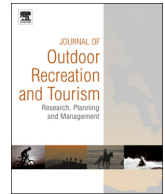




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The effects of seasonal business diversification of British Columbia ski resorts on forest management

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ABSTRACT

Some ski resorts are shifting their business models from winter-only snow-based activities to year-round tourism. This may be happening as a result of climate change or because of a change in recreationists' behaviour, amongst other causes. Using destination governance as a theoretical framework, this research sought to understand factors that allow such business shifts, as well as the impacts of such shifts on forest management in the areas surrounding the ski resorts. Four case studies in British Columbia were chosen: Whistler, Sun Peaks resort, Hemlock Valley resort and Mount Washington resort. In each case, opinions of stakeholders were collected through semi-structured interviews and the data were analyzed by a method inspired by grounded theory and thematic analysis. The strength of the communities and their incorporation into resort municipalities were identified as critical factors allowing a shift from winter-only to all-season to happen in a ski resort. Forestry practices were affected by the shift because of a change in management values towards more recreation and aesthetic values. An increase in the number of stakeholders with varied vested interests in forest management was believed to have resulted in improved destination management and leadership. The quality of life of shifted communities increased and was linked to a more environmentally friendly approach to land stewardship. This research contributes to overall research on destination governance and leadership.

Management implications: The experiences in Canadian resorts show that forest management around mountain resorts require new priorities. Three aspects are crucial:

- A shift in seasonal management considering outdoor recreation all year round.
- A lesser focus on extraction maintaining visual values.
- An inclusion of more stakeholders in the management system supporting self-regulation mechanisms in land stewardship and enhancing the quality of life of the residents.

1. Introduction

Some ski resorts, especially in North America, have transformed a snow-based single season (winter-only) business to a year-round business (Needham, Wood, Rollins, 2004). This transformation has occurred because it enables operators to maintain year-round employment, offset infrastructure and operating costs, generate profit, and provide access for people who may not otherwise be able to experience alpine settings (Saremba & Gill, 1991). A change in emphasis from some snow-related activities towards extreme sports has been proposed as a potential paradigm shift within the tourism industry (Burgin & Hardiman, 2012) and this change could have an impact on the expansion of the land base used by visitors and residents alike.

Seasonality in tourism is also very important and is well-

documented in the tourism literature, particularly in relation to the peripheral cold winter regions of Europe and North America (Baum & Hagen, 1999; Butler, 2001). Seasonality can be seen either from a natural e.g. weather, animal behaviour, or an institutional point of view e.g. holiday periods. However, Amelung, Nicholls, and Viner (2007) argue that there are three additional causes of seasonality: (1) social pressure or fashion; (2) sporting season; and (3) inertia on the part of travelers, who continue to practice tourism at a particular time of the year even though they are no longer restricted to this period. The shift from a purely snow-based winter business to a year-round business could be seen as a sub-problem of the seasonality issue.

Tourism product diversification can be an effective adaptation strategy for industry in response to climate change, especially for winter resorts that are threatened by warming temperatures and

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unreliable snow conditions (Dubois & Ceron, 2006). However, relatively few recent studies have addressed the diversification of ski resorts. In North America and Europe, significant efforts are being made to diversify ski resorts by operating chairlifts at alpine ski areas in the summer to accommodate activities such as hiking and mountain biking (Needham, Rollins, Wood, 2004). For instance, 12% of the ski areas in British Columbia (BC), Canada, had lifts operating in the summer of 1991; a decade later summer operations occurred in 65% of these areas. This is significant as some ski areas receive over 250,000 visitors each summer (Needham, Wood et al., 2004). Until the mid-1980s, most visits to Australian ski resorts occurred during winter, however, by 1988 approximately 50% of visits occurred outside of the winter season. Although the focus of 70% of these summer visitors was car touring and sightseeing, other activities included bushwalking and camping, abseiling, paragliding and fishing (Buckley, Pickering, & Warnken, 2000; Burgin & Hardiman, 2012).

Some studies have moved beyond a simple explanation of seasonality to explain the observed shift. The most frequent explanation is climate change and the likelihood of less and less snow at some resorts (Amelung et al., 2007; Scott & McBoyle, 2007). The second most frequent reason for the observed shift seems to be a change in the practice of sport/nature tourism due to the advent and increased popularity of extreme sports (Burgin & Hardiman, 2012). Due to the transition towards extreme sports, there is now increased demand for more resort-based built infrastructure that emphasizes social networking and public demonstration of thrill-based 'freestyle' tricks and stunts, rather than an immersion in a nature-based experience (Edensor & Richards, 2007).

The Global Observation Research Initiative in Alpine Environment (2016) suggested that alpine ecosystems remain poorly understood. Ski resorts are often located in high-altitude alpine zones, making them vulnerable to change. For instance, in Chile, species such as *Pinus contorta* are invading the timberline ecotone (Pauchard et al., 2009); in Hawaii non-native species adapted to cold conditions are a problem at higher altitudes (Daehler, 2005); and in Australia gardens in ski resorts have triggered plant invasions of native habitat (Williams, Hahs, & Morgan, 2008). The ski/snow industry directly impacts ecosystems as some techniques to prevent soil erosion on ski slopes also involve the introduction of non-native species, with unknown long-term consequences (Tsuyuzaki, 1995).

