

Chapter 2

Challenges to the Resilience of Whistler's Journey Towards Sustainability

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2.1 Introduction

The concept of sustainability is well established in political rhetoric, but interpretations of the concept are variously understood and implementation is challenging. Despite the increasing application of the term sustainability within policy domains, moving towards sustainability has proven to be challenging due to complex and persistent environmental, social, political and economic constraints. As Westley et al. (2011: 276) observe:

The conceptual and institutional separation of social and ecological systems has contributed and continues to contribute to a misfit between ecosystem and governance systems. This separation is a strong contributor to the path dependence that makes it so hard to shift to sustainable trajectories.

Even for those who seek to pursue sustainable trajectories, it must be recognized that, sustainability is not an end-state—but an attribute of dynamic, adaptive systems (Center for Resilience at The Ohio State University 2016). Consequently, increasing attention is being placed on transitional aspects of sustainability pathways and the ways in which they can become more resilient (e.g. Pike et al. 2010; Kemp et al. 2007). Resilience is the capacity of a system to survive, adapt, and grow in the face of uncertainty and unforeseen changes, even catastrophic incidents (Center for Resilience 2016). The increasing popularity of the concept of resilience in the social sciences is seen to be a result of the perception of increasing uncertainty and insecurity in a globalized world where economic and environmental crises intersect (Lew 2014). Much like the term ‘sustainability’, the term ‘resilience’ is a broad, fuzzy, ill-defined concept, applied widely across many contexts.

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Recent work on resilience in the tourism sector has sought to engage with the more complex and adaptive lens of social-ecological systems (SES). There have been several conceptual discussions, including those by Farrell and Twinning-Ward (2005), Strickland-Munro et al. (2010), Tyrell and Johnston (2007) and Calgaro et al. (2014) that propose frameworks or models to help clarify the complex elements of adaptive management in the tourism sector. The majority of tourism resilience research is based on case studies relating to either experience and perceptions of stakeholders to major economic shocks or natural disasters and crises (e.g. Biggs et al. 2012; Calgaro and Lloyd 2008; Cochrane 2010; Orchiston 2013; Ruiz-Ballesteros 2011) and more recently, resilience and adaptation to the less imminent environmental threats associated with climate change (e.g. Becken and Hay 2012; Scott et al. 2012; Luthe et al. 2012). Lew (2014) proposes that studies of resilience in a community tourism context should encompass slow change in order to provide a more comprehensive view of resilience. He presents a matrix model that conceptualizes resilience on the basis of scale (entrepreneurs to community) and rate of change (slow to sudden) that identifies four distinct categories each of which call for distinct issues, methodologies and management. As Lew (2014: 16) observes, “the concept of resilience has largely focused on economic resilience (rather than cultural, institutional or infrastructure resilience)” and predominantly on case studies rather than theoretical constructs.

My aim is to understand the catalysts of change that have affected the resilience of the sustainability path that the Resort Municipality of Whistler, Canada embarked upon in 2000. As the first resort governance model of its kind that incorporated policy designed to operationalize a journey towards sustainability through broadly-based, transparent stakeholder engagement in decision making supported by a comprehensive monitoring program, it gained widespread interest from resort destinations globally. However, since 2011, there have been a number of challenges to the resort’s sustainability pathway. These challenges raise issues concerning the resilience of such models. The inquiry is informed generally by the application of resilience thinking to social-ecological systems (Berkes and Folke 1998; Holling 1973; Gunderson and Holling 2002) and more specifically by the lens of ‘evolutionary resilience’ (Davoudi 2012) that focuses not on the return to a previously normal state but on the adaptability of socio-ecological systems in changing, adapting and transforming in response to stressors. This perspective aligns well with the understanding of transition management in sustainability planning (van Assche et al. 2014).

