

Vail's award-winning environmental strategic plan...

Searching for a quality environment

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Vail, Colorado is an internationally renowned year-round resort and second home to the wealthy; yet underneath its idyllic appearance, the Town of Vail has encountered the same environmental issues and concerns as other rapidly growing towns.

About Vail, Colorado:

Vail sits in the White River National Forest in a narrow valley surrounded by the breathtaking Gore Mountain Range. Its natural beauty and terrain stimulated the development of the Vail Ski Area which has attracted millions of visitors from around the world and has hosted world-class ski events. The popularity of the ski area encouraged developers and guests to realize that Vail additionally had much to offer during the non-winter months. Today, Vail is a year-round resort offering golf, hiking, fishing, and biking as well as music and dance festivals, a lecture series, an alpine garden, and fine restaurants and shops. At any time of the year, it is not uncommon to hear several different languages while walking in town.

Yet, despite significant pressures of growth that came with Vails' success, it has since 1992, been able to implement an environmental strategic plan that balances economic development and environmental quality.

The environmental impact of fast growth and the economic good fortune is evident everywhere... Vail, located along a major interstate highway, has in the past 35 years progressed from being an Alpine-like sheep pasture to a nearly completely developed town of 4,900 permanent residents which swells to 30,000 during its peak visitor season. With rapid growth came:

- Loss of wildlife habitat...
- Increased water runoff with a negative impact on water quality...
- Air pollution...
- The solid waste management problems that come with 24,000 visitors and 4,900 residents.

In addition, there were ever present traffic jams during the season and even sparkling Gore Creek which runs through the town had become less accessible to people and animals alike.

Early community concern... As Vail grew and land values dramatically escalated, some of its citizens became advocates for the environment, encouraging the town to bring order to development and to preserve its views, open space, and areas which had not been developed.

There is now a free bus system, a walking and bicycle path next to most of the creek, a traffic round-about, and protected view corridors.

Managing the environment... Work on the earlier concerns had demonstrated that community effort could improve the community. The next step was to hire Russell Forrest, in August 1992 to develop and implement an environmental plan and to make Vail a leader in environmental management.

Creating a community of concern and action

To gain broad support for environmental planning and action, Forrest formed a planning group of concerned citizens who ultimately decided to involve the entire community in protecting the environment by sponsoring a participative strategic planning event — a *search conference* — for managing and improving Vail's environment.

The *search conference*, it was thought, would help people with different views, hopes, and dreams for their town to discover whether they could create common ground around their environmental future and if they could create a plan to achieve their shared goals.

Why change? The rationale for any action as well as for bringing the community together is well illustrated by a comment of long-time resident and former Vail council member and mayor pro-tem, Dr. Tom Steinberg: “We needed to do this (sponsor the *search conference*) to save our *Golden Goose*, our environment.”

Preplanning and prework for the community planning event — The planning group of eleven people met from May through September 1993 to:

- Clarify the exact purpose of the conference and select a name, or theme for the conference...
- To identify a process to invite the people needed to both provide a complete picture of Vail's situation and make the conference inclusive...
- To extend invitations...
- To help with logistics...
- To identify and generate necessary background materials...
- To assist the consultant with framing conference activities...
- To support the entire effort.

An extraordinary journey... After considering many creative themes, the planning group selected *Vail's Environmental Odyssey: The Next Generation* as an appropriate and intriguing name for the conference.

The name served notice that both Vail and the *search conference* were not to be confused with the ordinary!

The purpose of the search was encapsulated in the following bullet points which stated that the search would help the participants:

- Develop a long-term vision for environmental protection and development...
- Identify important environmental issues that need to be addressed...
- Develop objectives for addressing those issues.

Expected results — One major output of the search would be a proposed environmental plan based on the shared vision and objectives (the plan would need official approval of the *Town Council*. The other major output would be voluntary, non-governmental activities which would be implemented by the search participants.)

