

**The Search for Paradise: Amenity migration and the growing pains  
of western Canadian mountain towns**

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Migration is not a new phenomenon, it has been happening since the dawn of human history. What is new is that toward the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium the motivation for this migration changed. In the past people moved primarily in search of food, or later, for economic reasons. Now there is a significant movement of people occurring because of a desire to attain a particular lifestyle: migrants are seeking a particular environment and a differentiated culture associated with rural areas, and in particular, rural areas located in coastal or mountain regions. This movement of humans to smaller communities in rural areas is referred to as “amenity migration,” a phenomenon that stands in sharp contrast the rapid urbanization and suburbanization that occurred in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The amenity migration phenomenon is happening worldwide, and as a result of globalization and internationalization the migration is also happening across national boundaries. Amenity migration is having a profound impact on previously remote communities, many of which were in economic decline.

In North America, research on amenity migration has focused primarily on the western USA, especially the movement of urbanites to rural communities in the Rocky Mountains. Comparatively little work has been done in Canada. While the effects of amenity migration might be less pronounced in this country, it is beginning to create huge challenges for communities in the mountains of western Canada. Historically, mountain communities in BC and Alberta built on resource extraction. By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many were economically depressed due to the decline of industry they depended on. In recent years, however, these towns have become magnets for those who are drawn to their regions by their natural beauty and outdoor recreational opportunities. As part of the larger globalization phenomenon, the migrants to these smaller communities are not just those from proximal urban centres but come from other provinces and other countries. This has resulted in the economic “rebirth” of many of these towns; however, soaring housing costs are causing acute problems for residents with modest incomes (both long time and recently arrived) who often end up living in even more remote communities and commuting long distances to work. The many jobs created in the service industry are attracting large numbers of seasonal workers from out of province and abroad who usually end up living in substandard, overcrowded accommodation. Most mountain communities are only vaguely aware of the amenity migration

phenomenon; however, the cost of housing is obvious and communities are scrambling to come up with strategies to address the ill effects that it creates.

This paper will contribute to our understanding of the amenity migration phenomenon by providing a case study of five mountain communities in Alberta and British Columbia: Canmore AB, Fernie BC, Golden BC, Revelstoke BC and Whistler BC. These communities are all within three hours of major urban centres that are the economic drivers of their respective provinces (Calgary AB and Vancouver BC);<sup>i</sup> all owe their existence to resource extraction activities; and all are in close proximity to major ski and golf resorts. While amenity migration in Canada may be a poorly understood phenomenon, it is causing change that is happening at a breathtaking rate and the potential challenges it will pose are enormous. Indecision or benign neglect will result in increasing tensions between locals and absentee home owners, stratification between the economic “haves” and the “have-nots,” the out migration of young people whose labour is critical for local economies, and increasing instances of homelessness and inadequate housing, particularly for those who work in the growing service sector.

Amenity migration in Canada can be understood in part as the result of two interrelated phenomenon: life cycle effects and generational effects. Life cycle refers to the fact that members of the same generation tend to do particular things at the same time because they are the same age. Much has been written about the post second world war “baby boom” in North America and the influence this generation has had on all aspects of society due to its sheer numbers. But nowhere is this phenomenon more noticeable than in Canada, where there was a surge both in immigration and in births between 1947-1966. In his book, *Boom, Bust and Echo*, demographer David Foot demonstrates the influence this large generation has had on economics, politics and culture.<sup>ii</sup> The older half of the population bulge is enjoying unprecedented prosperity and health, and is either retiring or thinking about retirement. Baby Boomers living in major centres have seen substantial increases in the value of their primary residences and can use the equity to secure loans for recreational property at favourable interest rates. Moreover, this generation is poised to receive substantial inheritances when their parents die, which will represent the largest intergenerational transfer of wealth in human history. Foot noted in 2007 that: “(i)n the past decade, the eldest boomers, reaching their 50s, began to inherit or purchase vacation properties - second homes that are located far from the major urban centres in which they spent their earlier years. In essence, then, population aging moves people away from downtown cores and back to smaller communities.”<sup>iii</sup> In Alberta and in particular BC, the movement of people away from urban to more rural settings will be accentuated by the fact that living in the large urban centres is becoming very expensive, particularly for those people on fixed incomes who may own their houses outright, but for whom market based housing taxes will become increasingly burdensome. The Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) predicts that: “High home prices in the Vancouver CMA will result in some people selling their homes and relocating to other, less expensive, areas of the province.”<sup>iv</sup>

But the move to mountain communities is more complex than simply being the result of a lot of people with a lot of money nearing retirement wanting to live in a small town. The Chinook Institute for Community Stewardship in Canmore Alberta nicely sums up the amenity migration phenomenon with the formula:

$$BB+ECV+(GE+TC)+SE = NAR.$$

The shorthand of this formula is explained by ... the baby boom bulge (BB) + new environmental and cultural values (ECV) + technological change and global production ({TC+GE}) + a strong economy (SE) equals a natural amenities rush (NAR).”<sup>v</sup> So while the existence of large numbers of people who make up the baby boom is important, it does not adequately address the issue of “why” many within this cohort choose to spend their money on searching out a particular lifestyle. This is explained by environmental and cultural values. And it is here that generational effects become an important explanatory variable. It explains the tendency for members of the same generation to act in similar ways or share common values – they do so because they were affected by similar events that shaped their life experiences. As such, those who were born in the post second world war decades experienced a period of economic growth and prosperity in their formative years. But this period of material affluence also coincided with a time when consensus with respect to what comprised the “public good” began to break down and the so-called “new social movements” emerged in the 1960s to articulate a new value set.

Members of new social movements have a shared understanding of the world around them, they “see” themselves as a group because they view the world through the same lens, a lens that grows out of shared experience. As young adults, Baby Boomers were active participants in the new social movements because it appeared to them that institutions did not reflect their values, and as such, provided inadequate responses to complex problems. Events such as the environmental disaster Love Canal, the grounding of the oil tanker Arrow and the publication of Rachael Carson’s *Silent Spring* were factors contributing to the growth of the environmental movement. The Vietnam war was the catalyst for the peace movement, and both the civil and women’s rights movement gained currency at this time. Ronald Inglehart suggests that as part of the post-war “education revolution” the baby boomers concerned themselves with “higher order” needs, as opposed to the more security focused needs of their depression era parents.<sup>vi</sup> And as this generation nears retirement, many are looking to “check out” of the big city in pursuit of a slower paced lifestyle in beautiful surroundings. As Harvey Locke notes in the “Spiritual Dimension of Moving to the Mountains,” amenity migrants “seek to restore or reaffirm their desire to live meaningful lives in a setting that lifts their souls and makes them feel good.”<sup>vii</sup>

