



IS CASTLE MOUNTAIN REALLY "TOO BIG ALREADY"?



IN THIS ISSUE OF *SKI CANADA* I INTENDED TO SHOWCASE THE SORELY NEEDED ADDITION

of new intermediate terrain to Castle Mountain. In its stead is this column, which details the legal manoeuvres through which a handful of radical environmentalists have used the courts to delay and possibly destroy this well-planned, carefully monitored and sensibly sized project.

Alert readers will recall my fanatical devotion to this cult stash in the Crowsnest region of southwest Alberta, a burly giant with muscular vertical and a vast sweep of lightly skied freeride terrain. Six years ago Castle put a lift onto its main peak, opening up some of Canada's longest, toughest fall lines plus never-before-skied backcountry routes. However, everyone at Castle knew such intimidating terrain would banish Castle from the mainstream. Seasonal skier-visits have, indeed, hovered around 45,000-65,000. That's less than half the traffic needed to operate a sustainable resort—not to mention a 10th of the number that hit Sunshine Village each season and, in fact, no more than a big weekend at Whistler-Blackcomb.

Enter Mount Haig, a neighbouring peak offering benign, treed and sheltered lower slopes. Castle's owners, a diverse group of local business people and devoted skiers, aimed to place a lift here as soon as the money was available and they'd completed the environmental upgrades required by the local and provincial governments. Among other things, they installed a modern sewage system to handle the needs of not only day-skiers, the budding cluster of vacation cabins and the new 110-bed Castle Mountain Ski Lodge, which opened last season, but the anticipated traffic created by Mount Haig as well.

Last season was a strong one at Castle, so the owners decided to go for Haig. They planned a fixed-grip quad chairlift to climb from the village about 330 vertical metres to treeline beneath the upper mountain's imposing cliff walls. This would open 27 hectares of new skiing terrain, all of it groomable runs cut through the forest and pitched at genuine novice to intermediate gradients. "Right now, a carload of people all have to be advanced to expert skiers to have fun at Castle," says Andrew Rusynyk, Castle's director of snowsports, marketing and development. "Haig would ensure that in a typical, mixed carload everyone could find ample terrain that's right for them."

The broadened clientele would anchor some modest additional base area development over the next several years, including 21 four-unit vacation homes bolstering Castle's tiny rental pool, a further dozen single-family houses and a 50-room hotel. In short, a viable resort—but on a boutique scale, for even at build-out Castle would have a fraction of the traffic of Fernie,

Photos: MARTIN LORTZ



western view

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Photo: GENE DWARKIN



Photos: MARTIN LORTZ



let alone Banff or Whistler. At \$2.5 million, the current Haig plan is a mere shadow of the lavish development proposed and rejected about a decade ago. It seems eminently reasonable, one that all parties could live with.

But not reasonable or livable enough for the greenies. Always crafty about exploiting legal loopholes where the mere democratic process fails them, members of the grandiosely named Castle Crown Wilderness Coalition two years ago sought a "judicial review" of the project. The court agreed to hear the matter, examinations for discovery began last summer and the matter went to trial in late autumn.

Alberta's environment department had decided Haig would not require the Byzantine rigours and vast expense of an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA). For one thing, the proposed expansion fell almost entirely within Castle's Licence of Occupation. For another, Haig was well below the thresholds of the earlier, vast scheme, which envisioned numerous lifts and an 18-hole golf course. It had been subjected to a massive EIA plus public hearings and a lengthy regulatory report. Why go through the same costly exercise twice?

The environment department, backed by its minister, decided Haig could be governed by the normal permitting process. "There's been multiple levels of approvals and permits sought and granted," says Rusnyk. "Everything from municipal development permits to provincial permits dealing with forests and the environment, and even a federal permit dealing with the fisheries aspects of the West Castle River. We had absolutely everything we needed." Contractors had been booked and Castle was ready to break ground last summer.

In court, meanwhile, the Coalition was demanding an EIA, arguing that Alberta Environment was relying on deficient information and had not followed its own internal standards to arrive at its decision. In early July, a justice of the Alberta Court of Queen's Bench largely agreed. Her 19-page ruling held that the department's reasoning in avoiding an EIA was unsatisfactory and that a senior bureaucrat's decision to green-light the project was "patently unreasonable." She demanded Alberta Environment rewrite its decision concerning Haig using more complete information and more exacting standards.

This doesn't spell certain death for Haig. On the bright side, the justice did not demand an EIA, which would have set back Haig by five years. And any ski area operator needs to be an optimist by nature—just look at the havoc wreaked by the weather alone. As well, all of Castle's permits remain current. Still, there's a sinking feeling at Castle that this could be Round 1 of years of punishing, energy-sapping and ultimately fruitless legal conflict. Much of Castle's investment in infrastructure was predicated on Haig going ahead; without it, it's largely a waste. Although the Alberta government will appeal the ruling, the length of this process guarantees Haig can't happen until next year at best.

"It's sad such a tiny number of people can block a project that's immensely popular with the local population," sighs Rusnyk. It's not just the skiing, he points out. Castle means jobs for local young people. And it's the place where dozens of families have spent the best times of their lives. Though the Coalition claims to have 300 members, Rusnyk points out only a bare handful live in the region. Yet they presume to destroy something enjoyed by thousands.

And let there be no mistake about the real agenda of the radical greens: they're not for reasonable development, or carefully controlled development, or modest development. They don't want to ensure Haig is done with the minimum possible environmental disturbance. They simply want no development of any kind, anywhere. Indeed, some of them want existing ski areas dismantled. Ten years ago, during the previous expansion controversy, the greens demanded the entire Castle region be turned into a wilderness that would bar virtually all human activity—right down to picking blueberries. In the words of Jeffrey Emmett, the Coalition's executive director: "We are opposed to any development at the ski hill. We feel it's too big already." ❧