

## Jumbo controversy

A visionary architect wants to bring a world-class ski resort to a logged-over B.C. valley. Eco-freaks respond with 'grizzlies not gondolas' bumper stickers

**George Koch and John Weissenberger**

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The photo looks down into an enchanting mountain cirque, a sapphire tarn sparkling at its base. Towering snow-capped peaks rise behind. Pristine wilderness? No, merely brilliant misinformation. Had the camera been held a little higher, and pointed a little lower, one would see a valley clearly pierced by a logging road, its slopes covered in vigorously growing stands of trees bearing the signs of previous cut-block logging.

Welcome to Jumbo Creek in B.C.'s Purcell Mountains, not far from the resort town of Invermere. If a picture is worth a thousand words, this one provides a textbook's worth of insight into the tactics employed by opponents of the ski resort proposed on Glacier Dome and Jumbo Glacier farther up this valley. The proponent is about to submit his Main Project Report to the B.C. government.

The battle could form a business school's case-study in turn-of-the-millennium development conflict. On one side is a dogged, somewhat idiosyncratic but visionary businessman who is playing by the rules and who wants to develop a project that would bring employment and wealth to a province that desperately needs it and, at the end of the day, make a profit.

On the other is the by-now familiar collection of ideological leftists, environmentalists and eco-freaks, Luddites, NIMBYs, aboriginals, agenda-driven bureaucrats, self-interested local businesses and even manipulative schoolteachers -- in short, the baying hounds of post-modern hell.

Jumbo Glacier Resort's proponent is Oberto Oberti, a Vancouver architect, project manager and lifelong skier, who a few years ago conceived the hugely successful Kicking Horse Mountain Resort at nearby Golden.

Amid stupendous scenery atop the main spine of the Purcells, Jumbo Glacier Resort would be unique in North America, more akin to high alpine ski areas of Europe, but getting the quality and quantity of snowfall normally found at heli-skiing operations. The initial, \$80-million phase would include a gondola and other lifts providing the greatest elevation gain in North American skiing, plus a compact sub-alpine village offering 500 beds. If successful, it could grow to 5,500 resort beds.

The area comprises provincial Crown lands, outside any national park or otherwise protected lands. Even the NDP-appointed apparatchiks of B.C.'s old Commission On Resources and the Environment found the area suitable for tourism development, saying it could be approved subject to environmental review. Oberti has spent several million dollars on planning and studies, including "the most extensive environmental assessment program done for any mountain resort in western Canada."

Opponents have countered Oberti's decade-long navigation of B.C.'s perilous regulatory archipelago

with -- what else? -- misinformation so blatant it seems deliberate, junk science, paranoia, attempts at political sabotage and ad hominem attacks on Oberti and anyone who dares support him (including one writer of this column). The instances are too many and complicated to recount fully, but some examples are telling.

One is linking Jumbo Glacier Resort to a dormant provincial highway proposal spanning Jumbo Pass to nearby Duncan. This riles both greenies and residents of the Duncan area, who value their isolation. In fact, the resort doesn't need or want the road, nor does the province have the money. The pass and the glacier are unrelated.

Opponents have taken to calling the project "Jumbo Resort," a manipulation of the place-name that evokes a huge, nasty capitalist scheme. Too bad Oberti isn't planning lifts at "Mega Monster Valley"! Ironically, Jumbo Glacier is secondary to his plan, with Glacier Dome the main skiing area. Oberti might have been better off naming his project "Glacier Dome Ski Area."

Oberti's other project, Kicking Horse, was strengthened tremendously by a municipal referendum. It instigated informed debate and revealed more than 90% popular support for development. Oberti's opponents have turned this idea on its head. Ian Cobb, editor of the Valley Echo newspaper, recently organized an online poll. The small number of self-selecting participants responded with -- wait for it -- 99% opposition to Jumbo. Results even Saddam Hussein would envy!

Also unlike at Golden, some prominent local businesses oppose Jumbo Glacier Resort. These are the usual zero-sum, the-pie-has-only-eight-slices types, oblivious that such a project is genuine value-added for the tourist, elevating the entire region's stature in international markets. A growing pie that would lift all gondolas, as it were.

Some of the same locals also claim Oberti's project can't possibly make money. It's kind of them to offer free management consulting, but it's really none of their business, is it? The regulatory process isn't -- or better not be -- aimed at outlawing business risk. The local chamber of commerce, for its part, is too craven even to take a stand.

There have also been the usual lies about the valley being "prime grizzly habitat." In response, Oberti commissioned a population sampling study, including DNA testing, by a team of bear experts. It found the valley is a "low" to "medium" usage area for two grizzlies. That's manageable for a winter-focused, 100-hectare resort development that leaves many thousands of hectares untouched. The opponents' response? A junk science pamphlet and an idiotic "grizzlies not gondolas" bumper sticker that presents a false dichotomy.

Environmentalists should hope Jumbo Creek isn't teeming with wildlife. If it were, that would suggest the "sensitive" and "vulnerable" (never "robust") "charismatic mega-fauna" -- constantly exploited by the movement's propaganda -- can thrive alongside logging and mining. If wildlife has multiplied in defiance of two of the Horsemen of the Gaian Apocalypse (dams and oil wells being the other two), why the big deal over a ski area?

In fact, Jumbo Creek already refutes one of the environmentalists' articles of faith: that forests, once logged, never really grow back. Some even call the heavily logged valley "pristine."

Numerous further steps, including formal public consultation, will follow Oberti's report submission. "We are begging the local government to withhold its judgment until it sees our full plan and the environmental assessment office's response," Oberti says. "There has been such a campaign of disinformation that the public's view may be poisoned." All project information is publicly available at a provincial registry.

Jumbo Glacier Resort will test the Gordon Campbell government's commitment to restarting B.C.'s economy and providing the long-promised alternatives to the declining forestry sector. While Premier Campbell has said he'd like to see this project proceed, his government's record so far, including retreat from highways privatization, dithering over forest industry mergers and an obsession with the 2010 Olympics as provincial panacea, isn't reassuring.

Oberti feels optimistic, however, saying he's being treated fairly by Cabinet ministers and bureaucrats sans their former NDP masters. While anti-development factions remain, Oberti says, "there are many excellent people working to turn things around."

It's high time. British Columbia has become a have-not province. Its GDP is smaller in absolute terms than Alberta's, which has nearly one million fewer residents. And before you snort about "all that oil" every Albertan has slopping about in his backyard cistern, remember that B.C. is even more richly endowed in resources than Alberta.

B.C.'s recent impoverishment can only be explained by lousy government policy and an increasingly surly population that seems to revel in its own lack of accomplishment. In that context, one wonders why Oberti goes on. But that's what visionaries do: they buck the odds, even when their opponents are as mendacious as these.

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