Northwest Dharma News

Off the Grid at Sea to Sky Retreat Centre Whistler, British Columbia

Located on a pristine lake bordering British Columbia's Garibaldi Provincial Park, Sea to Sky Retreat Centre (SSRC) is surrounded by wilderness. Off the grid, without municipal water and sewer, distant from supplies and accessible only by 2.5 km of private road, the SSRC property was acquired by Siddhartha's Intent Canada in the early 90's after a previous owner surrendered to the challenges of developing a vacation resort on such a remote site.

Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche, founder and director of Siddhartha's Intent, made living in harmony with its surroundings SSRC's first priority from the outset, by setting a conscious goal of not over-building. From this inspiration came a Master Building Plan and eventually a "Sustainability Plan".

A critical limiting resource is water, supplied from a creek and nearby springs, which is used directly for human needs as well as for micro-hydro power generation and for fire preparedness. With a seasonally fluctuating water supply, the need for mindful consumption of water and electricity is reinforced by directly experiencing, in the words of the Sustainability Plan, "the reality that resources are limited".



Sea to Sky Retreat Centre's Main Lodge, nestled in the trees by Daisy Lake, BC.



Living in harmony at SSRC means recognizing the welfare of non-human members of the community. No food waste is composted on site (it's transported elsewhere in biodegradable bags) and great care is taken with all supplies and disposables to avoid attracting and then habituating "problem" bears. This yearling retains her shyness.

Ron Stewart, SSRC Facilities Coordinator and principal author of the Sustainability Plan, responds to questions about Sea to Sky Retreat Centre's practices and philosophy:

To what extent did the sustainability decisions made for SSRC arise from the requirements of its remote location vs. a general attitude toward environmental stewardship?

The pragmatics of SSRC's situation and a sense of environmental stewardship arose together. Since we have no telephone lines, no connections to the power grid, no water main to connect to, and no septic hookups, we have to work with the elements. Working with the elements leads to a respect for the elements. As further reinforcement, SSRC is in an incredibly beautiful location with magnificent firs and cedars that are hundreds of years old. Our surroundings encourage us to be environmentally aware.

The Plan refers to "adapting" to fluctuations in water and electricity resources. Can you give some examples of adaptation?

We balance our water resource between the domestic water supply, fire-fighting reserve, and power generation in that order of priority. Sometimes we need to reduce the amount of water flowing into our micro-hydro generators. In that situation, we may ask our cook to use a pressure cooker on our propane stove rather than an electric rice-cooker, or we may postpone projects in our workshop that use electric power tools.

Even with full power, we are mindful daily of the loads on our power system. Load alarms are installed in our kitchen, laundry room, and workshop so that we know immediately if an appliance is adding too much to the cumulative load. Rather than turn on the diesel generator, SSRC staff normally just re-schedule a planned activity. By the practice of mindfulness, by communication, and by scheduling usage of heavy duty appliances, we can usually work within the power available from micro-hydro.

For electricity, you're aiming to rely solely on hydro, with diesel for backup only, in the not too distant future. What percent of diesel vs. hydro do you use now?

This year we have mainly achieved that goal. I would estimate that over 90% of 2009 power needs were provided by micro-hydro.

How have visitors responded to the adaptation requirements?

Visitors to SSRC come to work on their minds and bodies. Respect of the environment is fully compatible with such practice. I can never remember a single instance in which our visitors were unwilling to make small efforts to make sustainability work.

In our experience, people are quite willing to make personal effort to benefit the environment whenever there is an opportunity.

It's 33 km (20 miles) to the town of Squamish, your nearest source of supplies. How often do you have to go into town?

