largely comprising people who have made a conscious decision to move to Whistler – share a strong sense of community and a passion for protecting the natural environment.

Whistler's development dates to the early 1960s, when a group of businessmen joined forces with members of the Canadian Olympic Committee to find a site they could develop for a future Olympic Winter Games. Although the Whistler Valley was still wilderness then – there was not even a road into the area – members of the group believed in its potential, rolled up their sleeves and got to work. By the mid 1960s a road had been built into the Valley and the first ski lifts were operating on Whistler Mountain. In a “build-it-and-they-will-come” scenario, people began to move to the Valley, and schools, water and sewage treatment, building codes, medical services, fire protection, recreation complexes, library and postal services followed.

In 1975, the community became Canada's first incorporated Resort Municipality, a legislative designation that grants the local government special consideration to promote, build and maintain infrastructure and services for a large influx of visitors. Three years later work commenced on the building a new town centre, Whistler Village. In 2010, 50 years following its founding vision, Whistler will host the 21st Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games.

FOCUS
ON



Whistler will host the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games

Many communities have developed a variety of strategies and policies relating to planning for the future. Planning should not be totally centralized but be a balance between various components of the community and embrace all aspects of a liveable community. The judges are agreed that one community displayed that it has achieved this balance and has embraced all the aspects of interest to the judges. This community has been successful in the excellent organization of comprehensive sustainable plan and partnership agreement strategies. **This community is Whistler, Canada.**

JUDGES STATEMENT
INTERNATIONAL AWARDS FOR LIVEABLE
COMMUNITIES, 2005

SUSTAINABILITY

Whistler is generally recognized as one of Canada's leaders in community sustainability planning, engagement and implementation, and it was one of the very first communities to begin developing a sophisticated sustainability agenda. This reputation is deserved, and for a number of reasons.

The first is in the nature of the people who live, work and play there. British Columbia's Coast Mountains, graced with soaring granite spires, tumbling glaciers and wide-ranging wildlife, are nothing short of spectacular, and the Whistler Valley constitutes a particularly attractive setting in a spectacular corner of the range. It seems that all those who have had contact with the Valley – from the indigenous First Nations people, to the early settlers, to the business people who built the resort, to the current residents – have felt a special affinity for the place. Throughout, the natural environment has been acknowledged as the area's greatest asset and its number one amenity. Almost without exception, the residents of Whistler have chosen to live there because it offers a quality of life that exists in few other places – and they are very protective of the mountains, their community and their way of life.

Accordingly, most of the important economic and development decisions over the past 50 years have been made with both environmental and social considerations in mind. Whistler Village itself was designed to mimic a mountain stream flowing through a valley. Featuring a long pedestrian-only thoroughfare, the architecture strives to frame the best mountain views and ensures that sunlight floods as many corners as possible.

The community's general concern for the environment was heightened by a surge in growth that began in the late 1980s and continued through much of the 1990s. Double-digit growth became the norm, and for a number of years Whistler held the dubious distinction of being the fastest growing community in Canada. Between 1990 and 2000, Whistler's developed housing stock increased over 50 percent (from about 28,000 bed units to 46,000 in 2000).

Such rapid growth in a valley with physical limits to growth and

an amenity-protective population spurred a number of critical questions. Is continued rapid growth in the best long-term interests of the resort community? How does Whistler manage escalating living, housing and business costs? What are the environmental and visitor experience impacts of an expanding infrastructure and an ever-increasing number of people traveling up and down the Valley? How will global trends like climate change and shifting travel patterns affect a resort community whose lifeblood is deep snow and tourists?

In the year 2000, the Municipality of Whistler made some significant progress in setting out a direction of sustainability with a new vision and environmental strategy. It had begun to build community partnerships but was looking for a clear way of communicating this new priority with the broader community and, in particular, with local businesses. As with most communities, there were so many interests, so many diverging wants and needs – it was hard to develop a common approach for sustainability.