The discussion in this chapter draws upon research engagement over the past two decades with colleagues and graduate students into a range of topics relating to change and evolution in the Resort Municipality of Whistler. These research projects have variously employed multi-method community-based approaches that have utilized key informant interviews with a wide range of stakeholders; analysis of government documents (municipal and provincial); analysis of media reports; community surveys; and, participant observation at community meetings and

events. Whilst discussions on the evolution of Whistler have been published elsewhere (e.g. Gill 2000; Gill and Williams 2011, 2014), the lens of evolutionary resilience offers new insights into the critical examination of the factors that underlie governance transition in the resort and the factors that act as catalysts of change to the resilience of Whistler's sustainability pathway.

I begin the chapter with an overview of key constructs that inform the lens of 'evolutionary resilience' (Davoudi 2012; Davoudi et al. 2013) that is employed in this paper. The subsequent descriptive summary of Whistler's path to sustainability highlights key features and events to provide a chronological framework and context for the following discussion section that examines resilience factors of the sustainability path through an evolutionary resilience lens.

2.2 Key Constructs Underlying an Evolutionary Resilience Perspective

Resilience thinking provides a management approach based on recognizing the integration of human and ecological systems as complex systems that are continually adapting and neither linear, predictable or controllable (Folke et al. 2002). As Walker and Salt (2006: 9) observe, "[t]he key to sustainability is enhancing the resilience of the social-ecological system (SES), not by optimizing isolated components of the system". They go on to say that despite recent advances in the sustainability debate, it is evident that examination through a resilience lens clearly reveals, 'that we still have a way to go' (Walker and Salt 2006: 9). The concepts of both resilience and sustainability share similar attributes of being fuzzy, and broadly interpreted and misunderstood in diverse contexts, however, both it is agreed represent interpretations of a process rather than an end product (Smith and Stirling 2010). Although a contested construct, resilience can be perceived as an integral part of sustainability and a key element of pathway creation in the process of moving towards sustainable futures.

Evolutionary economic interpretations of the dynamics of change have now become widely applied across other social sciences disciplines. Geographers have extended these ideas to place-based interpretations that broadened inquiry to include consideration of social-ecological systems (e.g. Simmie and Martin 2010; Martin and Sunley 2015). Evolutionary understanding of resilience is best articulated by the "adaptive cycle" as reflected in the panarchy model (Gunderson and Holling 2002). This suggests that a system goes through cyclical phases of change in structure and function, notably: growth and exploitation; conservation; release or creative destruction and reorganization. Indeed, such phases resonate with Butler's (1980) model of the tourism area life cycle model, although at that time it was conceived as a linear and less complex process (Cochrane 2010).

In understanding resilience in an SES context, two key evolutionary concepts are especially pertinent. The concept of 'path dependence', a core notion in evolutionary

geography interpretations of regional development, recognizes the importance of past events in shaping future pathways through notions of “lock-in” (Martin and Sunley 2006). This focuses attention on a range of structural, cognitive and political elements that serve to maintain commitment to the established path. However ‘de-locking’ can occur as a result of path creation (Garud and Karnøe 2001). Understanding how path creation occurs directs the inquiry towards human agency and the role of entrepreneurs in forging new innovative paths. Human agents both individually and collectively are seen as engaging in ‘mindful deviation’ from existing paths, with their actions understood with reference to real time influence and the reaction to exogenous and endogenous critical events (Garud and Karnøe 2001; Gill and Williams 2014). The importance of niches (Kemp et al. 2001), or ‘protective spaces’ (Smith and Raven 2012), in nurturing innovations within a path creation process has been highlighted, for example in the context of socio-technical sustainability transitions (Smith and Stirling 2010).

Recent research suggests increasingly complex evolutionary processes that challenge rigid notions of path dependency. Strambach and Halkier (2013) introduce the concept of ‘path plasticity’ whereby innovations within a more flexible notion of path dependency do not necessarily result in the creation of new pathways. Davoudi (2012) employs the term “evolutionary resilience” [similar to “socio-ecological resilience” (Folke et al. 2010)] to challenge the idea of equilibrium whereby systems change over time with or without external disturbances and ‘small scale changes in the system can amplify and cascade into major shifts’ (Davoudi 2012: 303). Further, resilience does not imply a return to normality but the ability of complex social-ecological systems to transform in response to stresses and strains. This is especially appropriate for examining governance for sustainability and the capacity of traditional institutional frameworks and management processes to adapt to complex, changing economic, environmental and political, social, demographic and political realities.