The Baby Boomer migrants to mountain communities bring their values (and their money) with them. In particular, migrants place a high value on the proximity of mountain communities to unique habitat; these habitats are one of the few remaining places for wildlife. This is in part because these areas have tended to be less hospitable to human settlement than more “accessible” land that was used for such activities as farming. In contrast to the agricultural economies that evolved on the fertile lands that surrounded major western cities, these previously remote communities were built on resource extraction, and in particular, mining and forestry. These activities are typically not associated with a “forest conservation” frame embraced by those who value wildlife in their natural habitat, but rather, are consistent with the view that nature provides an endless bounty of resources to be extracted. Nature is something that is to be conquered rather than preserved. As I pointed out in a 2001 article that described the competing frames of BC forests:

felling trees was an honourable method of earning a living; indeed, the lumberjack is a prominent feature of British Columbia's outdoor mystique. The significance of the lumberjack to the provincial cultural persona is a legacy of its experience as part of the western frontier; the lumberjack symbolizes the settlers' success in taming the land and prospering from its natural bounty.<sup>viii</sup>

Needless to say, a frame of "taming the land" through resource extraction activities is not consistent with a frame that values the land in its wilderness form.

Laurence Moss identifies some of the key cultural and economic impacts associated with amenity migrants in the introductory chapter to his book *The Amenity Migrants: Seeking and Sustaining Mountains and their Cultures*.<sup>ix</sup> He begins with the observation that most of those who choose to relocate to a rural, mountain community bring aspects of their metropolitan origins with them, even though their move may be inspired by a rejection of those urban values. Migrants are often wealthier than their local counterparts, are used to a cosmopolitan community, and expect a high level of services. Their values and behaviour may be different than the local norm and they may exhibit a limited level of local attachment and commitment. As local services are often lower than those in the communities they left, amenity migrants often demand more and better services than the local government is able to provide. This can create tension between the migrants and the locals. Conflict also comes on other levels. The influx of migrants creates economic opportunity that may result in an expansion in the range of consumer products and services; however, it also can lead to price inflation. This typically hurts long time locals as well as poorer amenity migrants, many of whom work in the service industry. Primarily among these concerns is housing, the costs of which tend to inflate, and in many cases, inflate dramatically.

Escalating prices can only partially be attributed to those who actually quit or retire from their jobs in the city and relocate. Many migrants to rural communities are able to "commute virtually" to their jobs in the city, leading us to the third component in the Chinook amenity migration formula: technological change and global production. Cell phones, the widespread use of the internet, and the digitization of a wide array of material so that it is accessible on a computer with the click of a mouse, is facilitating a distributed workplace that allows urban professionals to work anywhere. So for example, few university professors who work for Athabasca University actually live in the town of Athabasca where the physical building is located. Most reside elsewhere, including the mountain town of Canmore. These professionals conduct research and communicate with students, colleagues, and university personnel by going online or picking up the telephone in their home-based office.

The globalization of production relates to the globalization and internationalization of the economy, which in turn speaks to the growing importance of tourism to BC and Alberta's economies, and in particular, to the economies of mountain communities. Almost a decade ago, Waldron noted that tourism worldwide was a \$444 billion dollar industry, which outstripped the world's 53 poorest countries Gross Nation Product.<sup>x</sup> "Tourist destinations in mountainous regions alone account for 13-20% of the industry and churn out US\$70-90 billion a year."<sup>xi</sup> While tourism does not produce a tangible product, it does produce an "experience" which can be marketed by resorts and purchased by consumers. Indeed, the "Whistler Experience" is a brand that has been very

successfully sold worldwide. As one of the venues for the 2010 winter Olympics, Whistler will garner even more of the international spotlight. And given the devastating impact of recent winters without snow on ski resorts in Europe, more and more attention will be paid to mountains in the northwestern part of this continent where shoveling snow continues to preoccupy citizens during the winter months. As one international non-governmental organization concludes in its case study of Whistler and its closest neighbours: "... all of these communities must demonstrate foresight in their planning practices if their towns and environments are to contend with the powerful economic force that 2 million visitors a year bring to the region."<sup>xii</sup>

The last requirement in the Chinook formula that is needed to produce an amenities rush is a strong economy. After a number of years of sustained economic growth, experts at Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation predict that BC's economy will slow down somewhat due to difficulties in the forest industry, and Alberta's will slow because of lower gas prices, escalating costs and the new royalties rate that will be implemented in 2009. But the economies of Alberta and British Columbia will still continue to drive Canada's economy. British Columbia, Alberta and Saskatchewan will attract the largest number of migrants from other provinces in Canada. British Columbia, along with Ontario and Quebec, will attract the bulk of international immigrants. While mortgage rates will increase slightly in the next few years, they continue to remain at record low levels. Given the economic challenges that Ontario is currently experiencing, the Bank of Canada will be motivated to keep interest rates low. The Canadian economy is at or very near full employment. While there are some concerns regarding the impact that the strength of the Canadian dollar will have on exports from the manufacturing sector, manufacturing is not a primary industry in western Canada, and is virtually absent in small mountain communities. BC in particular will continue to grow as a result of the in-migration of retirees, and housing prices will continue to rise.<sup>xiii</sup>

The preceding overview of the Chinook Institute's formula suggests that all four factors are in place to produce a sustained "amenity rush" in the western mountain regions of Canada. The most telling negative consequence of this rush is the problems that arise due to the lack of affordable housing. Much has been written on the subject of affordable housing in Canada, particularly in the late 1990s when public interest was piqued by concern with homelessness in cities, the decay of urban infrastructure and concern over quality of life issues. A commonly accepted definition of "housing affordability" that is used for public policy purposes is the "... relationship between housing costs and income. If housing costs are perceived to be too high relative to household income, then a housing affordability problem is perceived to exist." In Canada, a person who spends more than 30% of his or her pre-tax income on housing or who lives in crowded situations is considered to be in need of core housing.<sup>xiv</sup>

In the 1990s government decisions not to build new social housing, rent control deregulation in some provinces, cuts to welfare programs and the disinterest of the private sector to invest in rental accommodation combined to create a shortage of affordable housing. As a result, homelessness increased in all major Canadian cities. Much has also been written on the importance of affordable housing to building healthy, diverse cities that in turn support economically vibrant, competitive urban regions.<sup>xv</sup> But this literature focuses on cities located in larger, urbanized regions. Little attention has been paid to the problems of affordable housing in smaller centres located in rural

regions.

While this paper will not provide an exhaustive study of affordable housing in western mountain communities, a brief review of some indicators will illustrate the gravity of the problems that BC and Alberta face as a result of the amenity rush. The first table provides some basic demographic data for five sample mountain communities: Canmore AB, Fernie BC, Golden BC, and Revelstoke BC, Whistler BC. Table One provides some basic information.