DAVID WALDRON

FORMER COORDINATOR OF WHISTLER'S THE NATURAL STEP EARLY ADOPTERS AND WHISTLER. IT'S OUR NATURE PROGRAMS, AND CONTRIBUTOR TO WHISTLER 2002.

WHISTLER 2002 AND THE WHISTLER ENVIRONMENTAL STRATEGY

Although Whistler's Official Community Plans¹ of 1976, 1982 and 1989 included a number of growth management strategies, ongoing questions surrounding the runaway growth led to a call for a community visioning process in 1997. The resulting "Whistler 2002" vision articulated the community's social, economic and environmental priorities, based on sustainability concepts. Among the five priorities were "building a stronger resort community" (based on ideas related to social sustainability) and "moving toward environmental sustainability."

The process led to the creation of the Whistler Environmental Strategy, which provided a policy framework for moving toward environmental sustainability. Key elements of the WES included: replacement of past municipal references to "environmental stewardship" of the local landscape with "moving toward environmental sustainability" which also included values dedicated to global and regional responsibility and the rights of future generations. In collaboration with a number of community stakeholders, new environmental directions were established such as a protected areas network, community energy and air quality planning, and an environmental sustainability management system. However, the WES was not well understood throughout the community, especially within the business community. Further communication and engagement were recognized as essential.

¹Official Community Plans (OCPs) are the primary land use and development policy documents of British Columbia municipalities.

THE NATURAL STEP AND WHISTLER'S EARLY ADOPTERS

It was at this point, in March 2000, with Whistler 2002 in place and the WES drafted and being implemented, that Dr. Karl-Henrik Robèrt first visited Whistler. Although he was on holidays with his sons, Dr. Robèrt agreed to give three community presentations on The Natural Step. What he had to say resonated extremely well in a community that was wrestling with its long-term sustainability. Other community and business leaders were similarly impressed. While Whistler had been proactive about the environment and a variety of social issues, it had never defined its efforts in terms of an overarching sustainability framework.

The timing of Dr. Robèrt's visit to Whistler was ideal. Whistler 2002 had laid the groundwork for introducing sustainability to the community and the Whistler Environmental Strategy provided a comprehensive plan for environmental stewardship, 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 necessary intellectual and scientific rigor.²

SHANNON GORDON

WHISTLER2020 COMMUNITY INITIATIVES MANAGER

The Natural Step Framework was consistent with directions set by the Whistler 2002 vision and the Whistler Environmental Strategy, and it provided the means for effective sustainability education and communication.

Among those taking note of the opportunities opened by the Framework were the leaders of a number of high-profile Whistler organizations, six of whom decided to band together to become the Whistler's Early Adopters of The Natural Step Framework, which later became known as "Whistler. It's Our Nature." Their broad objective was to jointly increase their own knowledge of The Natural Step and share that new knowledge with the rest of the community. The participating organizations were:

- © The RMOW
(the municipal government)
- © Whistler Blackcomb (the ski resort operator and largest employer in Whistler)
- © The Fairmont Chateau Whistler
(a premier Whistler hotel)
- © Tourism Whistler
(the resort marketing organization)
- © The Association of Whistler Area Residents for the Environment (or AWARE, a local environmental advocacy non-profit)
- © Whistler Foto Source (a camera and photo finishing business that represented Whistler's small business sector).

² Shannon Gordon (2003). Whistler's Journey toward Sustainability, p.2, Paper presented at the Sustainable Mountain Communities Conference in Banff, Alberta

Whistler2020 is our vision, our strategies and our ongoing process for achieving a successful and sustainable future. Our vision is what we aspire to be, and helps inspire and guide our strategic planning and actions over time. Our strategies set out how Whistler will achieve this vision, through sixteen strategies and ongoing community-wide actions. Our process ensures that Whistler2020 is a 'living' plan, that it drives ongoing progress, and that it is continually informed by interested community members.

