

Branding Sustainability: Taking ‘The Natural Step’ in Whistler

Alison M. Gill and Peter W. Williams

Contact: agill@sfu.ca

Abstract

Translation of the concept of sustainability into practice is fraught with problems. While policy advances in all sectors of the economy have made steps in the right direction the lack of clarity in defining what is meant by ‘sustainability’ has resulted in varied responses. The tourism industry, with its heavy dependence on the quality of the natural environment has, especially through the development of ecotourism products, sought to address the sustainability question. However, the translation of sustainability concepts and principles into action is slow moving. The objective of this paper is to critically examine how the notion of sustainability has been packaged and branded by The Natural Step™ (TNS) organization (Robèrt, 2002) and how, in the context of sustainable tourism development, the Resort Municipality of Whistler, as an early adopter of TNS, has built upon the foundational ideas of TNS to develop an innovative comprehensive sustainability plan for the resort.

TNS 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 toward sustainability. Their mission is to make fundamental principles of sustainability easier to understand, and effective sustainability initiatives easier to implement. Aimed initially at corporations, TNS has caught the attention not only of companies, but also other institutions, and communities around the world (James and Lahati, 2004). Although most extensively adopted in Sweden where it originated, there are Natural Step offices in the US, UK, Canada, Australia and elsewhere.

The framework, rather than being prescriptive directs each organization/community to find its own solutions based on guiding principles that define a sustainable society (<http://www.naturalstep.ca/>). The guiding principles derived from science identify ‘sustainability filters’ that focus attention on eliminating activities that lead to: 1. progressive build ups in concentrations of substances from the earth’s crust (e.g. fossil fuels); 2. progressive build ups in concentrations of substances produced by society (e.g. aerosols); 3. ongoing physical degradation of nature (e.g. over-harvesting); and 4. barriers in the ability of other people to meet their needs worldwide (e.g. unfair wages). While widely accepted, the validity of TNS principles has been challenged (Upham, 2000).

Whistler is a comprehensively planned resort community, thus, since its inception in 1975 there has been careful attention to issues such as environmental management and more recently social issues such as affordable employee housing. However, the growth management strategy that had guided much of the resort's development was not appropriate as a guiding framework for future development once the planned limits to growth were approached. The success of Whistler as a mountain resort destination attracting both tourists and amenity migrants placed new pressures on ecosystems and the resort infrastructure. In 2002 the Resort Municipality adopted 'The Natural Step' (TNS) framework to guide its path towards sustainability. As such the resort became an early adopter in applying a community-level approach to sustainability. The outcome of this has been the development of a Comprehensive Sustainability Plan (CSP) entitled *Whistler 2020 – Moving Towards a Sustainable Future*, that sets out its goals according to the principles of TNS. The CSP provides a consensus-based vision, strategic direction and set of ambitious steps towards a more sustainable future. It replaces the previous Comprehensive Development Plans, and represents Whistler's highest-level policy document. Its intent is to inform all subsequent discussions and decisions concerning the destination's planning principles, priorities and actions.

Whistler was the first resort community, and the first municipality in Canada, to adopt the TNS approach. While the development of sustainability plans is not unprecedented, Whistler's CSP is pioneering for tourism destinations in several ways:

- The plan is grounded in the four guiding principles of TNS (see above) and TNS terms and concepts are used to make the concept of sustainability more comprehensible to the general public.
- The plan is driven by a vision created with input from public, private and non-governmental stakeholders attending numerous planning workshops and public meetings. The vision articulated in the CSP is that "Whistler will be the premier mountain resort community – as we move toward sustainability.
- The plan establishes a series of community-based action priorities that align with the vision. These priorities include: enriching community life; enhancing the resort experience; protecting the environment; ensuring economic viability; and partnering for success. Sixteen multi-stakeholder community taskforces use these priorities to develop and implement specific action programs.
- The community's interactive and informative website provides on-going support and a continuous feedback mechanism for stakeholders engaged in various sustainability related initiatives (<http://www.whistler2020.ca/whistler/site/explorer.acds>) and supports the extensive efforts at engaging locals in 'owning the plan'.

- The plan is supported with an annual monitoring program that systematically measures the progress of each proposed action towards the CSP's priorities.

Acknowledging the complex interdependencies in tourism destinations, *Whistler 2020* addresses its economic, social and environmental sustainability challenges in an integrated fashion treating the traditional 'pillars of sustainability' as interconnected components of the destination system. Thus, any action plan must consider its wider upstream and downstream implications. This more holistic approach not only forces individual action plans through a structured sustainability filter, but it also requires all Sustainability Program Tasks to seek alignment and fit with others in a Rubik's cube-like fashion that contributes more holistically to *Whistler 2020's* vision (Williams and Ponsford, forthcoming).

References

- James, S. and T.Lahati (2004) *The Natural Step for Communities: How Cities and Towns Can Change to Sustainable Practices*. Gabriola, BC: New Society Publishers
- Robèrt, K-H (2002) *The Natural Step Story: Seeding a Quiet Revolution*. Gabriola, BC: New Society Publishers
- Upham, P. (2000) Scientific consensus on sustainability: The case of The Natural Step. *Sustainable Development* 8: 180-190
- Williams, P. W. and Ponsford, I. F. (forthcoming) Confronting tourism's environmental paradox: Transitioning for sustainable tourism, *Futures*