**Table One: The Five Mountain Communities**

Town Population Mtn Range Mnt Resorts close by Resort Owners

Canmore AB	12,015	Rockies	Sunshine Village Lake Louise MntResort Nakiska Ski Norquay	Scurfield Family (Calgary) Resorts of the Cdn Rockies Resorts of the Cdn Rockies
Fernie BC	4,145	Rockies	Fernie Alpine Resort	Resorts of the Cdn Rockies
Golden BC	3,775	Columbia	Kicking Horse Mtn Resort	Ballast Nedam Int (Netherlands) Columbia Basin Trust
Revelstoke BC	7,180	Columbia	Mount Revelsoke	Hunter Milbourne (Toronto) Robert Powadiuk (Toronto)
Whistler BC	9,250	Coastal	Whistler-Blackcombe	IntraWest Corporation

The town of Golden was built primarily on forestry, while mining was a primary industry in Canmore, Fernie, and Revelstoke. The location of Golden and Revelstoke on the trans Canada CPR line was also an important factor in their development. All of these mountain communities share a similar history in that they boomed in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, they prospered and suffered mid century depending on the global price of lumber, coal or other commodities. With the exception of Whistler, these towns were largely in economic decline by the 1960s and 1970s as the mines on which the communities depended began to close and the forest industry went into decline. And all saw the revitalization of their communities with the tourism associated with golf course development, and in particular, combined ski, snowboarding, and mountain biking resorts that operate year round and are owned by multi national corporations.

This is not to say that skiing had not previously been important to the economies of these areas. Small ski resorts were built in or near all of these mountain communities by the 1960s (Sunshine, Fortress Mountain, and Mount Norquay near Canmore; Garibaldi Whistler Mountain at Whistler; Fernie Snow Valley at Fernie; Whitetooth the ski area at Golden; and Powder Springs in Revelstoke). Whistler is unique in that in addition to being a base for mining and logging, it has been the home of numerous fishing lodges that catered to tourists since its earliest years. The first of these opened in 1914 and were reached by horseback. When a gravel road finally reached Whistler in the 1950s, the possibility of having a four-season resort was realized.<sup>xvi</sup> In the last decade, small ski hills that were located outside national provincial parks were taken over by multinational corporations and now are being transformed into mega multi-use mountain resorts. More

terrain was added, mountain biking trails and courses were created for summer use, and on-site villages were built or expanded. The result is the infusion of millions of dollars of investment, both in the creation of the year-round resorts and the building of hotels and second homes either on-hill or in neighbouring communities.

Canadian mountain resorts have caught the attention of sport enthusiasts from across North America and beyond. Sitting just outside the gates of Banff, Canada's oldest and most famous national park, Canmore is an easy drive to some of the oldest resorts in the Canadian Rockies as well as to some of its most well known. To the east of Canmore is Kananaskis Country, Alberta's premier provincial park that boasts both local and world-class ski resorts. Three more ski resorts are located to the west of Canmore in Banff National Park. Along with Mount Norquay, Sunshine was first used for skiing guests in the 1920s and 1930s, and by the 1960s both ski hills were developed in earnest. Lake Louise Mountain Resort is Canada's largest single ski/snowboard resort and is well known as a frequent host of Alpine Skiing World cups. Nakiska Resort hosted alpine ski racing during the 1988 Winter Olympics, while the town of Canmore hosted the Nordic events. Fernie is famous for its enormous quantities of powder snow, and in 1997 the local ski hill was taken over, expanded and promoted by Resorts of the Canadian Rockies. Amid huge fanfare, Revelstoke Mountain Resort opened in 2007; it boasts the highest vertical drop in North America and the fourth in the world. The third highest vertical drop in North America is Kicking Horse Mountain resort, which opened in 2000 near Golden. The mega-resort of Whistler-Blackcombe was created in 1996 and is by far the biggest ski resort in North America with a vertical drop second only to Revelstoke. The eyes of the world will be on Whistler-Blackcombe Mountain Resort in 2010.

In his book *Downhill Slide: Why the Corporate Ski Industry is Bad for Skiing, Ski Towns, and the Environment*, Hal Clifford analyzes the commodification of skiing into a marketable product that is sold as a "tourist vacation experience." He documents the gentrification of mountain towns in the US, the creation of self-contained tourist villages, the construction of trophy homes and second homes that are usually vacant, the branding of leisure activities for marketing purposes, and the stratification of towns such as Aspen and Vail Colorado into the "haves" and the "have nots" because of hugely inflated housing costs. Clifford argues that the social costs to these mountain towns are enormous, and ultimately will create big problems for an industry that is already seeing a decrease in the number of enthusiasts.

One of the American "big three" four season mountain resort developers, IntraWest, owns Whistler-Blackcombe and uses the same marketing tactics in Canada as it does in the US to target wealthy Baby Boomers with a particular lifestyle brand. Although the Baby Boom buyer of second homes may not actually have "dropped out" in the 1960s, opting instead to work hard to accumulate capital, he or she can still purchase the alternative lifestyle associated with being a carefree ski bumb, a physically fit sports enthusiast, or an avid outdoorsman who is in tune with the natural environment. Clifford describes the packaging of this particular lifestyle to sell property at Whistler-Blackcombe:

In IntraWest's sales video for Creekside, a five-hundred-bed redevelopment of Whistler Mountain's original base area (southwest of the current Whistler Village), the marketing is premised on 1970s flower-power culture. The seventy-thousand dollar sales-pitch film is built around period footage of skiers in the

1960s and 1970s and a theme of a Volkswagen van being driven to the ski area ... to take us all back to that ostensibly happier, freer time. The implicit sales pitch is the same: spend enough money and this lost youth, whether it was yours or not, will be yours in a new IntraWest development.<sup>xvii</sup>

Given the huge growth of the Whistler-Blacombe Mountain Resort, and in particular the dramatic increase in second home purchases since IntraWest assumed control in 1996, one is lead to conclude that this message resonated with Canadian Baby Boomers with money in their pockets. While the growth of many of the established resorts in the Canadian Rockies are restricted because they are located in National Parks, resorts such as Revelstoke Mountain are working hard to develop a brand that rivals that of Whistler. These brands are as much about village night life and “seeing and being seen” as they are about outdoor activities.

Table 2 demonstrates the importance that tourism now plays in the economies of the mountain communities; it shows the percentage contribution of the various sectors.

**Table 2: Percentage Contributions 2001**

	gov't	ser- vices	bldg	retail	manu- factur	mine	forest	energy	trans- fers	other	total
Canmore	22%	42%	10%	9%	3%	1%	0%	2%	10%	1%	100%
Fernie	19%	23%	5%	6%	0%	24%	3%	0%	16%	4%	100%
Golden	17%	27%	7%	10%	0%	0%	19%	0%	16%	3%	100%
Revelstoke	17%	36%	4%	6%	1%	0%	15%	3%	17%	1%	100%
Whistler	15%	59%	10%	7%	1%	0%	1%	0%	3%	3%	100%

In four of the five communities, the service sector contributed the most to the local economy in 2001. Fernie is the only community where mining contributes more than the service sector, but even here it is ahead by only one percentage point. Canmore, and in particular Whistler, are very dependent on the service sector. As new resorts have been developed and the economy has grown since 2001, one could reasonably expect that the patterns emerging will be even more pronounced in 2008.