Application of these evolutionary perspectives is reflected in the notion of transition management for sustainable governance systems (Loorbach 2010; Van Assche et al. 2014). Transition management is conceived as an evolutionary, iterative four-stage cyclical governance framework (Kemp et al. 2007; Loorbach 2010; Rotmans et al. 2001) that includes problem and goal setting and visioning; identification of pathways and subsequent experiments; learning and adaptation; and institutionalization (Smith and Stirling 2010). Gill and Williams (2011, 2014) have applied an evolutionary economic geography approach to examining changing modes of destination governance. As they observe, effecting real change in modes of governance that embody principles of sustainability is an oft-contested process as path dependent forces, grounded in strategies that prioritize economic growth, act as resistant forces to more innovative approaches to governance that address a broader range of sustainability objectives. This chapter examines these findings through the lens of resilience.

2.3 Whistler's Journey Towards Sustainability

The Resort Municipality of Whistler in British Columbia, Canada, located 120 km north of Vancouver, was established in 1975 to govern the new comprehensively planned mountain resort development. From its early beginnings with two competing companies operating on adjacent mountains (later in the 1990s to merge into a single corporation, Intrawest), the resort has grown to have a resident population over 10,000 with 2700 seasonal residents and an additional 11,500 second-home residents. It has evolved from a winter ski resort to North America's premier all-season mountain resort with over 2.7 million annual visitors (approximately 44% in winter and 56% in summer) (Tourism Whistler 2016).

Several features make Whistler's governance evolution distinctive. From its earliest days, it has had a fully functional municipal government structure with all planning regulated by an Official Community Plan that is periodically updated. The first decade of development has been characterized as being driven by 'growth machine' politics, controlled by elite decision makers, which stimulated rapid growth to establish a critical mass of accommodation and services in the fledgling resort (Gill 2000). Community growth and civic engagement since the early 1990s reflects a growth management approach that has resulted in a high level of engagement of residents with trust in the democratically appointed municipal government. Notable, as demonstrated in community survey responses, were residents' high rankings of environmental quality as the most valued attribute of resort community living (Gill 2000). This strong environmentalist philosophy was also demonstrated in the creation of various environmental organizations within the community. Whistler also developed close working relationship between the mountain operators (Intrawest - now with new corporate ownership known as Whistler Blackcomb), the municipality and the community—especially around environmental management initiatives. This resulted in generally harmonious, uncontested, collaboration.

Community confidence in the governance system was also strengthened in the late 1980s with the introduction of a 'bed unit cap', a planning management and monitoring tool that established a limit to growth associated with environmental quality (i.e., sewage and water capacity) (Gill 2007). This growth management policy regulated the type, number and location of allowable units of accommodation with a maximum build-out to 52,500 bed units—the achievement of which, when established, seemed far in the future despite on-going growth of the resort that seemed resilient even to global economic fluctuations. Successful destinations draw increasing demand and this was especially the case in Whistler when, in the late 1990s, it became evident that the resort community was indeed approaching its planned limits to growth. This in turn had the effect of accelerating the rate of development and consequently housing prices. The Resort Municipality found itself in a difficult political position. The resort was locked into a growth model that had served both economic and community interests well for over a decade. Development was carefully controlled by policies and by-laws identified in the

Official Community Plan and the community reaped many benefits from infrastructural developments financed by the amenity charges levied against developers. But, growth in tourist numbers, tourism enterprises and resident numbers was also accompanied by a rapid growth in second-home development and a high level of demand for housing. For the first time resident surveys revealed that housing affordability had surpassed environment quality as the top priority of residents with respect to quality of life (Gill and Williams 2011). The dilemma was that relatively uncontested rapid growth had occurred because of residents' reassurance that the established bed unit limit would not threaten environmental quality. The challenge lay in how to move beyond the self-defined limits to growth to ensure that the electorate's concerns for affordable housing and environmental quality were met.

