



## A SKI RESORT OWNER AND OPERATOR EMBRACES SUSTAINABILITY

Sprawling across two 7,000-foot peaks in the Coast Mountains just north of Vancouver, British Columbia, Whistler Blackcomb is one of the world's premier ski resorts. The enviable status is attributable to a variety of "biggest and best" claims: it has more terrain than any other resort in North America, the highest vertical drop, the highest lift elevation, the most glaciers, and arguably the best glades and the best access to the backcountry. To complement the skiing, Whistler Village, nestled in the valley between the mountains, offers a well-rounded and attractive après-ski experience with a lively collection of restaurants, shops, bars, hotels and spas. While winter skiing and snow boarding attract over a continent-leading two-million skier visits a year, the resort operates through the summer with a full accompaniment of warm-weather activities ranging from lift-serviced mountain biking, guided glacier tours, wildlife walks, fishing, rafting, and horseback riding.

Whistler and Blackcomb were founded as separate resorts, but merged in 1997 when Intrawest Corporation, then the owner of Blackcomb, purchased the Whistler operation. Intrawest itself was founded as a residential and urban real estate firm in the mid-1970s, but subsequently became a world leader in the development and operation of experiential destination resorts. Headquartered in Vancouver, it is today the largest owner and operator of village-centered destination resorts on the North American continent.<sup>1</sup>

In 2006, Intrawest's founder and CEO, Joe Houssian, retired, selling the company to Fortress Investment Group. Under the new arrangement, Intrawest operates as a privately-owned company. It remains a dominating force in Whistler commerce, owning not only the ski resort but significant commercial real estate holdings as well. With 550 permanent staff on its Whistler payroll, Intrawest is the community's largest employer. *(For more information on Intrawest and its Blackcomb Whistler resort, see Appendix 1.)*

More and more people are recognizing  
that this planet is a space ship  
and it's the only one we've got.  
You've got to be thinking long haul.

**JOE HOUSSIAN**  
INTRAWEST FOUNDER AND FORMER CEO<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Dancing with the Tiger*, B. Natrass & M. Altomare (2003), p.162

<sup>2</sup>Quoted in *Dancing with the Tiger*

## FOCUS ON SUSTAINABILITY

From the day Whistler Mountain opened in 1966 – when the population of Whistler Valley was all of about 25 permanent residents – the area attracted individuals who were passionate about the mountains' abiding beauty and the recreational opportunities they offered, and who, by-and-large, understood the mountain ecosystem's life-sustaining function. The community formed a local government and incorporated as the Resort Municipality of Whistler in 1975. Whistler's first Official Community Plan (OCP), created in 1976 – well before Intrawest purchased the Blackcomb resort in 1986 – mandated the development of a unique pedestrian-oriented village that would be part and parcel of the ski operations that flanked it. The Plan emphasized the integration of commerce and community by calling not only for the creation of a destination resort but a strong, cohesive mountain community.

Succeeding OCP's (1982 and 1989) reinforced the idea of a strong resort community and on making it a leading four-season destination, And the notion has since continued to shape the development and personality of Whistler. Since their respective openings in 1966 and 1980, Whistler and Blackcomb were obliged to follow the environmental rules and regulations, but in a community like Whistler mere compliance was never really going to be enough. Evolving community norms and pressures demanded a proactive environmental stance which – in a conveniently self-reinforcing turn – was good for business and the operators' own economic sustainability. Given as much, it made sense that the unified Whistler Blackcomb take a leadership role once the community sustainability initiatives began to take shape in the late 90s. The resort became one of the Early Adopters of The Natural Step Framework in 2000 and is now a partner in Whistler2020.

In truth, Whistler Blackcomb brought a considerable record of environment action into the program. A 1993 oil spill on Blackcomb highlighted the need for good planning and monitoring, and the resort owners decided the mountain needed a formal Environmental Management System (EMS). Developed

and implemented under the leadership of Arthur DeJong, Blackcomb's Mountain Operations Manager (now Mountain Planning & Environmental Resource Manager), the EMS covered a wide range of issues and practices, including:

- ⊙ fish and wildlife management
- ⊙ forest, soil and watershed management
- ⊙ low impact land use decisions
- ⊙ environmental education
- ⊙ water conservation
- ⊙ energy conservation
- ⊙ community outreach
- ⊙ solid waste management
- ⊙ fuel and hazardous waste management

Aside from the EMS, Blackcomb also began working on a comprehensive environmental strategy intended to become a model for other resorts. The strategy, which became a part of the Whistler Blackcomb operation once the two resorts merged, includes an impressive array of projects designed to reduce the resort's environmental impact. They include:

- ⊙ Waste Reduction Audits and a Waste Reduction Workplan that has institutionalized an extensive resort recycling operation;
- ⊙ Energy Quest, an on-mountain energy conservation program with a goal to reduce fuel and electricity consumption by 15 to 20%;
- ⊙ Environmental plan and design for lifts expansion that has reduced the amount of timber that had to be removed from the original estimate of 10,000 to 3,200 cubic meters;
- ⊙ a Habitat Improvement Team that works with local groups on community projects that protect and restore local resources and habitats.