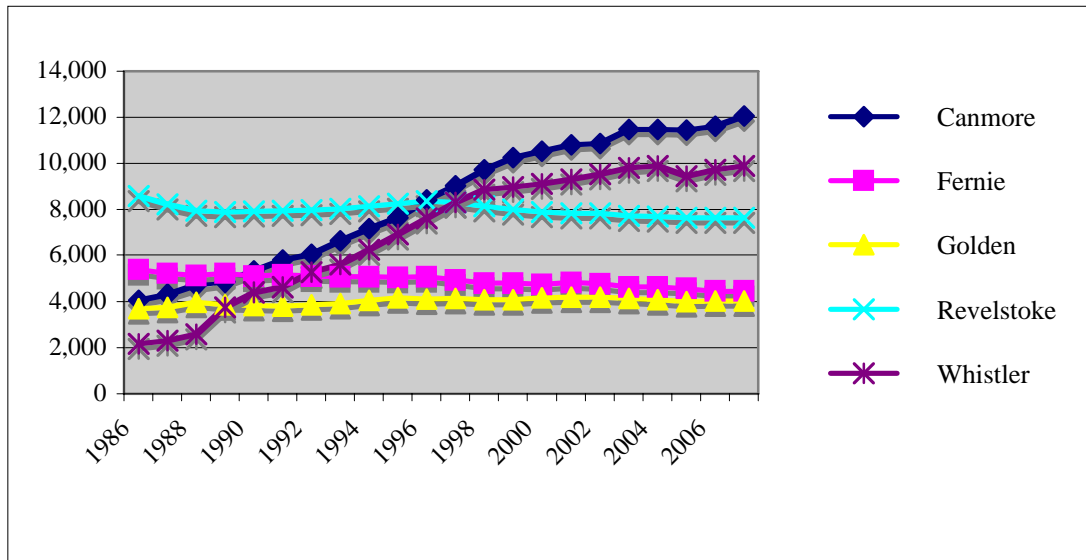
The difficulty with the transition in the economies of these mountain towns from resource extraction to tourism is two-fold. First, high paying jobs are lost when resource industries decline and are replaced with low paying jobs in the service sector. In 2005, the medium income for person 15 years and over who worked full time in Canmore was \$40,637; Fernie \$47,760; Golden \$42,989; Revelstoke \$45,640; and Whistler \$37,341. Fernie’s comparatively high incomes are predicable given that resource extraction is still a prominent contributor to Fernie’s economy. At the other end of the scale, Whistler is the most dependent of all of these communities on the service sector. What is particularly interesting about these figures is that the medium incomes of both Canmore and Whistler (the most service sector intensive towns) is below the national average of \$41,401 despite the fact that over 30% of the residents in these towns have university certificates, diplomas or degrees.<sup>xviii</sup>

The second and more troubling problem with the rise of tourism is the growing investment from outside the local community in property, and in particular, the purchase



of second homes. The dramatic rise in property values in Canmore and Whistler will be analyzed in more detail later in this paper, but the higher costs can be explained to a certain extent by the huge population growth in those two jurisdictions (Canmore 112% increase since 1991; Whistler 454% increase since 1986). Golden's population also increased, though a growth of 9% is fairly modest over two decades. Interestingly, the average price of a house jumped 18% the year after the new mountain resort opened and has continued to rise since then, yet Golden's population actually dropped 5% between 2001 and 2006. A similar phenomenon can be seen in Fernie and Revelstoke, where property values have also increased significantly despite the fact that the two communities have actually lost population since 1991 (Fernie -17%; Revelstoke -11%).<sup>xix</sup> See Figure One for population trends for the mountain communities.<sup>xx</sup>

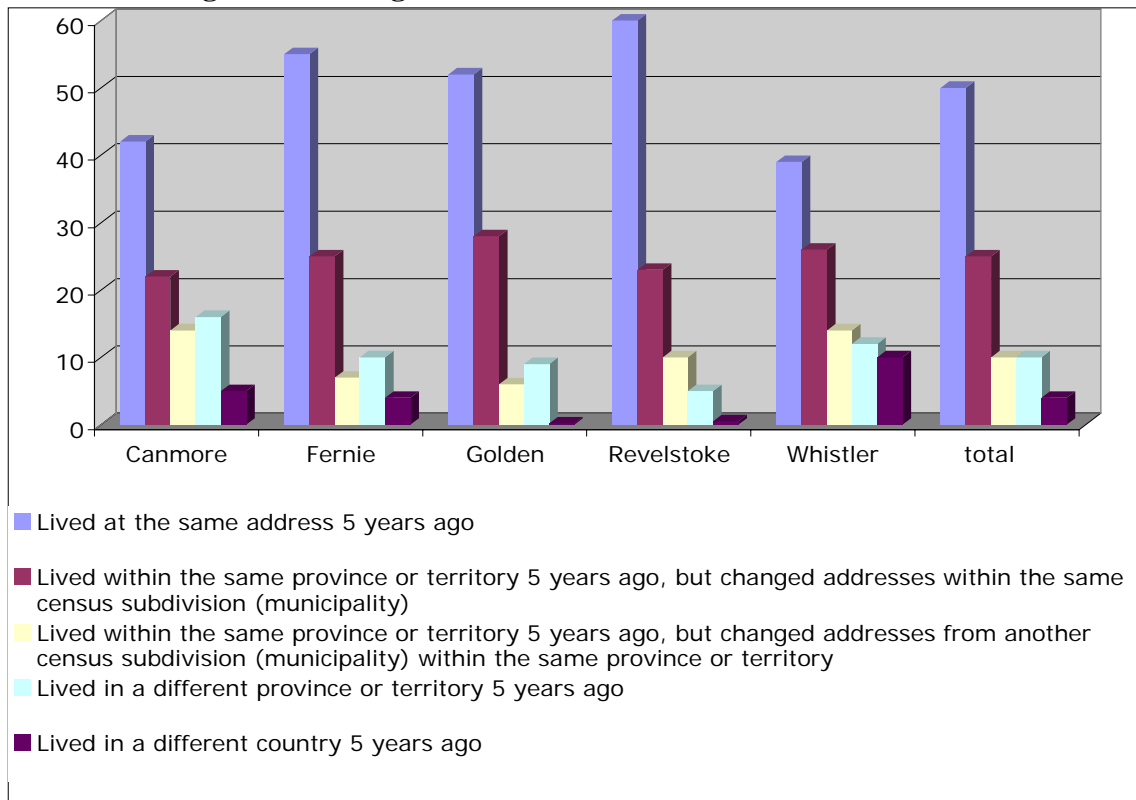
**Figure One: Population trends for mountain communities**