While no strangers to the concept of sustainability, the engagement of the RMOW up to that point was focused almost entirely on environmental aspects. Addressing how to incorporate social and economic concerns into the governance structure were more challenging. The solution came unexpectedly as a result of the founder of The Natural Step (TNS), Karl-Henrik Robert vacationing in Whistler in 2000. TNS is a global not-for-profit agency that promotes its vision of sustainability to companies, communities and institutions supported by planning tools, education and training and expertise. Robert met with a few key resort stakeholders who were impressed by his charismatic nature and the underlying scientific foundations supporting a sustainability approach. Shortly thereafter, several key stakeholders including the local government (RMOW); Intrawest, (the mountain operators), several small business operators and an environmental NGO became 'early adopters' of TNS. A period of intense community engagement took place over the next two years to educate people about the philosophy, language and elements of TNS. The Natural Step principles are grounded in fundamental system conditions that: avoid concentrations of pollutants from synthetic substances and from substances mined or pumped from the Earth's crust; avoid overharvesting and displacing natural systems; seek efficiency when it comes to satisfying human needs by maximizing the benefit from the resources used (TNS 2016).

Subsequently over the next three years, planning for *Whistler2020* a strategic comprehensive community sustainability vision and policy document was developed. The Natural Step sustainability principles formed the basis for the plan development process and content and these were augmented by local values. *Whistler2020* is the 'product of the creativity and commitment of 16 community task forces, over 20 partners and 75 implementing organizations' (TNS 2016). The plan that was finalized in 2005 won numerous awards and established Whistler as an international leader in sustainable resort community planning. TNS described it as an ambitious step towards sustainability.

Occurring simultaneously with Whistler's engagement with sustainability planning the resort was also engaged in the Vancouver bid for the 2010 Winter Olympic and Paralympic Games. The successful bid was announced in 2003, Whistler was designated the Host Mountain Resort with two representatives on the Vancouver Organizing Committee (VANOC). VANOC also included representation from the four First Nations on whose traditional territory the Games were to be

held, which in Whistler's case involved the Squamish and Lil'wat Nations. Over the next seven years, the VANOC members worked collaboratively guided by the Committee's desire to be the most sustainable Games to date. By 2003 the RMOW had committed to TNS and had participated for 3 years in intense community engagement towards a sustainability path. Importantly, the opportunities for leveraging legacy benefits from the Games, especially the resolution of the affordable housing problem, were enhanced by the resort community's widespread commitment to a sustainability agenda. The resort was able to negotiate the extension of the municipal boundaries with the legacy of additional of public Crown that permitted the development of a new subdivision that after its use as Athletes' housing would be designated as resident-restricted housing. In keeping with the desire to create a 'green Games' all development met high levels of certification under the Leaders in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) standards.

With respect to understanding Whistler's sustainability path, another very significant Games-related issue related to the legacy agreements with the First Nations partners—the Squamish and Lil'wat peoples (Williams and Gill 2017). Despite having been established on the traditional territories of these people, the resort had not previously engaged at all with its aboriginal neighbours. However, as the result of evolving federal legislation seeking to address historically unresolved territorial land claims, the engagement of First Nations as equal partners in Olympic planning and legacy agreements was a high priority. Over the years of planning, VANOC partners established good working relationships and agreements were reached to develop an aboriginal Cultural Centre and also provide extensive legacy lands to the First Nations in Whistler and the surrounding area. As compensation to the First Nations for the extension of municipal boundaries an agreement was also reached that development of 300 acres within the municipality would abide by all RMOW regulations and by-laws.

From a sustainability perspective, the Games were considered to have been very successful with the award-winning construction of an enviable resident-restricted neighbourhood that allowed Whistler the ability to reach a level of 75% worker accommodation. Environmental concerns were thoroughly addressed in all Olympic infrastructure development and the community was riding high on the euphoria of the overall success of the Games.