For its pioneering efforts, Whistler Blackcomb has won numerous environmental awards – ten, in fact, between 1999 and 2007. In 2005, out of a field of 62 applicants from ski areas across North America, the resort won the National Ski Areas Association’s (NSAA) Golden Eagle for Overall Environmental Excellence — the ski industry’s top prize for environmental excellence.<sup>3</sup> In 2006 it won the BC Tourism Award for Environmentally Responsible Tourism. Most recently, the resort won the 2007 NSAA Silver Eagle Award for Excellence in Fish and Wildlife Habitat Protection.

We do it now because it’s just smart. It’s smart business. It’s smart in terms of the community. It’s smart in terms of getting our approvals. It’s smart in terms of our customer... People want to get away to something that is a bit more wholesome, to something they can touch and feel, a bit more earthy. If we ruin the resort environment, from Intrawest’s point of view we’ve essentially ruined our business plan.

**JOE HOUSSIAN**  
(INTRAWEST FOUNDER AND FORMER CEO)<sup>4</sup>

## THE NATURAL STEP AND WHISTLER BLACKCOMB

Whistler Blackcomb’s connection with The Natural Step began in March 2000 when members of the ski operation’s senior management team attended one of Dr. Karl-Henrik Robèrt’s community presentations. The resort subsequently became one of the community’s six Early Adopters, committing the company to learn more about the TNS Framework, use it to improve the resort’s sustainability performance, and to work with the other Early Adopters to develop ways to share their collective learning with the wider community. In November 2000, a team of Whistler Blackcomb managers took a two-day TNS course designed to teach participants how to prepare and present sustainability awareness sessions for their respective organizations, and in April 2001 the entire senior leadership team attended a presentation on The Natural Step Framework.

In the intervening years, Whistler Blackcomb has used the TNS framework to support its ongoing sustainability planning. While the company’s EMS remains the primary document through which the company articulates its environmental work, the EMS is informed by the TNS Framework along with the National Ski Areas Association Sustainable Slopes guidelines and Whistler’s 2020 Sustainability Strategy. Arthur DeJong reports that, “in our daily work life, TNS is a fundamental tool.” TNS gives the resort a common understanding of what sustainability is and a language to talk about it. It also helped to create the baseline targets to strive for.

As such, The Natural Step Framework is an important part of the mix that drives Whistler Blackcomb’s continuing commitment to environmental stewardship. Recent initiatives, notably regarding education and support of the Whistler2020 Strategy are discussed in the following sections.

<sup>3</sup>Quoted in *Dancing with the Tiger*, p.162

## EDUCATION AND OUTREACH

Whistler Blackcomb now has a number of education programs for its staff, managers and clients, as well as outreach initiatives for the local and global communities.

### Company education

Sustainability training for new Whistler Blackcomb employees begins with their orientation. The company emphasizes the stewardship possibilities associated with many of the jobs, and employees are encouraged to join one of the numerous company committees that have sustainability objectives. The Natural Step eLearning course, used in conjunction with group discussions, has been widely employed for staff and management training. Structures that support the educational initiatives include:

- ⊙ an expanded environmental team of three full time employees: an energy manager (energy reductions, incentive programs and efficiency measures), environmental resource manager (land use planning, land development, ecosystem management), and emissions and waste reduction coordinator;
- ⊙ annual one hour staff training sessions are conducted;
- ⊙ weekly staff meeting outlining sustainability programs;
- ⊙ the creation of four working groups that focus on sustainability planning in the areas of water, energy, transportation and procurement; and
- ⊙ the purchase of 50 licenses for TNS eLearning course for use by staff, management and senior management.

The educational programs have resulted in a number of ideas that the company has incorporated in its environmental strategy. Included are the creation of a new procurement group, the use of recycled paper, and a new waste reduction initiative.

### Client and local community outreach

As part of its environmental work, Whistler Blackcomb has established outreach programs for its clients and the local community. As part of its effort, the company has:

- ⊙ established an Intrawest Sustainability Network to provide a forum of exchanging information on sustainability programs with other resorts;
- ⊙ put up more than 45 interpretive signs on the mountains that provide ecology education;
- ⊙ brought the Telluride Mountain Film Festival touring show to Whistler annually to raise awareness about environmental issues and to showcase the Whistler Blackcomb Foundation Environmental Fund.