The real estate boom is explained by looking at the rate of purchase of properties occupied solely by foreign and/or temporary residents, i.e., second homes. In 2005, the number of second homes in Whistler accounted for 55% of the housing stock, Fernie was at 29%, and Canmore was at 27%.<sup>xxi</sup> It is worth noting at this juncture the speed with which these communities are changing: just six years earlier in 1999, less than a quarter of Whistler's properties were second homes.<sup>xxii</sup> In 2005, Golden and Revelstoke trailed the others at 8% and 5% of their properties being second homes. This might be explained by the fact that the resorts in these locales only recently underwent major expansion (2000 and 2007 respectively). The newness of these mountain resorts leads one to speculate that the rate of second home purchase in 2008 and beyond will be substantially higher should these two communities follow the pattern of the more established resort communities.<sup>xxiii</sup> In any event, there is no evidence to suggest that the purchase of second homes will abate anytime soon. CMHC reports that in 2005, 9% of Canadian households owned a second home, and that 51% of all owners of secondary residences were Baby Boomers.<sup>xxiv</sup> A recent Royal LePage Real Estate Services study indicates "...approximately 8 per cent of Canadians own a winter recreational property or are thinking of buying one in the next three to five years, with residents of British Columbia representing the largest purchaser population (13%)."<sup>xxv</sup>

The following table illustrates the migration patterns over the period 2001-2006 for each of the five communities. The largest proportion of citizens in these communities have lived at the same address for five years, yet this proportion only represents the majority of citizens in Revelstoke, Golden and Fernie. In Whistler and Canmore these citizens are in the minority. Even when the totals of citizens who have lived at the same address are added to the numbers of citizens who moved within the municipality for the five-year period 2001-2006, the percentage of people in this category is only in the mid 60s. These two towns have seen migrants from within the province (14%) and from outside the province (16%) in addition to migrants who moved to the town from a different country (10% and 5%). This all adds up to a great deal of in-migration from different places, including international locales.<sup>xxvi</sup> The data in Figure Two are taken from the 2006 Canada census. They show the percentage of people in each of the five mountain communities between 2001-2006 who lived at the same address 5 years ago; the percentage that lived in the town but changed residences; the percentage that moved into the town from somewhere else in the province; the percentage that moved into the town from out of province; and the percentage who moved into town from another country.

**Figure Two: Migration Patterns in Mountain Communities**



Turning now to the price of houses, a more dramatic tale unfolds. All communities have seen big jumps in prices. When the new ski resort in Golden opened in 2000, the price of an average house was \$134,368. Seven years later the average house price was \$291,781. In the first quarter of 2002 the average selling price of a home in Revelstoke was \$82,445. In the first quarter of the year Revelstoke's new ski resort opened (2007), it was \$269,008. By the end of the year it was \$324,593. Fernie tells a similar story. Price increases in Canmore and Whistler started earlier, and as a result, property in these communities is far more expensive than their interior counterparts. The

average selling price of property in Canmore was similar to its interior BC counterparts in the early 1980s; it was already \$315,000 in 2003 but by May 2007 the cheapest single detached house on the market was selling for almost \$600,000.<sup>xxvii</sup> In Whistler, the average price of property (the vast majority of which are condominiums) was \$378,843 in 1998, rising to \$909,766 in 2007.<sup>xxviii</sup> A visitor wishing to purchase a week in a timeshare condominium on the hill will run between \$4,000 - \$10,000 for the 2008-2009 winter season.<sup>xxix</sup> A particularly telling and rather ironic example of the difficulties that the lack of affordable is creating for mountain communities is the April 2008 resignation of Revelstoke's director of town planning, Hap Stelling. Stelling received an eviction notice for his rental accommodation and because the rental market is extremely tight and he cannot afford to purchase property, he decided to quit his job and return to New Brunswick.<sup>xxx</sup>

The difficulty in hiring and retaining staff is a chronic problem in western Canadian cities has been well documented, but it is clear that smaller communities are experiencing the same issues. Various local communities report that employers are having a hard time filling positions. In Whistler, the situation is particularly difficult. "Approximately 400 FTE positions went unfilled in Whistler during the 2006/07 winter season (Figure 3-10). There were about 50 unfilled positions in small companies, 130 unfilled positions in medium sized businesses and 230 vacancies in large organizations. Had these positions been staffed, they would have increased the overall workforce by 3%." These statistics were slightly improved from the year before: "30% of businesses in Whistler had staffing shortages, in 2006/07 this figure was 23%. Large companies are hit harder than smaller ones."<sup>xxxi</sup> Whistler's labour shortage will no doubt be exacerbated in 2010 by its hosting of the Winter Olympics.

The East Kootenay area of BC is yet another excellent example of a region in great transition as a result of amenity migration. Up until 2001, this area was dotted with communities dependent on natural resource extraction, in particular mining and forestry. Now, the region is transitioning to an economy based on tourism, and in particular golfing and skiing resorts. This region is located on the western slopes of the Rocky Mountains within a few hours drive of Calgary, a city that is generating wealth at an astonishing rate. A CMHC report notes that the number of Canadian households that owned vacation homes increased by almost 25%.<sup>xxxii</sup> The planned expansion of the Cranbrook airport and the building of an airport in Revelstoke to accommodate international flights, as well as the region's proximity to Alberta's buoyant economy are also factors affecting the local economy. A June 2007 report on affordable and attainable housing commissioned by the town of Fernie described the impact of these changes on the housing market as "tsunami-like."<sup>xxxiii</sup>

Unfortunately for the communities that were traditionally based on resource extraction, the new jobs that are being created in the tourism sector do not command the same salaries as the jobs they are replacing. The five communities included in this study are proximal to major ski resorts that employ a high number of people in the service sector earning minimum wage or slightly higher. Many of these employees work more than one job and/or share accommodation with other people who are in the same circumstance. These towns are also the temporary homes to seasonal employees who come from outside the community (many come from abroad) and are only there to work and enjoy themselves "for the season". This puts additional strain on the housing market,

as these seasonal workers are not adverse to having multiple roommates and are willing to live in substandard housing as their situation is temporary. While their neighbours might object to the congestion and nuisance created by the neighbourhood “party place,” an absentee landlord can realize an excellent return on his or her investment.