However, a year later in 2011, the path towards sustainability began to stall as a result of post-Games economic decline and community engagement fatigue with 'sustainability'. At the November elections the entire municipal Council and Mayor who had, over the past decade, been the champions of the sustainability path were defeated and replaced by business-oriented representatives. With a shift in political power that favored economic development over sustainability, many of the operational programming priorities supporting *Whistler2020* were compromised. The multi-stakeholder Task Forces that were integral to the sustainability governance process were disbanded and municipal decisions became more centralized. Further, the Whistler Centre for Sustainability that had been created to support and monitor the sustainability path and played a pivotal role in coordinating the process had its

municipal budget slashed. Sustainability issues were placed on the backburner as attention was focused on stimulating the tourism economy.

The Municipality's withdrawal of support for sustainability-related action was exacerbated as the result of legal contestation by the First Nations over the agreement that they abide by Official Community Plan (OCP) regulations in the use of their Olympic legacy lands in Whistler. Their claim that they were not consulted in the Plan development and that it restricted their rights to full economic development opportunities was, after several legal battles at the provincial level, ultimately upheld and the RMOW was required to revert back to the 1993 OCP (prior to sustainability planning). The following discussion seeks to investigate and interpret Whistler's sustainability path through the lens of evolutionary resilience in order to provide an understanding of catalysts of change that both stimulated and supported the creation of the governance path transitioning towards sustainability and the shocks and stressors that have threatened its resilience.

2.4 Discussion: Evolutionary Resilience of Whistler's Sustainability Pathway

The adoption of sustainability as an overarching goal of the Resort Municipality of Whistler's governance signaled a transition towards a new path for the resort community. The interpretation of the resilience of this process is informed by the key constructs of evolutionary path creation theory that emphasize human agency, critical endogenous and exogenous events and the importance of real-time influence (Garud and Karnøe 2001). Maintaining some chronological structure, the discussion first examines the factors that affected the adoption of a new sustainability path and its apparent success; and, second considers, the stressors that resulted in a retreat from the sustainability agenda.

2.4.1 Creating a New Pathway Towards a Sustainable Future

The first issues to consider are the catalysts of change that led to Whistler choosing to adopt a comprehensive sustainability agenda. As Davoudi (2012: 303), drawing on the idea of panarchy in adaptive systems (Gunderson and Holling 2002), states that, 'as systems mature, their resilience reduces and they become 'an accident waiting to happen' and when systems collapse, 'a window of opportunity' (Olsson et al. 2006) opens up for 'alternate systems configurations'. This offers some insight into Whistler's adoption of a sustainability path. From its inception Whistler was "locked in" to a successful growth model (Gill and Williams 2011), which seemed to satisfy both the resort sector and the community. However, the bed unit cap that

was based on estimates of environmental limits, while serving to maintain community trust and support for continuing tourism industry growth (within those limits) faced an impasse. Temenos and McCann (2012) interpret the adoption of the sustainability path as a 'sustainability fix'—a political discourse which accommodates both profit-making and environmental concerns (While et al. 2004). This perspective is especially pertinent to a tourist-dependent community where there is a high level of industry dependency on environmental quality and municipal officials must find a solution to maintain a delicate equilibrium between capitalist growth and associated political pressures. The RMOW is experienced at accommodating such a balance between resort and community priorities; indeed, it was planned from its inception to be a 'resort community' to specifically address such tensions. Further, in the early 1990s the RMOW faced a similar dilemma when rapid growth did emerge as a contested issue with citizens. The solution then was the adoption of a 'growth management' approach. I have characterized this as 'initially introduced as a buzzword and a compromise that might appeal to both growth and no-growth factions with business interests focusing on growth and no-growth interests emphasizing management' (Gill 2000: 1099). However, the initial ambiguity was translated into effective governance policies that included a comprehensive resort and community-monitoring program. While the notion of sustainability suffers from similar problems of vagueness and ambiguity that have been described as "guiding fiction" (Gill and Williams 2008), the subsequent implement of a sustainability agenda resulted in the development of an innovative governance model for transitioning towards sustainability that became widely acclaimed.