One of our learnings in this process was patience. People need to believe and want to do the right thing. They need to understand it. It's not a flavour of the month. We encourage people to work in sustainability. If you want to be effective it has to become a way of life. People need to buy into it because they want to.

**DOUG FORSETH**  
SVP OPERATIONS, WHISTLER BLACKCOMB

## Participation in the global community

Whistler Blackcomb's' progressive social and environmental planning for ski resorts has led to a number of invitations for the company to collaborate internationally on a number of mountain-related issues. As a result, Whistler Blackcomb is now consulting with the European and Australian ski industries on climate change impacts, and has worked with the United Nations Environmental Program on an initiative to protect UNESCO world heritage sites in mountainous regions.

## CONTRIBUTING TO THE WHISTLER2020 VISION

Whistler Blackcomb has been actively involved in the Whistler2020 strategy (see the Whistler community case study), and a number of company employees are volunteering as representatives on 12 of the 16 Whistler2020 Task Forces. The company's participation has been beneficial not only in terms of the closer relationships it has developed with the community, but in terms of acquiring new ideas for action. In partnership with other Whistler2020 participants, the company is working on climate change, waste management and land use.

## Climate change

As a ski resort, Whistler Blackcomb is keenly aware of the challenges posed by global warming.

To ensure that it can provide the visitors with the best winter experience possible now and in the future, the company has launched a number of initiatives designed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Examples include:

- © installing a 10 kilowatt run-of-river turbine in a mountain creek to power the lights and heat in one of the chairlift's huts and washrooms;
- © retrofitting buildings (mainly restaurants) to reduce GHG emission by 850 tonnes (an equivalent of taking 212 cars off the road<sup>5</sup>) by putting in hybrid (electric-propane) heating system, new insulation, and changing to compact fluorescent lighting;
- © establishing car pooling program (see text below);
- © reducing the company fleet and vehicle size for higher efficiency; and
- © reducing electricity consumption by 4,575,000 kWh by introducing automatic lights and heat controls (photo cells detecting when the operators enter the lift huts) so that the lights and heating go off when not in use and installing a hybrid heating system, for example.

We have many staff members who live in the adjacent communities of Pemberton and Squamish and commute to Whistler to work. Several years ago, a group of maintenance staff convinced their manager to let them use one of the fleet vehicles to carpool together from Squamish. They all chipped in for gas and used the vehicle outside of operational hours. In the past five years, this program has been formalized and expanded to include six vehicles and 53 riders from both Pemberton and Squamish. Commuters use fleet vehicles to travel the highway and pay for fuel and extra maintenance while Whistler Blackcomb covers the cost of the leases and insurance. This makes for a safe, economical and fun way to get to work. And the program saves more than 617,000 kilograms of emissions annually.

[WWW.WHISTLERBLACKCOMB.COM](http://WWW.WHISTLERBLACKCOMB.COM)

<sup>5</sup>Based on the assumption that an average car produces 4 tonnes of GHG per year.

## Waste management

By adopting an aggressive waste management program, Whistler Blackcomb reduced the amount of waste being sent to the local landfill by over 60 percent between 2001 and 2005. Whistler Mountain now collects organic waste from its kitchen and composted 100 tonnes in 2006 alone. The company recycles 25 types of materials, ranging from beverage containers (over 80,000 annually) to light bulbs and ski poles. For example in the 2006/2007 season 75% of all beverage containers were recycled. Used clothing, ski equipment and office supplies find new owners through a local Mountain Materials Exchange program or are donated to charities.



We do have some influence when speaking. But you can only inspire the audience through action. When you talk about the process – you put them to sleep, it’s the action that makes a difference.

**ARTHUR DEJONG**  
MOUNTAIN PLANNING & ENVIRONMENTAL RESOURCE  
MANAGER, WHISTLER BLACKCOMB



Whistler Blackcomb is diverting over 60% of their waste from landfill with aggressive recycling and composting policies

The moment we have had winter, everyone will start asking questions. My colleagues in Europe lived through it last year.<sup>6</sup> So when the media show up we need to show global leadership through mitigation. We are going to show the world that we can reduce emissions and provide education. TNS is part of the foundation giving us tools and skills.

**ARTHUR DEJONG**  
MOUNTAIN PLANNING & ENVIRONMENTAL RESOURCE  
MANAGER, WHISTLER BLACKCOMB

<sup>6</sup>There was no snow in the Alps at the beginning of the 2006 ski season in and many resorts had to cancel their bookings.



## Land Use

Whistler Blackcomb will provide three venues for the 2010 Olympic Winter Games.

The Olympic agreement noted special concerns regarding the venues' impacts on fish and wildlife habitats, vegetation, air and water quality, as well as possible effects on the First Nation's peoples living in the area. The games organizing committee made very strong commitments to incorporate sustainability in all its planning, decision-making, performance monitoring and reporting.