In British Columbia, forests have traditionally been managed for timber production. However, the increasing importance of nature-based tourism within the province means that forests also have significant value as a tourism resource (Hilsenager, Harshaw, & Kozak, 2016). Crown forest land in BC is widely accessible for recreational opportunities ranging from snowmobiling and cross-country skiing to hiking, camping, hunting, and fishing. British Columbia has 12 ski resorts spread over its 10 mountain ranges stretched across the province (Skiing & Ski map, 2017). We studied four ski resorts in the province with an aim to provide an enhanced socio-ecological understanding of the management diversity of the forested and non-forested land covering the ski resort areas, and analyzed the shift from winter only to year-round business plans. Specifically, the study investigated the following questions: what factors and mechanisms allow a shift to a year-round business to happen in a ski resort and how does a shift in seasonal management of a mountain resort influence or change the way the surrounding forest is managed?

1.1. Destination governance

To contextualize the case studies, a brief review of the pertinent resort governance literature is presented. Beritelli, Bieger, Laesser (2007) define governance as a concept that encompasses the values, rules, institutions and processes through which public and private stakeholders seek to achieve common objectives and make decisions. Within resorts, a community-driven need to control and monitor the action of single companies and entrepreneur exists. These enterprises

and related stakeholders pursue their economic interests by sourcing from the natural and cultural resources of the destination, which are perceived as public assets. Previous research has shown that changes in governance strategies provide useful keys to understanding the dynamics and competitiveness of destinations (Svensson, Nordin, & Flagestad, 2006). In the corporate model of governance, there are hierarchical relationships with concentrated power, whereas for community type destinations, the development process involves informal connections, knowledge and trust, making a dynamic (and therefore a historical) perspective crucial to the analysis of the network's formation and influence (Beritelli et al., 2007). In this section, we examine the governance structure of each of the resorts investigated in this study; namely, Whistler, Hemlock Valley, Sun Peaks, and Mount Washington.

Whistler has experienced a shift from an investor-driven pro-growth model, with limited public input into decision-making, to a highly democratic community-driven governance approach that can be characterized as a corporatist model. Whistler Resort was established as a result of a merger between Blackcomb and Whistler mountains in 1996 under the ownership of Intrawest Corporation. In 2016, a Colorado-based company Vail Resorts purchased Whistler Resort and has made significant investment since then into upgrading the skihill. The current model in Whistler is ideologically aligned with the principles of sustainability due to its focus on inclusive participation of citizens in decision-making (Bramwell & Lane 2013). The Cheakamus Community Forest (CCF) in Whistler is one of 50 Community Forests in BC and covers 33,067 ha. CCF was established in April 2009 based on a 25-year tenure with the provincial Ministry of Forests and Range and has four main partners: Resort Municipality of Whistler (RMOW), Lil'wat Nation, Squamish Nation, and Richmond Plywood which is the operations contractor. While many resorts exhibit pro-growth approaches to governance, an examination of the corporatist model in Whistler could offer new insights into how a destination could adopt a more sustainable path.

In Hemlock Valley, the Province of British Columbia is the major landholder and influences the actions of Hemlock Valley Recreations, its tenant. In British Columbia, the Regional District does not legally have jurisdiction over vacant, unencumbered, Crown-owned lands. The Regional District regulates and has jurisdiction over all privately held lands (FVRD, Fraser Valley Regional District, 2017). The Province and the Regional District work together to ensure that development agreements between the Province and the resort company is implemented.

Sun Peaks Resort Corporation and the Province of BC have signed a development agreement to which no one else is a party. Under this agreement, Sun Peaks Resort Corporation and its principal shareholder, Nippon Cable of Japan have invested considerable resources in the Sun Peaks development, demonstrating a long-term commitment to the economy of the region, and a vision of building a vibrant, multifaceted year-round resort community with a growing residential population (Drapeau, 2010). Sun Peaks is located on unceded Secwepemc territory and consultation was held with Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities about its development at the founding of Sun Peaks Resort Corporation (FN, First Nations, 2017).

Mount Washington alpine resort is located entirely on private land, owned by the Mount Washington ownership group since 1989, however, it was sold to a Utah-based company Pacific Group Resorts in 2015. Mount Washington resort caters to the permanent and seasonal population of the Mount Washington alpine resort community. As a privately held resort for more than three decades, Mount Washington is not as developed as most comprehensively planned and managed mountain resorts in BC (CVRD, Comox Valley Regional District, 2013). Investment in resort expansion is at the discretion of the existing ownership group, taking into account favourable market conditions. However, limited commercial development has occurred over the past several years (CVRD, Comox Valley Regional District, 2013).

The approach of destination governance, help answer our research questions. Therefore, we hypothesize that (i) the resort's scale, culture

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