Critical elements of a path creation lens draw attention to two catalysts of change—human agency (especially with regard to entrepreneurship) and real time influence—both of which figure prominently in explaining how Whistler adopted the sustainability path. The initial catalyst revolves around the role of Karl-Henrik Robert, the founder of The Natural Step (TNS), who in 2000 visited Whistler on vacation. The effects of human agency and timing are captured in the following quote that until recently was on the RMOW website:

Life is about timing, and the timing was right! Whistler had always been proactive around the environment and other forward-looking issues, yet never defined its efforts in a formal definition of, or framework for, "sustainability". In fact, some local leaders were at that time seeking some way of communicating and engaging with the broader community about sustainability issues - and as luck would have it, they found their solution in Dr. Robert's presentations (Gill and Williams 2014: 552).

While Robert represented an exogenous influence and he was only in the resort for a short time, together with his charisma, his vision in creating TNS and its successful international profile added legitimacy to his message. While visionaries may only have the idea, 'entrepreneurs' (some of who may also be considered visionary) are influential in mobilizing action along the pathway. One such entrepreneur was the former chief administrative officer (CAO) for the municipality who

subsequently served on the VANOC board of directors. In receiving a Freedom of the Municipality award, he received praise for his vision and extraordinary strategic approach in achieving ‘one of the master strokes in our history’, with the development of the Natural Step Framework, as the underpinning for Whistler2020 and subsequently with Whistler’s Olympic success (Smysnuik 2010). Another, important local entrepreneur in the sustainable path creation was the Mayor who championed the sustainability path and effectively steered the community. Smith and Stirling (2010: 7) drawing upon on Kemp and Loorbach’s (2006) work on transition management, describe ‘visionary forerunners’ as:

empathetic to sustainability goals, open-minded, able to convey and transition vision back to constituency and able to influence their constituency behavior. They are willing to put in time, energy, resources into the challenges of: collectively envisioning viable sustainability goals; nurturing promising niches, building supportive constituencies of actors, institutions, and markets, and continually anticipating, learning and adapting.

However, beyond individual entrepreneurial agency, collective human agency is necessary and transition initiatives must primarily be implemented within the business communities and civil society’ (Smith and Stirling 2010). In Whistler, following the directives of TNS framework, adoption of the system derived from principles of innovation, whereby ‘early adopters’ were recruited and served to mobilize community support. Indeed, in Whistler there were already a cohort of individuals who championed notions of environmentalism and supported sustainability thinking and the early adopters were from a representative range of resort businesses, community and political interests.

The process was guided by expert advice from TNS that included educational materials and professional training seminars. The Natural Step approach is closely aligned with the principles of transition management (Loorbach 2010; Van Assche et al. 2014) which incorporate four key elements: (i) problem structuring and the development of a shared vision for attaining sustainability goals; (ii) the identification by participants towards goals using back-casting methods; (iii) learning and adaptation to provide links between long-term goals and short term actions in niche experiments; and (iv) institutionalization and commitment to goals (Smith and Stirling 2010). TNS provided a ready-made language developed by externally validated expertise regarding sustainability and a first step was to educate and train the public to adopt a common understanding of language and an understanding of how to support the sustainability framework. Similar engagement processes to those undertaken in Whistler have been variously termed ‘community conditioning’ (Sailor 2010; Gill and Williams 2011) or ‘education of attention’ (Temenos and McCann 2012; McFarlane 2011). Achieving the stage of institutionalization is considered to be the most important stage of a transition management strategy (Smith and Stirling 2010). The adoption of *Whistler2020* as Whistler’s highest-level policy document resulted from 5 years of intense community engagement. As a consequence, it was an important agent in the success of Whistler’s engagement in the Olympics as it provided resort representatives serving on VANOC to promote

Whistler's commitment to a sustainability path with the support of a 'social license to operate' from the community (Gill and Williams 2014).

Real time influence is very evident as a factor in Whistler sustainability journey with respect to the convergence of the sustainability planning process and the awarding, in 2003, of host resort status to Whistler for the 2010 Winter Olympic and Paralympic Games. The International Olympic Committee was positioning the Games as 'the most sustainable' and thus, engagement on the local Vancouver Organizing Committee (VANOC) offered a 'protective niche' (Smith and Raven 2012) for Whistler to develop its sustainability agenda. The adoption of the established and externally validated TNS allowed the resort to showcase *Whistler2020* as a global leader in sustainability governance initiatives. Such protective niches are considered as important spaces to develop, improve and enroll support for radical sustainable innovations that carry systemic implications (Smith and Stirling 2010).