WWW.WHISTLER2020.CA

Working together, the Early Adopters designed and implemented a number of community awareness and learning initiatives between 2000 and 2002. They included:

- ⊙ A two-day “train the trainers” workshop at which teams from each Early Adopter organization learned how to develop and deliver sustainability awareness presentations to others in their respective organizations
- ⊙ An intensive ten-week advanced training for Early Adopter members designed to deepen participants’ knowledge of The Natural Step and give them the skills to act as community resources for other organizations interested in joining the journey to a more sustainable future
- ⊙ A Whistler Sustainability Symposium which featured North American and European businesses who were using The Natural Step approach
- ⊙ A community speaker series that included Karl-Henrik Robèrt, David Suzuki and Ray Anderson
- ⊙ A community engagement program called Whistler. It’s Our Nature. In addition to the speaker series noted above, the program included workshops, sustainability toolkits (booklets) and other resources meant to encourage Whistler individuals, households, businesses and schools to join the growing sustainability movement.



³ In 2005, the RMOW was awarded the FCM-CH2M HILL Sustainable Community Award for its “Integrated Sustainability Initiative,” for its efforts as part of Whistler. It’s Our Nature.

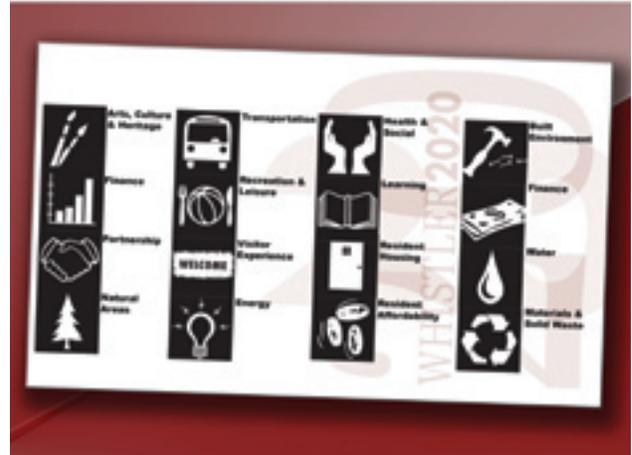
the Whistler story

In 2002, four factors converged to further advance sustainability in Whistler: the five-year Whistler 2002 vision (created in 1997) had expired; the understanding and efforts of the Early Adopters and others had substantially increased; there was an increased community awareness of sustainability and its advantages within the community; and Vancouver's and Whistler's partnership bid for the 2010 Winter Olympics. In particular, the Olympic bid galvanized the community into thinking about what could happen to Whistler if the bid was accepted. Esther Speck, who had helped the Fairmont Chateau Whistler develop a Natural Step sustainability action plan and later joined the RMOW team leading the Whistler2020 development process, recalls that, "It became very important for the community to have a strong direction in place, so the Olympics wouldn't just happen to the community. We wanted to be in charge, to direct the Olympics to leave the legacy we wanted as a community."⁴

Whistler2020 is a community plan, not a consultants' plan or a municipal plan. The process can be compared to having a community build a barn rather than the barn being built by a construction company. Only in that way is the community going to like it, be proud of it, and take care of it.

