

Not the beast it's made out to be B.C. ski resort clears hurdles after fighting misinformation

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On Thursday, the B.C. government rightly allowed the proposed Jumbo Glacier ski resort to pass a critical environmental hurdle. In doing so, it rose above misinformation deliberately manufactured by bureaucrats in a previous provincial government, anti-development activists and self-interested businesses who'd rather not share the breathtaking Kootenay vistas they have enjoyed largely alone until now.

Here are the facts: The ski resort, near Invermere and modelled after Zermatt, Switzerland, will use 104 hectares for the resort on the site of an abandoned sawmill. The skiing terrain will cover 5,900 hectares. When completed, the \$450-million resort will have 5,500 tourist beds, about one-ninth the number of beds at Whistler.

Critics, armed with mid-1990s data produced by the province's environment ministry, argue the ski village will harm the local grizzly bear population. But the data they use are highly suspect.

Government documents obtained under B.C.'s Freedom of Information Act reveal ministry staff actively conspired with local interest groups since 1990 to derail the project. The ministry required numerous, costly studies to try to thwart the project. Then, incorrect data were used, including a map of local bear populations which was not based on any actual count in the Jumbo Creek area, a fact later conceded by ministry staff.

Instead, the best estimate is a robust population of 150 grizzlies in a 4,200-square-kilometre area that includes Jumbo. B.C.'s Environmental Assessment Office noted this week that, with appropriate mitigation, "there is a low risk that the project would result in a reduction of the grizzly bear population." Meanwhile, environmental activists have misled the public, labelling an area that has had 85 per cent of its trees harvested over the past century as "pristine."

Environmental stewardship is, and should be, a paramount concern in wilderness development. And it has not been given short shrift for the Jumbo Creek project. The Vancouver Sun reported the environmental review has filled 13 volumes and 3,722 pages, the B.C. environmental approval certificate comes with 15 non-negotiable conditions, the developer signed 195 written commitments, and the project must still be endorsed by the regional district and gain approval under 18 provincial and six federal statutes. As well, the current design has been scaled back 60 per cent from the original concept.

Along with the environmental concerns, some opposition to the Jumbo Glacier resort is based on narrow self-interest. Heli-skiing companies, for example, expected the resort will cut into their business. But it is not the job of government to turn down potential revenues solely out of concern for currently contracted companies. According to the village of Radium Hot Springs (which supports the project), heli-skiing operations pay about \$12,000 in annual user fees to the province for the use of up to 145,000 hectares. The resort, by comparison, will pay \$3.2 million in various taxes annually to all levels of government on a smaller footprint of 5,900 hectares.

Fully one-eighth of British Columbia's 95 million hectares is designated parkland and is off-limits

to development. The Jumbo Glacier land represents just 0.006 per cent of that total. Given the small footprint of this Swiss-style ski resort and the unreliable data feeding its opposition, this project represents an acceptably modest intrusion into a vast wilderness.

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