Seasonal workers and long-term residents in low paying sectors such as the service industry are increasingly finding that they cannot afford to live in the towns in which they are employed. At Whistler, workers are commuting from the outlying communities of Squamish and Pemberton, while some residents of Fernie are looking toward Sparwood and Hosmer to rent or purchase property. Undoubtedly as prices in Fernie rise, residents will begin looking to the other side of the Alberta border, where the economically depressed towns in the Crowsnest Pass offer housing prices that are a fraction of Fernie’s. The ultimate result of this trend is that Canadian towns that are home to large four season mountain resorts will become a place where many people come to play but not to work, and escalating property values will make it increasingly difficult to live, work, and recreate in the same community.

As commuting grows, the mountains communities of western Canada will begin to resemble those in the US, where thousands of low paid workers in the service sector (often migrants and immigrants) have an hour to two-hour commutes to their place of employment on windy mountain roads that can be treacherous in the winter. In Aspen Colorado, a single-family home costs a few million dollars, a sum that is completely unattainable on minimum wage.<sup>xxxiv</sup> As one Roman Catholic Archdiocese in Denver wrote in reference to the mountain resort industry:

The tent and trailer camps, sometimes without electricity or running water, that today house so many service workers on the Western Slope (of Colorado), raise troubling questions about the kind of society that is emerging there ... What we risk creating is a theme-park “alternative reality” for those who have the money to purchase entrance. Around this Rocky Mountain theme park will sprawl a growing buffer of the working poor.”<sup>xxxv</sup>

Tent and trailer camps that provide shelter for service workers have already arrived in the Canadian Rockies. Wapiti Tent Campground near Canmore provides a temporary home to 75 long-term campers in the summer. While some claim that workers prefer living in a campground in order to save up to \$1160 a month on rent, the extremely tight rental market in Canmore would suggest that even if they could afford the rent, apartments are simply not available.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

Increasing stratification between the property haves and the have-nots in Canadian mountain towns creates a host of social ills beyond long commuting times. Previous studies indicate that amenity migration can lead to decreasing public access to valued natural resources.<sup>xxxvii</sup> Large developments of high-end housing sometimes restrict or completely block access to areas that were once open to the community, particularly subdivisions built as “gated communities” that are so popular south of the border. Some subdivisions of trophy homes in the US are not only gated, they provide private hiking, biking and equestrian trails to their residents.<sup>xxxviii</sup> This can lead to a variety of negative social consequences, including an increase in crime. In the case of Whistler, “(t)he number of reported statute offences experienced a 290% increase between 1996 and 2002. The per capita rate of criminal code offences in Whistler in

2001 was more than twice the province of British Columbia's average.<sup>xxxix</sup> Empty homes are not necessarily secure homes, and trophy homes serve to remind those who are affected the most by the lack of affordable housing that a huge chasm exists between the amenity migrants and the workers that provide the labour for the services they enjoy. Implementing security measures that create barriers around luxury homes in order to protect the rich from the poor will undoubtedly become a booming business in many small communities where residents previously did not bother to lock their doors.

Major employers in mountain communities are now looking at building staff housing for employees. Mountain resorts typically have limited staff housing, but other local employers such as Island Lake Lodge in Fernie provides limited staff housing and is contemplating developing more. This follows a tradition of the mining companies that have in the past assisted employees with housing. For example, Kaiser Coal Company built housing in one of the older neighbourhoods in Fernie, and provided forgivable mortgages to employees if they stayed with the company for at least ten years.<sup>xi</sup> But it appears that many businesses within the tourist industry feel that it is a government as opposed to a corporate responsibility to provide affordable housing. Even though the housing situation has been cited repeatedly in Whistler as the primary reason for staff shortages, only 28% of employers provided their employees with assistance in finding accommodation, and only 29% of large employers and 22% of smaller ones provided staff housing.<sup>xii</sup>

Affordable housing advocates across Canada argue that governments are not doing enough, particularly given the changing nature of the global economy and escalating costs that are creating difficulties for more and more people. This is also true in Canadian mountain towns. According to the Fernie Affordable and Attainable Housing Strategy, many locals feel that "the City of Fernie must take a leadership role in addressing the community's housing needs." This sentiment is shared in other municipalities and a variety of studies and consultations are being undertaken. Yet, the Fernie report also points out that it is the federal government that traditionally provided funding in this area. When the federal government withdrew from this policy area in 1992, it was left to the provincial and local governments to fill in the gaps.

In BC, the responsibility for the provision of affordable housing is filled primarily by the British Columbia Housing Management Commission (BC Housing). Established in 1967 through an Order-In-Council under the *Housing Act*, this crown agency focuses on developing and managing subsidized housing for BC's most vulnerable citizens. In December 2001, the province and the federal government signed the first bilateral agreement in the country which will provide \$177.4 million over 5 years to provide affordable housing.<sup>xlii</sup> This agreement was renewed four years later, with additional supports aimed at high risk groups that are the most likely to be homeless.<sup>xliii</sup> The current budget for housing is now the highest in BC's history, providing direct assistance to 84,000 households in 2007.<sup>xliv</sup>

In Alberta, responsibility for affordable housing falls primarily with the Department of Municipal Affairs. In August 2005, Alberta signed its bilateral agreement with the federal government that would provide \$63 million over the next two years in order to increase the supply of affordable housing. Subsequently, the province set up the Municipal Sustainability Housing Program that provides \$100 million per year to municipalities over three years. This new initiative which seeks to make funding for

meeting growth-related changes more flexible and predictable over a ten-year period. But other provincial departments are also involved in funding affordable housing. Alberta Seniors and CMHC signed an agreement in June 2002 through the Federal Affordable Housing Program that contributed \$67.12 million over four years to provide matching grants for the creation of low-cost housing in high-growth areas in high need of housing.

Despite the fact that the provincial bodies charged with responsibilities seem unable to keep up to the growing demands of this policy arena, inserting itself in the housing policy field would be a new role for municipalities such as Fernie. With the exception of local governments in Metro Vancouver and Whistler, “most of BC’s local governments have played no role, or a limited role, in affordable and attainable housing.”<sup>xlv</sup> The same is true in Alberta. And while various levels of government are discussing the difficult housing situations that society’s most vulnerable citizens face (low income seniors, the disabled, single parents), much less attention is paid to seasonal workers. But this is not to say that their problems are totally ignored, particularly by the communities they work in. Recently the mayor of Canmore mused publicly that perhaps the town should look toward the example set by its sister municipality in Banff National Park which built a hostel that provides temporary housing for its seasonal workforce.<sup>xlvi</sup>

This is not to suggest that mountain towns have done nothing to address the affordable housing issue. Again, it is the two communities that have been the most affected by amenity migration that have been the most active. Whistler is not only the leader among the group of communities considered in this study, it is one of the few municipalities in Canada that is aggressively seeking to deal with the issue of affordable housing. In 1997 the Whistler Housing Authority (WHA) was created as a wholly owned subsidiary of the municipality; its mandate is to ensure that 75% of Whistler’s workforce lives within the community. The WHA oversees the creation of an inventory of price controlled units for residents for rent or for purchase; it currently provides about 25% of the housing stock need for its seasonal employees. About 1/3 of Whistler’s local population (both permanent and seasonal) live in housing that is restricted to those working in Whistler. With the creation of a new neighbourhood that will contain housing for 1,000 Whistler workers and the creation of an Athlete’s Village that will house another 1,000 workers after the 2010 Winter Olympics, roughly ½ of Whistler’s population will live in resident-restricted housing units.