TIM WAKE,
RMOW COUNCILOR, 2007

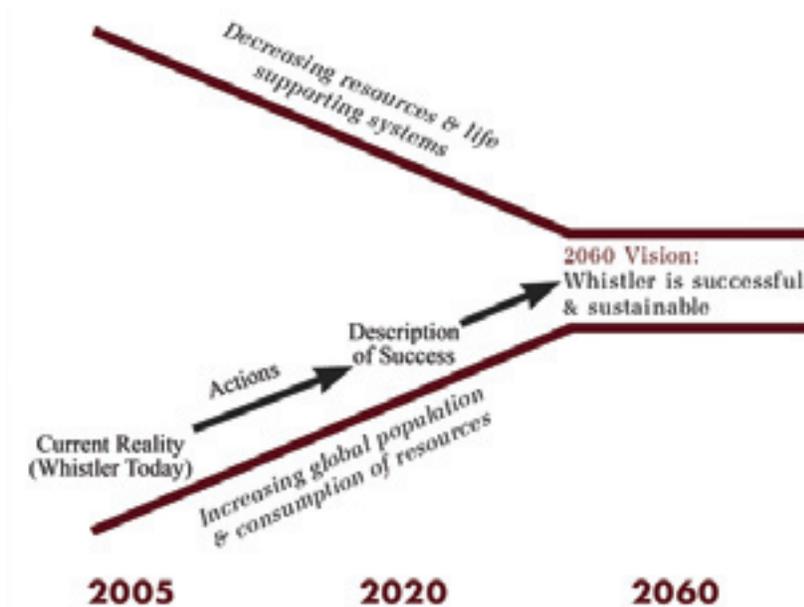
WHISTLER2020: THE 17 STRATEGIES⁵



Given all that was happening, it was becoming increasingly evident that the community needed a new planning framework to guide it into the future. The municipality and community leaders committed to creating a comprehensive sustainability plan (CSP), now more commonly referred to as an integrated community sustainability plan (ICSP). Initiated under the Whistler: Its our Future banner, the vision for the community was officially adopted by council in December 2004 with a new title: Whistler2020 – Moving Toward a Sustainable Future. The 16 initial strategies for achieving the vision were adopted by Council in August 2005. It was the first CSP/ICSP in North America to use the The Natural Step Framework throughout its development and implementation, and embed The Natural Step and sustainability into the municipality's highest level policy statements.

⁴ Esther Speck (2006) personal conversation with TNS.

⁵ The Whistler2020 Food Strategy was developed as the 17th strategy through a task force engagement process during the fall of 2007. It was initially thought that food would be adequately covered within the Health & Social and Resident Affordability strategies. However, it soon became clear after their development that food should be a separate strategy.



WHISTLER2020

Whistler2020 is a community-created sustainability plan, developed and committed to by approximately 30 formal partner organizations and businesses, 160 task force members who annually meet to review and improve the plan, and roughly 40 organizations implementing the task force actions.

As a planning document, Whistler2020 comprises the community's shared vision of success to the year 2020 and the strategies needed to achieve that success. Although the plan targets the year 2020 for the vision and strategies, achieving all of the community's sustainability objectives is a longer-term goal set for sometime before 2060.

Whistler2020's vision foresees Whistler as "The premier mountain resort community – as we move toward sustainability." The vision also articulates five priorities – enriching community life, enhancing the resort experience, protecting the environment, ensuring economic viability, and partnering for success – and 17 strategy areas. The community task forces review progress and

performance results on an annual basis and recommend the "next step" actions that will move Whistler closer to its vision.

The strategies give the vision its legs; the actions that are recommended and implemented in each strategy area move the community towards its vision of success and sustainability.

Further actions are created and implemented by every Whistler2020 partner. The partners use Whistler2020 to guide and direct all of their actions as an organization - not just the ones that the task forces recommend.

For each strategy there is a task force composed of a) local experts in the strategy area, b) the organizations and businesses most likely to be responsible for implementation of the task force recommendations, and c) other stakeholders who are most affected by the strategy area and recommended actions (e.g., seniors, businesses, young families, etc.). A municipal staff team facilitates the process but does not determine the content.

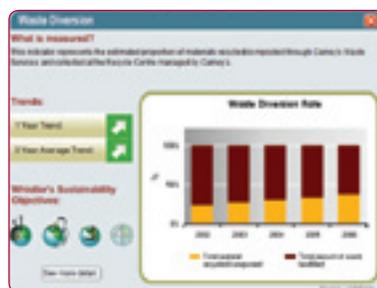
The Natural Step's methodology was used in the initial development of the strategies. Task force members were first introduced to The Natural Step's key concepts, guided through the action plan process and given access to the TNS eLearning course. Each task force developed a description of success for each strategy, ensuring that those descriptions aligned with Whistler's long-term sustainability objectives. Task force members then assessed aspects of the current community reality supported or contravened long-term goals, developed lists of recommended actions and defined indicators that could be used to track progress.