2.4.2 A Post-Olympic Shock to the System—How Resilient Is Whistler's Sustainability Path?

"There is little doubt that sustainable development represents an ambitious agenda for societal change" (Meadowcroft 2007: 302), that requires goal directed intervention by governments and other actors and societal self-steering that reflects collective decisions, value and choices. The abrupt shift in Whistler's sustainability agenda that occurred in 2011 was certainly a major shock to the established Mayor and Council that had so successfully steered the sustainability agenda for around a decade. More so after it came so quickly on the heels of accolades about the success of the Olympic Games in advancing the resort's sustainability goals (RMOW 2010). As the post-games report entitled *Living the Dream* declared in June 2010 (four months after the Games, and a year and a half prior to the scheduled municipal elections), "[t]he 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games were not an 'end' in themselves, but a catalyst that has accelerated Whistler's journey towards achieving its vision of becoming the premier mountain resort community - as it moves towards sustainability" (RMOW 2010: 1).

While it is common for destinations that host mega-events to experience post-event economic slumps, the situation in Whistler was exacerbated by suffering from the delayed impacts of the 2008–2009 global crisis and subsequent economic downturn, from which it had been largely protected due to Games construction. The withdrawal of the protective niche offered by the Olympic planning process, that had distracted a range of stakeholders from local politics over an extended period of time, resulted in a refocusing of attention on the crisis of the day—empty hotel beds (54% occupancy rate), low tourism numbers and consequently business losses. The issue-attention-cycle is useful here in understanding how priorities and values shift. As Downs' (1972: 39) observes it is characterized by, 'a systematic cycle of

heightened public interest and then increasing boredom with major issues'. Reflecting back to 2000, there was a crisis situation whereby residents were worried about affordable housing and environment and business interests were concerned over limits to growth. The 'sustainability fix' potentially offered the political solution to address these dilemmas. Inspiring and committed leadership in the community and a lengthy but focused education and learning process mobilized the community. This provided a 'social license to operate' to Whistler's VANOC members resulting in valuable legacy rewards for the community, most notably the resolution of the affordable housing issue as well as continuing commitment to environmental quality including LEED certified construction.

However, it is evident that in 2011 attention was focused on the current crisis in the business sector diverting attention away from the comprehensive ideas of sustainability, which in any event suffer from ambivalence and complexity with respect to goals. As one observer reported, it has become a good word gone bad—lost meaning though misuse and overuse (Slater 2011). Further, from a community resident's perspective, the Games had resolved the most serious concerns of residents—the provision of affordable housing—their attention, as suggested in local newspaper coverage, instead turned to issues of economics and job security.

Ultimately, transitioning towards sustainability is grounded in power and politics. Smith and Stirling (2010: 9) pose the question: "how credible is it that a transition management process that begins with a vanguard of elite visionary forerunners can really overturn structurally embedded regimes?" As Bosselmann et al. (2008) emphasize the dominant form of governance in the western capitalist economy is representative democracy that is not especially conducive to sustainability planning as it favours short-term gains over long-term responsibility because politicians' jobs depend on them meeting the immediate needs of the voters.

Although governance for sustainability requires societal self-steering that reflects the collective decisions and value choices of the community, much of the progress rests with government. Importantly, shifting power balances occur in response to adjusting to legal rights and responsibilities and the creation of new institutional actors (Meadowcroft 2007). In Whistler, the introduction of First Nations stakeholders into the mix of stakeholders has created uncertainty regarding how their 'legal license to operate' will impact the resort land use (Williams and Gill 2017). As demonstrated in the following quote: "The Olympics accomplished for the first time that we were present and accepted at the table" (Chief Ian Campbell, Squamish First Nation, cited in Tize 2014: 53). As never before, any future encroachments or expansions to Whistler-Blackcomb's tenure rights on those crown lands will be dependent on consulting and accommodating the Squamish and Lil'wat First Nations. Consequently, the company is engaged in on-going activities designed to build collaborative relationships with these First Nations. As Williams and Gill (2017) observe: "[r]ecognition, rights, respect, co-operation, and partnership, are important pillars in this emerging and more indigenized governance approach in Whistler".