The H.O.M.E. Matching Program is another WHA initiative; this one was undertaken with the Chamber of Commerce. It matches landlords to local business whose employees require housing. The H.O.M.E program targets second home owners and landlords who have had bad experiences in the past and thus are reluctant to rent their properties. The program also provides a website with profiles of resort employees who are looking for accommodation so that landlords can pick suitable tenants without the hassle of placing ads and fielding phone calls. In April 2008, Smart Growth BC recognized the municipality for its 2020 Sustainability Task Forces and its 57 unit Beaver Flats Employee Housing Building. Whistler proudly claims that “...per capita, no other community in North America has done more to address affordable housing.”<sup>xlvii</sup>

Canmore first entered the affordable housing policy arena in the mid 1990s when it adopted new zoning bylaws allowing increased density and required developers to provide a significant number of entry level homes as well as employee housing. By 2000, it had created the not-for-profit Canmore Community Housing Corporation (CCHC) to

provide housing solutions for the community. This corporation is fully owned by the Town, which appoints its Board of Directors. CCHC in turn created the Mountain Haven Cooperative Homes Ltd. to provide affordable housing on a rental or equity purchase basis through deed restrictions. In October 2004, Canmore contributed \$305,459 to a partnership with CMHC and Mountain Haven Cooperative Homes Ltd. to build a \$2.5 million housing cooperative comprising 17 apartments. As a result of this partnership, Mountain Haven received an \$850,000 grant under the Canada-Alberta Affordable Housing Program.

Despite the huge potential impact that the housing issue will have on the quality of life in rural mountain communities, a recent survey of 42 rural communities in BC with a medium community size of 5,500 residents revealed that affordable housing was the least cited as a major issue that the respondent's community is working on or is concerned about. By far the most frequently cited concern was "manage growth and change" followed by "diversify economy." These issues relating to the development and the economy were cited far more frequently than any of the questions contained in the social issues, demographics or relationships categories. As reported in the study: "Many communities seem to see growth as a juggernaut that needs to be slowed down and dealt with in a measured way, so as not to destroy rural or distinctive lifestyles."<sup>xlviii</sup> Mountain resort critics such as Hal Clifford are much more negative in their assessment of the changes to local communities. He asserts that "...small ski towns are being colonized by mega ski industries."<sup>xlix</sup> While residents in BC towns might not yet be adversely affected by escalating housing costs, the locals can see what is happening to their towns and they are feeling nervous about the speed and intensity of the change.

Perhaps the best insights into what the future holds for small mountain towns in Alberta and BC are derived from those towns that have already experienced change that would have been virtually unfathomable just a few decades ago. Moore et al argue that there are five factors that account for Whistler's unprecedented growth and lay the foundation for sustained amenity migration. These are:

- (i) changed lifestyle motivations;
- (ii) escalated and concentrated wealth investment focusing on second-home ownership;
- (iii) improved business and communications technologies;
- (iv) increased transportation access to markets; and
- (v) enhanced awareness of Whistler's high-quality amenities.<sup>1</sup>

Substitute "Whistler" with the name of any of the other four communities included in this study and one would come to the same conclusion: these communities will continue to grow until the last of the Baby Boomers pass through their pre and immediate post retirement years.

People are moving to mountain communities for lifestyle reasons, but unlike the hippies that preceded them in the 60s and 70s, they are not doing this because they want to completely drop out of urban life. They just want to avoid the worst features of it. The answer to avoiding the troubling future that is presenting itself to mountain towns may be to restrict or place a tax burden on the purchase of second homes by people living elsewhere, particularly in the case of international buyers. From the perspective of a healthy community, it would be preferable for vacation home buyers rather than those who work and live in the community to be on a waiting list for available stock.

A second solution to maintaining community integrity may be to diversify the economy and attract those who can telecommute. As such, the future of small mountain towns might still lie in the service industry; however, the product exported will be professional expertise as opposed to a “tourist experience.” Clifford credits a Denver think-tank, The Center for the New West, for coming up with the term “Lone Eagles” to describe the telecommuters who represent the most important lifestyle change in North America in the last three decades. “Just as ranchers, loggers, and miners are in the export business, so are Lone Eagles; they export intellect. They are executives, stock traders, writers, photographers, software designers, and artists; or people who run advertising agencies, publishing houses, consulting firms, and the like.”<sup>li</sup> As part of Richard Florida’s oft cited “creative class,” these workers will not only contribute to the “bohemian culture” that is said to produce a healthy community, they garner substantial wages that will have positive spin-offs to the local economy by weaning it off its dependence on a mega-resort development.<sup>lii</sup> And, of considerable importance to the mega resorts, these workers are wealthy enough to be able to afford to recreate regularly in the villages that are being created at their backdoors. As they age, Baby Boomers will gradually hang up their skis and mountain bikes in favour of more sedentary pastimes like lying on a beach at a Mexican resort. Thus the mountain resorts would themselves benefit from working to create a more diversified local economy.

The responses to the influx of people and capital to these small mountain communities have been varied with respect to understanding the phenomenon and planning appropriately to ensure affordable housing and healthy communities. Coming up with a comprehensive plan for economic growth and development can be difficult in the face of conflicting values of resident locals and the amenity migrants. But one thing is clear, mountain communities in BC and Alberta are no longer isolated out-ports that are immune from the pressures of the outside world. An international audience first caught a glimpse of the remarkable natural beauty of the Canadian Rockies during the 1988 Calgary Winter Olympics in Alberta. Attention will soon be focused on the stunning vistas afforded while driving the sea to sky highway on route to Whistler BC, the venue for the 2010 Winter Olympics. Mountain communities are experiencing an influx of both amenity migrants and capital from international resort developers that are seeking to produce a tourist “experience” for the mega wealthy. Considerable thought needs to be given to how change and growth will be managed in these small Canadian communities, and in particular, what the role of various levels of government will be in ensuring that severely stratified and artificial communities are not the result of unrestrained corporate development and profit. As globalization decreases the isolation of communities worldwide, it is clear that Canadians must not be complacent about the development of their previously unknown vacation spots that are blessed with natural beauty and which have been, or soon will be “discovered” by a mobile, affluent global elite seeking to purchase a bit of paradise to which they can either relocate or recreate.