Creating the Whistler2020 strategies required the task forces to meet several times over many months. Today, with the plan in place, the task forces meet every year to assess progress and to recommend new actions.

In 2006, more than 150 members participated in the task force process and generated 142 recommended actions for potential lead organizations. Of these, 103 were accepted by the lead organizations – a 73% acceptance ratio. Once accepted, it is the responsibility of the lead organizations to ensure that the necessary plans and resources exist to successfully implement the actions. To provide transparency and build trust within the community and the task forces, lead organizations that choose not to implement their assigned actions are asked to provide rationale for declining the action and their statement is published on the Whistler2020 website and reported back to the recommending task force.



Task force recommended actions are evaluated by the leading organization and then reported on www.whistler2020.ca.



Whistler measures various indicators to see whether they are helping Whistler move towards or away from its vision and what sustainability principles are affected. Here, we see that Whistler's waste diversion rate is increasing, bringing Whistler closer toward its vision.

A few examples of actions directly and indirectly resulting from Whistler2020 are:⁶

1. Establishment of in-fill housing guidelines to concentrate future developments in existing neighbourhoods to increase density and reduce the distance that residents need to commute.
2. Powering all municipal diesel vehicles with bio-diesel blended fuels (resulting in a 17% reduction in GHG in the summer and 4% in the winter).
3. Installation of geothermal heat exchange system for heating and cooling at a community fire hall and a housing project.
4. Landfill methane capture that resulted in lowering emissions by 5% (estimated that 21,000 tonnes of CO₂ equivalent (tCO₂e) emissions will be avoided in 2007, with a total of approximately 450,000 tCO₂e reductions over the next 25 years.).
5. Piloting of solar powered garbage compactors in Whistler village (these compactors are expected to reduce pickup and transfer frequencies by more than 500%).
6. Development of a master calendar of all arts, culture and heritage events happening in Whistler to provide residents and visitors easier access to information and build community.
7. Creation of a needs assessment of Whistler's housing in recognition of changing demographics and need for long-term and diverse housing prices and types.

8. Expansion of the Adopt-a-Youth program. This program pairs first-year seasonal employees with Whistler residents to embed a sense of community for new residents.

⁶ For information on actions taken by specific Whistler Early Adopter organizations see Natural Step at www.naturalstep.ca. For a full list of the 17 strategies, priorities, indicators and actions taken by the community, see www.whistler2020.ca.

Throughout the process, and on an ongoing basis, the wider community is kept abreast of Whistler2020's progress and performance through columns in the local papers and presentations to various groups in the resort community. A website that supplies important information also helps to ensure process transparency and accountability. Among other features, the website gives detailed information on each recommended action and its acceptance and implementation status (see bottom right on page 8) and provides a "report card" on the community's recent performance at moving toward – or away from – its vision of success and its sustainability objectives (see bottom left on page 8). The report card contains 23 core indicators that give an overall performance snapshot and 80 strategy indicators that provide specific results related to the 17 Whistler2020 strategies.⁸

The results that Whistler has achieved are a testament to the ambition, patience and long-term commitment of all the organizations and community members involved. Whistler's process has also been hailed by others as a model of sustainability planning.

The Federation of Canadian Municipalities and CH2M HILL, for example, awarded Whistler a national award for sustainability community planning in 2005. Whistler also took top honours among 53 competing cities in 2005 in the Planning for the Future category of the International Awards for Liveable Communities and was named as one of the most liveable communities in the world. Not be left out, the Whistler2020 website, as a key piece of the program's infrastructure, won an innovation award in 2006 from the Canadian Association of Municipal Administrators.

The Whistler2020 sustainability plan and implementation process was activated by the visionary leadership of community stakeholders, delivered through an excellent framework for engagement, coupled with a strong belief in the ability of the community to respond. These key factors, as well as a strong prior network formation upon which to build the task force process, and a commitment to inclusion and diversity, created a very strong engagement process from which to drive the sustainability plan.