Inviting and selecting participants for the search conference... The planning group generated a logical list of participants, and extended, via the media, an open invitation to anyone interested in and connected to Vail's environmental future.

Pre-conference data collection... The planning group also developed the following papers as a means to provide all participants with an understanding of important trends, planning documents, and concepts related to planning:

- An environmental trend analysis which identified numerous public opinion, regulatory, legislative, demographic and economic trends which might affect Vail in the future...
- A paper on the concepts of sustainable development discussed the strong connection in Vail between protecting natural resources and the tourist based economy...
- A paper on *What is strategic planning?* This was an overview of the components of strategic planning, including identifying internal and external trends, setting priorities, implementing, and evaluating the plan...
- A paper titled: *White River National Forest: Ecosystem Management* — a discussion of US Forest Service policy on ecosystem management (based on the principle that sustainable ecosystems are the foundation for sustainable multiple-use management)...
- *The Eagle County Master Plan* — a description of the current plan for new development and protection of the natural character of Eagle County (the county in which the Town of Vail is located).

The search

In October 1993, after the 5 months of planning and preparation, the one-and-a-half day *search conference* took place in a ski area cafeteria under the gondola. To accommodate the schedules of the 53 busy people in this resort community, the search took place between the end of the fall leaf season and the beginning of hunting season. Together the people attending the search reflected the diversity of opinions and agendas in Vail.*

The search conference begins — The *search conference* began with a shared lunch during which the environment (energy, openness, and sharing) for the event was set.

* Participants included:
Teachers...
Students...
Local government officials...
Other local governmental entities...
A hospital administrator...
Realtors and developers...
Ski area officials...
Merchants...
Environmentalists...
Community activists...
Athletes...
The media.

The agenda... In consultation with Merrelyn Emery, co-inventor of the *search conference*, the following agenda was set to accommodate the necessary reduction of time from the customary two-and-a-half days to only one-and-a-half days:

- Scan of the global situation...
- Agreement of probable and desirable futures...
- Talking through the history of Vail...
- Trends and impacts on Vail's environment...
- Agreement on Vail's desirable environmental future...
- Action planning.

The shortened time-frame and the lack of sound control in the cafeteria lent this search a frenetic pace and feeling. People were serious about their work and managed to communicate over the din of many small groups talking in the same room. The perfect Fall weather did allow some small groups to work outside to get a break from the noise.

Participants were very determined to find common ground as a basis for action... There was an interesting debate about the carrying capacity of the land and if the population would ever reach the limit that the area could support. Their most significant stumbling block was the apparent conflict of preserving and enhancing both the environment and the economy. Participants resolved this conflict by agreeing that the environment had to be preserved to support a robust economy that was in large part dependent upon a healthy environment to draw tourists to the area.

After struggling to find common ground, the *search community* identified the following eight elements of a desirable environmental future and worked in self-selected groups to develop an action plan for each element:

- Open space...
- Sense of community — identity and diversity...
- Maintenance of a healthy ecosystem...
- Environmental efficiency...
- Desirable transportation...
- Environmental leadership — an international model...
- Philosophy of developmental...
- Environmentally sound/sensitive economics.

During the final push and excitement of completing the search, each group shared its plans with the entire community with relief as well as excitement. Non-governmental action plans included:

- Strong public education and involvement...
- A house tour of energy efficient homes...
- Extending the recycling program...
- Gathering data...
- Obtaining more open space.

Next steps — Before adjourning, the tired, relieved yet still enthusiastic participants discussed how to share their work with the entire town and to convey their support of the environmental strategic plan to the Town Council.

Their next steps included convening a public meeting to share their plans, authorizing the town's community development staff to modify the plan based on input from the public meeting, and attending the Town Council meeting to support the presentation of the recommendations from the search.