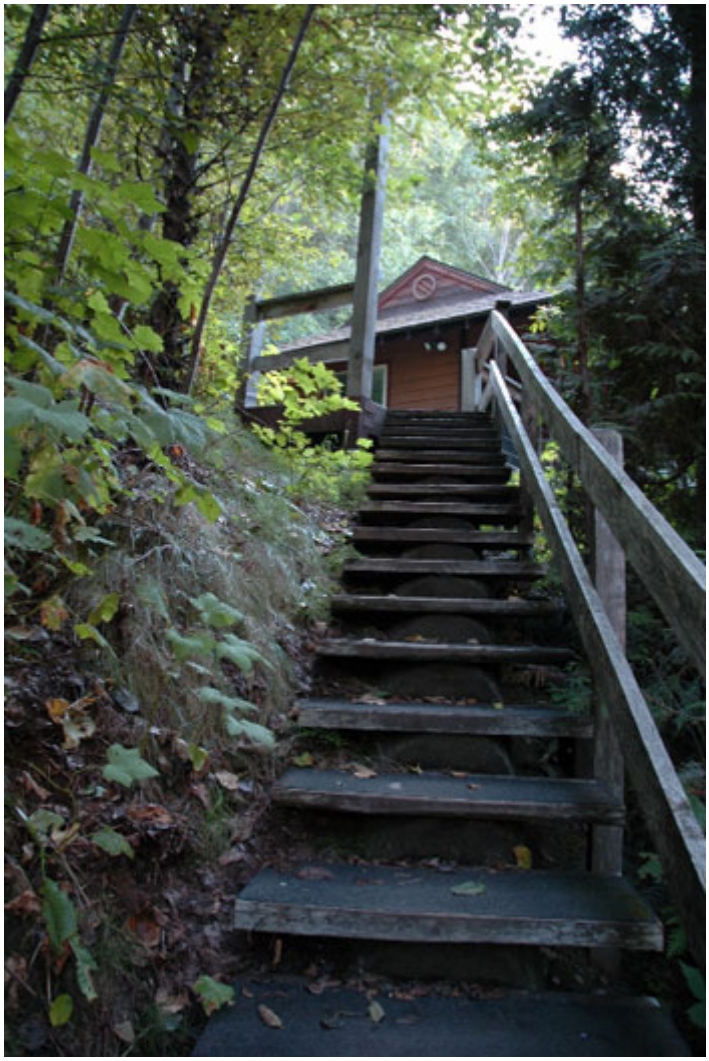
During our regular season (March-December) we plan one town trip per week. During the winter closure time, town trips are once every two weeks. To reduce the number of town trips was an objective of our Sustainability Plan that we have now mainly achieved. The solution was simple: planning! Now a great deal of effort goes into the preparation for each town trip so that we meet multiple needs. The garbage, recycling, and compost go out. In addition to shopping for groceries, maintenance and repair items, and sundries, the banking is accomplished, water samples are dropped off for testing according to provincial requirements, and any other errands are run.

Is there public transportation for guests traveling to SSRC?

Yes. Greyhound runs about every 2 hours from Vancouver to a stop nearby SSRC.



The Olympic torch passed the SSRC access road on its way to nearby Whistler Mountain and the 2010 Winter Games.



With sustainability in mind, the 40-acre site can support about 30 people, enough for 5 staff members and 20-25 guests, in 12 permanent structures. Above is one of the retreat buildings.

SSRC usually shuts down for 3 months in winter, according to the Plan. Did you alter that schedule this year for the Winter Olympics?

Yes. We were open from Feb 14 to 28.

Any comments on the games?

Yeah!!!!!!!

Finally, any advice for other retreat centres wishing to become more environmentally sustainable?

There is no kit that can be purchased and assembled to create a sustainable life. The land itself needs to be listened to so that one knows the appropriate technology to apply and the scale of that application. While "green" technology is necessary, it is only a small portion of the answer. Sustainability is much more about people than technology. When people are willing to move away from instant convenience and towards mindful living, sustainability will happen.

Then work towards comfort. Know that it is possible to be both sustainable and comfortable. We can feel free to celebrate life on this wondrous earth.

In its conclusion, your Sustainability Plan states that its purpose "is not to present an ideology of environmentalism". Could you explain?

We live in the world as it is. In the pristine wilderness, there is also a charnel ground. The cougar lives by killing the gentle deer. The osprey feeds its chicks with the fish in its talons. As Buddhists we practice nonviolence, but we are not on a mission to reform the cougar and the osprey.

While it is good to minimize the environmental impact of human life, it is best to avoid polluting the mind. Ideology in any guise causes us to lose our sanity and natural decency.

For more information on Siddhartha's Intent and Sea to Sky Retreat Centre, please visit: http://www.siddharthasintent.org/. To read the complete SSRC Sustainability Plan, see: http://www.siddharthasintent.org/centres/retreat-centres/ssrc/sustainability.html

Contributor: Ron Stewart. *Photos: Courtesy Sea to Sky Retreat Centre and Ron Stewart.*