As one example of the resort's efforts to reduce its development impacts, a new lift being built in a sensitive sub-alpine zone in 2006 was constructed over snow using helicopters. Biologists and professional foresters, working as part of the planning team, helped reduce a footprint initially estimated to impact about 40 percent of the area down to only 5 percent.

As a host for the Olympic venues, Whistler needs to accommodate a large number of athletes. Instead of building new hotels, the Athletes village was designed for the use during the games and then for the use by the employees of the community. The Athletes village will also use a district heating system for 95% of their water and space heating. The primary energy source will be the local waste treatment facility and the secondary source will be gas piping from the local landfill. This system will decrease greenhouse gas emissions by 60-70% in comparison to traditional heating and has a positive net present value. The plans for all three venues include public use after the games.

## LAST WORDS

When The Natural Step Early Adopters group was created in 2000, Whistler Blackcomb (Intrawest) already had a long list of environmental initiatives and was one of the community's environmental leaders. Accordingly, one might wonder what difference adding a new sustainability approach to the mix could make. According to Arthur DeJong, The Natural Step, by providing a common understanding of what sustainability is and a shared language for speaking about it, helped the company become more strategic in designing and implementing actions, become better at communicating about its actions and, above all else, engage in more effective partnerships with other members of the community. "The biggest thing, with the most impact, that The Natural Step has done," says DeJong, "is to bring everyone together. That is so valuable. Things have changed here."<sup>7</sup>

Doug Forseth, the resort's SVP Operations, has been impressed with way The Natural Step has become the long-term sustainability focal point for the resort and the wider community. "It's been magic for the community," he reports. "Since Dr. Robert's visit – TNS had a staying power. We've been attached to it because it makes sense."

Forseth, like many others at the resort, is excited by the possibility of showcasing what the resort and the village have accomplished at the 2010 winter games: "We hope that the sustainability message comes through during the Olympics. When people start writing more about Whistler and Vancouver we want to demonstrate that it is possible to host an event like that and be respectful of the place we live in."

<sup>7</sup>Quoted in *Dancing with the Tiger*, p.165

## APPENDIX 1

### FACT SHEET: WHISTLER BLACKCOMB / INTRAWEST

Intrawest Corporation's holdings include: 12 mountain resorts in North America; Canadian Mountain Holidays - the largest heli-skiing operation in the world; Sandestin Golf and Beach Resort in Florida; and Club Intrawest – a private resort club with nine locations throughout North America and in Europe.

NAME OF THE ORGANISATION	WHISTLER BLACKCOMB / INTRAWEST	
NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES	550 PERMANENT STAFF PLUS SEASONAL WORKFORCE INCLUDING INTERNATIONAL STAFF AND VOLUNTEERS	
Main services/ activities offered	SUMMER ACTIVITIES	WINTER ACTIVITIES
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- mountain bike park;</li> <li>- hiking, walking, touring;</li> <li>- alpine activities (Glacier walks, hikes, Rap Jumping, ATV Rides)</li> <li>- summer Glacier Skiing</li> <li>- dining</li> <li>- golf</li> <li>- river rafting tours</li> <li>- jet boating</li> <li>- horseback trail riding</li> <li>- fishing</li> <li>- spa</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- ski and snowboard schools</li> <li>- tubepark</li> <li>- snowmobiling</li> <li>- heli skiing/boarding</li> <li>- snowshoeing</li> <li>- snowcat tours</li> <li>- sno-limo mountain ecotouring</li> <li>- cross-country skiing</li> <li>- backcountry wildlife tours</li> </ul>
Main departments	Retail/rental (retail buyers, shop supervisors); Food and beverage (chefs, restaurant staff); Finance; Operations (lift operations, environmental co-coordinators, health and safety); Guest services (guest relations hosts, seasons pass admin); Sales & marketing; Ski & snowboard schools; Maintenance (plumbers, mechanics); Information technology; Employee experience (HR).	

### ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Additional resources can be found at:

[www.intrawest.com](http://www.intrawest.com)

[www.whistlerblackcomb.com](http://www.whistlerblackcomb.com)

[www.whistler2020.ca](http://www.whistler2020.ca)

[www.vancouver2010.com/en/Sustainability](http://www.vancouver2010.com/en/Sustainability)

Natrass B. & M. Altomare (2003) *Dancing with the Tiger: Learning Sustainability Step by Natural Step*. New Society Publishers, Canada. Thank you to Arthur DeJong, Doug Forseth and Kathy Jenkins for granting The Natural Step interviews.

This case study was written and researched by Magdalena Szpala and edited by Bart Robinson for The Natural Step Canada.  
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