VICTORIA SMITH
AUTHOR OF THE HEART OF CHANGE

LAST WORDS

Whistler's experience with sustainability planning and The Natural Step holds a number of lessons for other communities embarking on their own journey to sustainability. It also demonstrates the advantages of using The Natural Step Framework.

Firstly, sustainability planning requires patience and a long-term commitment. Whistler's planning process developed over the course of several years and involved exploring possible futures for the community, creating a shared vision, making well-grounded assessments about the current sustainability of the operations, practices and behaviours associated with many areas of community life, creating actions to move the community towards its vision, and then monitoring the implementation of those actions. On paper, the steps sound clear-cut; in practice, they require perseverance and a great deal of skill in terms of strategic thinking, process facilitation and community engagement.

⁸Indicators for the 17th strategy (the Food Strategy) will be added in 2008.

Secondly, genuine community engagement is a necessity. Victoria Smith, in her Master's thesis written about the Whistler process, identified "the imperatives for leveraging a community of people to work toward a vision of sustainability."⁹ The imperatives include:

- ⊙ Exceptionally strong leadership from government and community leaders
- ⊙ Excellent facilitation and a framework for engagement
- ⊙ The recognition that broad community engagement is crucial for success
- ⊙ A shared and genuine desire for inclusive and diverse participation
- ⊙ An action-oriented process
- ⊙ Shared organizational responsibility for implementation
- ⊙ Mobilizing leaders to work together during a critical stage of development in the community

A common framework and definition of sustainability is critical: without it, meaningful dialogue that leads to a common vision and progress toward the vision is much more difficult.¹⁰

SHANNON GORDON
WHISTLER2020 COMMUNITY INITIATIVES MANAGER

Whistler's commitment to community engagement dates to at least the late 1990s and the Whistler 2002 process. The commitment to community engagement exhibited in that process was carried unbroken into Whistler2020, with citizens participating in multiple formats that included open houses, workshops, kids' forums, surveys and the internet. The task forces continue to be a tremendous tool for engagement, leading to the creation of 'democratic space' and genuine communication among the stakeholders.

The Natural Step Framework is also given much of the credit for the program's success. It has provided a common language and a common mental framework for people to use, allowing the community to identify shared goals and ways to work towards them.

Describing what success would look like and using backcasting eliminates unnecessary negativity and discussion. It allows more innovation and inspiration. We have hosted numerous conferences and meetings with a lot of participants - one with 60 people in the room from 19 communities, along with other parties - and without failure backcasting has been successful.¹¹

MIKE VANCE
RMOW GENERAL MANAGER OF POLICY AND PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT AND MEMBER OF WHISTLER2020 TEAM

⁹ Victoria Smith (2002) The Heart of Change, p. 48, University of Toronto.

¹⁰ Shannon Gordon (2003). Whistler's Journey toward Sustainability, p. 6. Paper presented at the Sustainable Mountain Communities Conference in Banff, Alberta.

¹¹ Mike Vance (2007) Personal conversation.

The final lesson is a simple one: even with a great framework and an inclusive process, nothing happens without action, and the cardinal rule regarding sustainability is to take action today with the resources at hand. Even the simplest action, with the most meager of resources, gets people into the game. Esther Speck, another long-time participant in Whistler's journey and a former Whistler2020 team member, advises all those starting the journey, to **"Pick something and do it! Don't be paralyzed by complexities. Acknowledge where you are, but get started!"**¹²



For us in Whistler, we have found The Natural Step Framework to be broadly applicable across all areas of the community (from energy systems to arts and culture) and to all levels of decisions (from purchasing paper to developing a tourism strategy). It also provides the critical shared language and ultimate end goals that have allowed the community to move beyond discussions about what sustainability is to action planning for how to get there.

KEN MELAMED
MAYOR OF WHISTLER

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

www.whistler2020.ca

Thank you to Esther Speck, Mike Vance, Shannon Gordon, Ted Battiston, Tim Wake for granting The Natural Step interviews.

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¹² Esther Speck (2007). Personal conversation.