

Sustainable Industries and Tourism Potential in British Columbia

When proposing sustainable industries often the pure “green” appearance of an activity hides the true aspects of sustainability in the larger picture of the provincial economy of B.C.

For example, when three people from Toronto or New York land with a helicopter on a beautiful river bend, fish and then go away without leaving any trace, it is believed that this is sustainable ecotourism (if they access through a forestry road with a pick up truck or go to an ocean inlet with a small power boat this is even better). Backcountry skiers from Germany start in a remote valley and camp out for a few nights before being picked up in another valley. A couple from Calgary drives a pick up truck on a forestry road in B.C. and enjoys a day or two of hunting or of hiking. These activities are believed to be an example of sustainable ecotourism. In reality they are not quite so. Going to a well planned mountain resort and spending a longer holiday there by a group is a truer example of sustainable tourism, or ecotourism. Imagine if the five million of skier days of the B.C. tourism industry were produced instead by a couple of million of trips into the backcountry.

There are many industries that may be or may become sustainable. The gambling industry seems to have become more popular with the weakening of the economy and of traditional industries, but environmentally it does not appear to be at the top of the sustainable activities. Traditional industries of B.C., forestry and mining, are being revived in a more sustainable manner (however a mine creates economic activity that is destined to cease once the ore is exhausted) and are promising. But tourism is unique because it can be an export industry and at the same time it can create an industry that is dependent on the enjoyment of nature as is, with the potential of creating an economic activity that can go on forever.

The fallacy is to believe that ecotourism based on remote fishing, kayaking, hiking etc. can sustainably create an industry. In reality this kind of activity is not sustainable because of the numbers that would be required to become an industry, the distances that are involved and the vastness of the territory that it needs to utilize. Already, despite the small numbers involved, it is difficult to access any part of the interior of B.C. without finding human activity, now expanded by motorbikes, ATVs and snowmobiles. The numbers are small, the disturbance of the access points relative to the numbers is high, and the access is disproportionately expensive relative to the numbers.

Tourism resorts in the right climatic locations and designed to sustainable standards are a model of sustainable economic growth for the future in B.C.

In B.C. the only two aspects of tourism that can create a sustainable industry are the Alaska cruises and ski resorts, because only these two

have the numbers of visitors and the concentration of access, services and activities that can render tourism a sustainable industry.

However, the Alaska cruises do not utilize a permanent infrastructure in the ground, the ships have their own maintenance cost and environmental footprint, and are a single purpose mode of transportation.

Mountain resorts are different. Whistler generates approximately two and a half million skier days, or visitors for a day per year, using permanent infrastructures and multi use access. If Whistler were in a location where snow making is not necessary and designed according to the more sustainable standards of today, it would be an example of an economic engine that can operate indefinitely without further modification to the environment.

This is why tourism resorts in the right climatic locations and designed to sustainable standards are a model of sustainable economic growth for the future in B.C.

Unfortunately, all mountain resorts in B.C. for historical and political reasons have been placed where snow making is a necessity and where there are a number of adversities to be overcome every year, in terms of climate, access and availability of amenities capable of attracting out of Province visitors, the visitors that the local economy needs. This lack of appropriate facilities, however, should be seen as a great opportunity to create a truly sustainable industry

by accessing the right locations. Mountain resorts can become the truly “green” sustainable industry of B.C. Nature has given to the B.C. Backcountry a monopoly of the right locations for the ski industry on the North American continent.

- *Oberti Resort Design, March 2010*