Issues of power and politics are also evident in the most recent potential challenges to Whistler's sustainability path. In 2016, Whistler Blackcomb announced a

multi million dollar, multi-year expansion plan, its largest and most progressive development in the organization's history. As Whistler's major corporate stakeholder, it exercises considerable power in the resort, and although some concern regarding housing, environment and culture contested have been raised (Barrett 2016), the company is widely acclaimed for maintaining high quality environmental management practices which are informed by TNS principles.

2.5 Conclusions

This chapter has examined the catalysts to change that have impacted the creation and direction of the sustainability governance path adopted by the Resort Municipality of Whistler, British Columbia, Canada. Viewed through an evolutionary resilience lens—the constructs of 'sustainability' and 'resilience' are viewed as elements of complex adaptive systems, that do not follow linear paths but have loops and stalls and readjustments of direction, with no steady state envisaged. Resilience is seen as a necessary attribute in following a sustainability path. In this chapter the focus has been on identifying those factors that affect path constitution through the establishment and steering of a transitional governance approach grounded in principles of sustainability. The challenges of steering the direction of sustainable governance lie in integrating conflicting values, dealing with risk, uncertainties and ambivalence (Voß et al. 2007). The importance of human agency, including that of entrepreneurs (or visionaries), as well as the collective agency of stakeholder commitment and engagement, are critical to establishing and steering along the pathway. Drawing from path creation constructs other catalysts of change can often be understood with reference to 'real time influence' and the effects of exogenous or endogenous shocks (Garud and Karnøe 2001). Further the importance of 'protective niches (spaces)' (Kemp et al. 1998) especially during the incubation phases of new ideas is seen as especially relevant in the early stages of pathway creation. However, ultimately the resilience of a sustainability path is very dependent on issues of power and politics.

In the Whistler case described, the role of exogenous forces has been significant. For example, the introduction of TNS as an externally validated process with established protocols, played an important role in allowing uncontested acceptance of the approach. Further, engagement in the organization of the Winter Olympics, with its matching goals of sustainable practice, offered protective space that legitimized and showcased the innovative governance approach.

Although the word seems to have more or less vanished from the lexicon of Whistler's government and local media, enviable standards of environmental management are practiced by both the mountain operators and the Municipality and are enshrined into policy; the community is very well provided with services and facilities—and better served than nearly all similar resorts with respect to dedicated affordable employee housing; and, the mountain sports economy is thriving with plans for expansion. However, while *Whistler2020* still remains as an overarching

policy document and the stated vision of becoming ‘the premier mountain resort—on the way to sustainability’, its implementation is substantially curtailed. Changing power structures have further challenged the nature of future pathways. The legal ramifications resulting from the First Nations contestation over past lack of consultation will result in more complex and perhaps more contested land use decisions. Further, Whistler Blackcomb’s major new development proposal signals that the era of established growth limits seems to be a thing of the past. But the bottom line is an economic one and as noted in a report in the local newspaper on Whistler Blackcomb’s Renaissance plan ‘for a booming ski resort competing to stay atop the snowsport world, change is a necessary constant in Whistler’(Barrett 2016). Ultimately, although sustainability is practised at a local level, the drivers of competition are global. In mountain resorts, the term resilience now seems to be aimed at addressing the threat of climate change with expansion of activities to higher (and potentially more ecologically sensitive) elevations. If we consider the evolutionary resilience trajectory with its complex loops then ‘yes’ it does seem currently that Whistler has retreated from its sustainability path but as Meadowcroft (2007: 313) reminds us ‘the sort of radical decoupling of economic activity from environmental burdens will require iterative processes of reform stretching over many decades’. Importantly, it requires on-going commitment to the practical and participatory learning component of the process. Thus, as evidenced in Whistler’s ‘back-sliding’, sustainability requires not only innovation and entrepreneurship by champions but also continuing engagement, support and partnerships with a broad range of stakeholders.

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