

Shifting the Discourse from Growth to Sustainability

NEW APPROACHES TO GOVERNANCE IN
RESORT DESTINATIONS

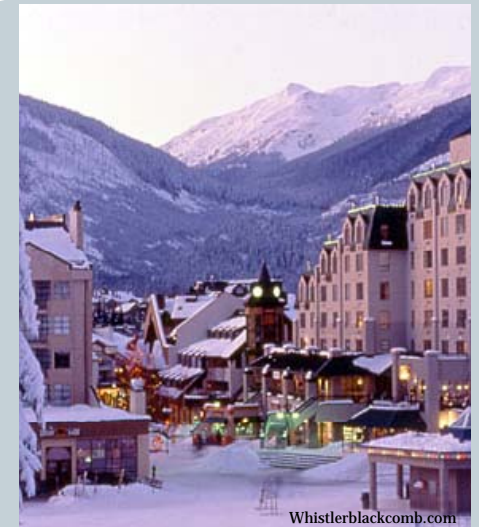
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Paper presented at the IGU Pre-conference Symposium *Transforming and Managing Destinations: Tourism and Leisure in a Time of Global Change and Risks*. Trier, Germany, August 22-25, 2012

Presentation Outline

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- Introduction
- Theoretical/conceptual framing
 - Governance and neoliberalism
 - Interpretations of sustainability:
 - Guiding fiction
 - Strategic ambiguity
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- Shifting the discourse in the resort community of Whistler



Introduction

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- Increasing calls in the destination management literature to rethink appropriateness of pro-growth strategies
- Whistler, an all-season mountain resort in British Columbia, Canada has recently introduced an innovative comprehensive sustainability plan
- Findings based on longitudinal multi-method empirical research on transformational issues in Whistler - currently framed in path dependency/path creation context.

Governance and neoliberalism

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- In response to global forces of change, advanced capitalist economies have responded by developing neoliberal modes of governance that embrace “growth first” ideology (Peck & Tickell, 2002).
- “Governance” encompasses the values, rules, institutions and processes through which public and private stakeholders seek to achieve common objectives and make decisions.

Neoliberalism and urban sustainability

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- While et al. (2004:550) suggest that although superficially the neoliberal project of ‘growth first’ seems to conflict ideologically with the principles of urban sustainability, the entrepreneurial city is dependent on enhancing urban environments and ecologies to create an attractive image.
- This is also true in a resort context and environmental policy initiatives have been on-going in many destinations for the past two decades and are now (in some instances) becoming embodied into broader sustainability agendas.

Interpretations of sustainability: “Guiding fiction”

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- “Guiding fictions” serve socially valuable functions as long as they stimulate and organize social discourse around problematic issues and the definitions remain vague (Shumway, 1991; McCool and Moissey, 2001).
- The value of “guiding fictions” diminishes when stakeholders seek to translate principles into practice

Interpretations of sustainability: “Strategic ambiguity”

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- From organizational behavior field, “strategic ambiguity” helps smooth over differences useful in supporting stakeholder buy-in to sustainability concepts and engagement in collaborative venture (Wexler, 2009)

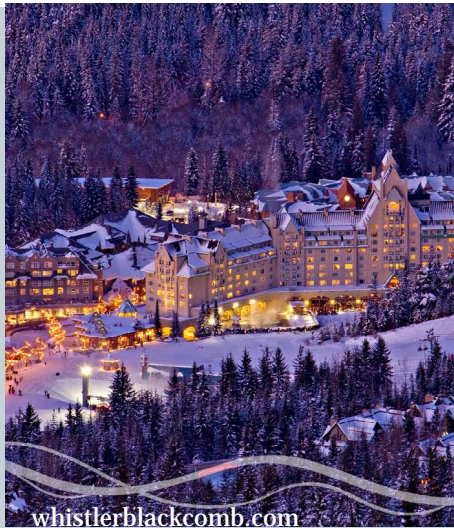
Interpretations of sustainability: the “sustainability fix”

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- Concept developed in urban politics and planning that refers to a political discourse that allows development to proceed by accommodating both profit-making and environmental concerns, thus enabling the creation of bridges between organizations and actors who might not otherwise work together (While et al, 2004).

Shifting the discourse in Whistler

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Whistler's evolving governance

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- A new (1975) comprehensively planned mountain resort community with elected municipal council
- Guided by Official Community Plan
- Until recently “locked-in” to pro-growth development path (Gill and Williams, 2011).
- Past governance approach has evolved – especially to “growth management” strategy (1994) that included monitoring resort and community change and public engagement in planning.

Growth management as an example of strategic ambiguity

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- “Growth management was initially introduced as a buzz word and a compromise that might appeal both to growth and no-growth factions, with business interests focusing on growth and antigrowth interests emphasizing management” (Gill 2000:1009).
- Generally uncontested development as a result of resort growth paralleled by community amenity growth.
- A maximum level of development in the form of “bed units” (52,500) based on assessed environmental limits gave community confidence in municipality’s growth strategy.

2000: The need for a new discourse

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- Bed unit limit fast approaching, concerns over affordable housing; increasing tourists; mounting ecosystem stresses etc.
- The solution lay in finding a way to diffuse the discourse regarding growth from one that focused on the bed unit limit and its tight relationship with environmental quality to a broader agenda the established “sustainability” as the core policy imperative.

Shifting the discourse to a new sustainability path

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- The solution to creating a new path arose unexpectedly when the charismatic leader of The Natural Step (TNS) organization (Karl Henrik Robért) visited the resort.
- TNS is an international non-profit research, education and advisory organization that uses a science-based framework to help organizations and communities move towards sustainability.

TNS Four Principles of Sustainability

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1. eliminate our contribution to the progressive buildup of substances extracted from the Earth's crust (for example, heavy metals and fossil fuels)
2. eliminate our contribution to the progressive buildup of chemicals and compounds produced by society (for example, dioxins, PCBs, and DDT)
3. eliminate our contribution to the progressive physical degradation and destruction of nature and natural processes (for example, over harvesting forests and paving over critical wildlife habitat);
4. eliminate our contribution to conditions that undermine people's capacity to meet their basic human needs (for example, unsafe working conditions and not enough pay to live on).

Implementing the shift

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- The first step was to engage the community in an intensive educational awareness campaign that promoted understanding and adoption of principles, language and tools of TNS. This took over 2 years.
- With the community and other stakeholders fully immersed in the “guiding fiction” of sustainability as seen through the core principles of TNS this established the necessary conditions to engage in a “sustainability fix”

From discourse to action

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- The outcome was the development of the Comprehensive Sustainability Plan known as *Whistler2020* (see www.whistler2020.ca)
- Whistler became the first resort community resort community (and the first municipality in Canada) to adopt and successfully begin implementing TNS in a planning domain





- In 2011 a local newspaper article referred to the 's-word' - "a good word turned bad through overuse and misuse". This is creating problems with implementation of the *Whistler2020* plan
- Nov 2011 municipal elections saw sweep of new pro-growth, business-oriented candidates elected (reflection of economic stresses)
- The response – scaled back task force engagement within governance structure; revisiting of bed unit cap.

Conclusions

- Path creation is often a contested path
- The sustainability fix requires active environmentally conscious community and political commitment to citizen participation in planning and decision making.
- Continuing reinforcement/education concerning the underlying principles of "sustainability" is necessary.
- Despite recent setbacks, Whistler's model of sustainability governance is flexible and scalable and still provides an innovative model of a sustainable approach to governance.