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<sup>i</sup> As Gerald Vander Pyl notes in the *Calgary Herald*, “There’s a magical number that comes up a lot when Calgarians start looking for recreation properties: Three, as in only a three-hour drive from the city,” see “K3” in the *Calgary Herald*, 9 Feb. 2008. Both the *Calgary Herald* and the *Edmonton Journal* newspapers



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have a regular Saturday “Recreational Homes” section that discusses the pros and cons of various recreation destinations such as Fernie, Kimberely, Fairmont Hot Springs, and Invermere BC.

<sup>ii</sup> David K. Foot with Daniel Stoffman, *Boom, Bust and Echo 2000: Profiting from the Demographic Shift in the New Millennium*, Toronto : Macfarlane Walter & Ross, 1998.

<sup>iii</sup> David K. Foot, Population Aging," in J. Leonard, C. Ragan and F. St-Hilaire (eds.), *A Canadian Priorities Agenda: Policy Choices to Improve Economic and Social Well-Being* (Montreal: Institute for Research on Public Policy, 2007), p. 208.

<sup>iv</sup> Canada, Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, “Housing Market Outlook, Canadian Edition,” released first quarter 2008, p. 9.

<sup>v</sup> Chinook Institute for Community Stewardship, “Alberta’s Amenities Rush: The Open Space Toolkit,” The Chinook Institute, Canmore Alberta, 2005, p.7.

<sup>vi</sup> Ronald Inglehart, *The Silent Revolution: Changing Values and Political Styles Among Western Publics*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977.

<sup>vii</sup> Harvey Locke, “Spiritual Dimension of Moving to the Mountains,” in Laurence A. G. Moss (ed), *The Amenity Migrants: Seeking and Sustaining Mountains and Their Cultures*, Cambridge, MA: CABI Pub., p. 32.

<sup>viii</sup> Lorna Stefanick, “Baby Stumpy and the War in the Woods,” *BC Studies* no. 130 (Summer 2001).

<sup>ix</sup> Moss, *Amenity Migrants*.

<sup>x</sup> Waldron, Dave and Jim Godfrey, Peter W. Williamson "Why Tourism and Mountains?" in Martin Price, *Mountains of the World: Tourism and Sustainable Mountain Development*, Berne Switzerland: Mountain Agenda, Centre for Development and Environment, 1999. Cited in Leads, <http://casestudies.lead.org/index.php?cscid=43>

<sup>xi</sup> LEAD, Learning through Case Studies, “Globalisation and Sustainability in The Whistler-Squamish Corridor: Recreation, Tourism and Sustainable Development,” December 2004, downloaded 04 May 2008 from <http://casestudies.lead.org/index.php?cscid=43>

<sup>xii</sup> LEAD, Globalisation, downloaded 04 May 2008 from <http://casestudies.lead.org/index.php?cscid=43>

<sup>xiii</sup> Canada, “Housing Market Outlook,” p. 9-10.

<sup>xiv</sup> Sharon Chisholm, *Affordable Housing in Canada’s Urban Communities: A literature review* (July 2003), Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, p. 3.

<sup>xv</sup> Neil Bradford, “Why Cities Matter: Research Perspectives for Canada,” Ottawa: *Canadian Policy Research Networks*, 2002 and Richard L. Florida, *Cities and the Creative Class*, New York Taylor & Francis Routledge, 2005.

<sup>xvi</sup> Tourism Whistler, “Modern History of Whistler,” downloaded 05 may 2008 from [http://www.tourismwhistler.com/www/about\\_whistler/history.asp](http://www.tourismwhistler.com/www/about_whistler/history.asp)

<sup>xvii</sup> Hal Clifford, *Downhill Slide: Why the Corporate Ski Industry is Bad for Skiing, Ski Towns, and the Environment*, San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 2003, p. 100.

<sup>xviii</sup> Canada, Statistics Canada, “2006 Community Profiles,” 2006 Census, released March 13, 2007,

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<http://www12.statcan.ca/english/census06/data/profiles/community/Index.cfm?Lang=E>

<sup>xix</sup> Canada, “2006 Community Profiles.”

<sup>xx</sup> Population statistics derived from BC, BC Stats, <http://www.bcstats.gov.bc.ca/data/pop/pop/estspop.asp> and Alberta, Municipal Affairs and Housing, <http://www.bcstats.gov.bc.ca/data/pop/pop/estspop.asp>, downloaded 09 May 2008.

<sup>xxi</sup> Canada, “2006 Community Profiles.”

<sup>xxii</sup> Whistler Housing Authority, Whistler housing needs assessment: 2004 report,” cited in Sean Moore et al “Finding a Pad in Paradise: Amenity Migration Effects on Whistler, BC,” in Laurence A. G. Moss (ed), *The Amenity Migrants: Seeking and Sustaining Mountains and Their Cultures*, Cambridge, MA: CABI Pub., p. 140.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Canada, “2006 Community Profiles.”

<sup>xxiv</sup> Canada, Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, *2006 Census Housing Series: Issue 1—Demographics and Housing Construction*, p. 5 downloaded 04 May 08 from [https://www03.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/b2c/b2c/init.do?language=en&z\\_category=0/0000000143](https://www03.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/b2c/b2c/init.do?language=en&z_category=0/0000000143)

<sup>xxv</sup> Royal LePage, “Winter Recreational Property Prices Remain Red Hot During Canada’s Coldest Months: Canadians are committed to their winter retreats despite rising prices,” 31 January 2008, downloaded 05 May 2008 from <http://www.royallepage.ca/CMSTemplates/AboutUs/Company/CompanyTemplate.aspx?id=1718>.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Canada, “2006 Community Profiles.”

<sup>xxvii</sup> The Canadian Real Estate Association, Property and Open House Search, downloaded 05 May 2008 from [www.mls.ca](http://www.mls.ca).

<sup>xxviii</sup> BC, BC Assessment Authority, "Sales Price Data, Golden," Victoria BC, 2008.

<sup>xxix</sup> The Canadian Real Estate Association, Property and Open House Search, downloaded 05 May 2008 from [www.mls.ca](http://www.mls.ca).

<sup>xxx</sup> David Rooney, “Eviction forces city planner to leave town,” in *Revelstoke Times Review*, 15 April 2008, downloaded 04 May 2008 from [http://www.bclocalnews.com/kootenay\\_rockies/revelstoketimesreview/news/17673339.html](http://www.bclocalnews.com/kootenay_rockies/revelstoketimesreview/news/17673339.html)

<sup>xxxi</sup> InterVISTAS Consulting Inc., “Whistler Housing Authority Employer Housing Needs Assessment 2007,” prepared August 2007, page 8. downloaded 04 May 2008 from <http://www.whistlerhousing.ca/?NmID=46>.

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<sup>xxxiii</sup> City Spaces, “Scoping Report: Affordable and Attainable Housing,” prepared for the City of Fernie, 07 June 2008, p. 2.

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- <sup>li</sup> Clifford, *Downhill Slide*, p. 225
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