A good summary of the participants' view of the search is provided by Alan Best, a member of the planning group, as well as the Eagle Valley Environmental Coalition. Best says of the search, "I was surprised that this group of disparate individuals reached any agreement on our core environmental issues. Although there were not enough *average Joe's* at the search, the group was a broad spectrum of the community — everyone from realtors selling luxury homes to those waiting tables in town — and we did agree on the important issues."

Adopting the vision and plan

Following more citizen input from the public meeting, a group of involved people took all of the statements of the desirable elements for the future, combined and reworded them into the following overarching vision statement which is the cornerstone for the plan:

"The Town of Vail will be a leader in natural resource stewardship and will strive as a community to attain environmental and economic sustainability."

The goals selected to support the vision include:

- Sustainable land use regulation and economic development.

The goal is to ensure that new development is consistent with the carrying capacity of the area's natural environmental and man-made resources, and to provide information to encourage community support for environmental quality.

- Ecosystem protection to safeguard the natural resources (air, water, soils, natural habitat).

This gave recognition to the concept that these resources are interconnected and interdependent.

- Environmental efficiency to improve management of water, energy, and waste in businesses, residences and government.
- Proactive environmental management that will identify Vail as an environmental leader.

The entire strategic plan stresses proactive environmental stewardship and management as being essential to maintain the environmental assets of the area and ensure the future economic success of Vail. On November 5, 1994, one year after the *search conference*, the Town Council formally adopted the *Environmental Strategic Plan* with the support of all of the community's major sectors. In short, they agreed that Vail's environmental strategic plan provided credibility, legitimacy, and direction for achieving its goals.

Working toward the goals — Since the plan was adopted, the Town of Vail has been quite active in working toward its goals.

Sustainable land use regulation and economic development... The town now has a regulation that requires approval from a design review board before live vegetation can be removed. The regulation is designed to improve protection of riparian and wetland vegetation as well as to protect mature trees during construction.

The town's planning staff assists developers in identifying and reducing environmental impacts associated with development projects, often acting as a liaison between the Army Corps of Engineers, US Forest Service, and Federal Emergency Management Agency on development projects.

Ecosystem protection... To reduce air pollution caused by particulates, the town has encouraged, through education and incentives, the conversion of 500 of the 2000 dirty burning fireplaces to clean burning alternatives.

The town has further reduced airborne particulates by using volcanic cinders instead of sand for road application during winter storms.

To address water quality issues, the town adopted the *Non-Point Source Water Quality Plan* and the *Eagle River Plan* to:

- Monitor water quality...
- Detect land uses that significantly contribute to pollution...
- Identify specific action to reduce pollution, such as erosion control guidelines...
- Provide educational program for landscapers and homeowners to reduce water quality impacts from lawn-care chemical application.

To further address water quality, quantity, and aquatic life, a partnership between Vail Associates, the Town of Vail, Water and Sanitation Districts, and the US Geological Survey has been formed.

Open land use policies... The Town of Vail adopted a *Comprehensive Open Lands Plan** which will enable the town to acquire or protect remaining key open space parcels that are valuable and/or sensitive natural resources for outdoor recreation, extending or connecting trails, and creating areas for other public needs. The highest priority for open space acquisition/protection are environmentally sensitive areas. In the past year, Vail has purchased 120 acres of open space land and currently has a total of 1,100 acres of open space. This is approximately 33% of the total land area of the town. Much of the open space is sensitive natural habitat, wetlands, and stream tract areas.

Vail is acquiring US Forest Service lands within its boundaries. Historically, these properties have been at risk of being exchanged to private developers but the exchange now allows the town to control growth around its boundaries. Vail is also moving forward with creating an interconnected trails system which will be built with substantial volunteer labor.

Sustaining a proactive stance toward the environment... To promote environmentally sound practices and to encourage innovative environmental initiatives, Vail established the *Mauri Nottingham Vail Environmental Quality Award* (to honor Mauri Nottingham, a long-time friend of the environment in Vail and a participant in the *search conference*). Last year's awards went to a

* The *Comprehensive Open Lands Plan* has received awards from the American Society of Landscape Architecture, the Colorado American Planning Association, and the Colorado American Society of Landscape Architecture.



Rita Schweitz has an extensive history in managing and facilitating small and large groups and critical mass events. Schweitz manages search conferences to produce strategic plans and continuing participative planning groups in both the public and private sectors. Schweitz also brings participative design to organizations seeking to redesign their work to be self-managing. Schweitz is the senior partner in ChangeWorks of the Rockies, a participative planning, design and learning consulting firm operating out of Denver, Colorado.

Russell Forrest is the senior environmental planner for The Town of Vail, Colorado.

hotel for its fireplace conversion program, to a family for placing land in the Eagle Valley Land Trust, and to the students of the local high school for the creation of a *bio-building*. Awards include an annual ski pass, tennis pass, gas grill, and gifts and certificates from local merchants.

Additionally, the town is a participant in the Eagle River Environmental Business Alliance — the organization established to help monitor the clean-up of a *Superfund* site, south of Vail. Since the clean-up has begun, water quality has improved significantly and thriving trout are now found downstream of the mine. Since the Vail water system uses water from the Eagle River, it will continue to be active in monitoring.

Environmental efficiency... Vail, in conjunction with other local governments and relevant businesses has initiated a planning effort to develop a solid waste management plan to identify actions that will most cost-effectively reduce waste.

Environmental management and compliance... Vail is in the process of applying for ISO 14001 environmental certification (an international standard which documents an organization's environmental management and protection processes.)

Volunteer activities — The search conference was a catalyst for many volunteer activities:

- Vail Associates has hired a full-time recycling coordinator to promote and oversee the recycling effort at the ski area...
- Colorado Mountain College now provides a course on *Environmental Science and Policies*...
- There is a World Wide Web Home Page on environmental activities in Vail...
- A local radio station presents an environmentally-friendly *tip of the day*.

Partnering for progress... Many organizations and agencies formed the *Partnership for Environmental Education and Programs* to coordinate environmentally related programs. The US Forest Service, Town of Vail, Trees for Vail, Betty Ford Alpine Gardens, Vail Associates, Vail Recreation District and others realized that their individual environmental education efforts and programs could be enhanced by coordinating their activities and by making them available to residents, teachers, and guests.

Jeff Bowen, a professor of business and president of *The Partnership for Environmental Education and Programs*, is enthusiastic about the partnership and its work to date. Bowen says, "The search conference was extraordinary because it brought together the people who should work together. It showed that groups which historically fought with each other could work together hand-in-glove. About 30 people meet monthly to work for their common goal of promoting environmental education and programs. We have received grants and in-kind services and are delighted with our accomplishments."

The partnership, which was first brought together in July 1995, has conducted a teacher-in-service program to inform the educational system of resources available and is currently working on the following:

- A speaker series on the economics of being green...
- Establishing *EarthFest*, a weekend celebration of environmental and educational activities including planting of trees, demonstrations, lectures, hands-on activities for all ages...
- An environmental summer camp to provide a camp experience on natural resources for middle-school children...
- A program to involve science classes in environmental projects...
- A list of educational and hands-on events for guests and residents.

Results and recognition

In 1996, Vail received national recognition from *Renew America* (a national award committee under the leadership of Vice President Al Gore) for implementing an outstanding environmental program and its program and accomplishments were entered into an international database of environmental success stories. Through the effort of its leaders and citizens, the town is definitely being recognized as a leader in natural resource stewardship while striving to attain environmental and economic sustainability. ♦

Editor's note: The Town of Vail is continuing its groundbreaking work in collaborative planning. On March 17, 1995, the Vail Town Council and Vail Associates' management jointly presented a draft plan, *Strategies for the Future*, of an agreement to establish common priorities and identify issues that will contribute to the future, managed success of the community.