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ABSTRACT

Lifestyle migration occurs in many forms and this research explores the experience of daily life for a group of lifestyle migrants in Whistler BC Canada who also make a critical labour cohort. Unlike transient tourism workers this group is intent on long term residence in the area but encounters numerous structural challenges. This qualitative research highlights the motivations and challenges of this group with implications for the social sustainability of the Whistler resort community.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to explore the experience of daily life of a particular type of lifestyle migrant that supports the winter tourism industry in Whistler British Columbia. The resort destination of Whistler BC Canada, is ranked as one of the top winter destinations in the world. It relies on a steady stream of young and often migrant workers to maintain operations, for example Whistler-Blackcomb Mountain alone employs approximately 3,459 people alone (2018 Top Places to Work). Many staff are seasonally transient but others come to Whistler expecting to make the resort community their new long term home – it is this latter group who are between 1 and 7 years of their negotiation with life in Whistler that is the focus on this study. The reality is that many young people intent on residence in Whistler do not manage to negotiate their structural environment satisfactorily enough to stay and leave relatively early in their mobility experiment hence the self-ascribed term the two-year tourist.

The idea that lifestyle migrants make a decision to move to an area, experience and negotiate with it and decide to leave disenchanted is not new (Benson, 2013). What is different with this research is that unlike the situation for retirees, part-time and many fulltime migrants where if they leave there is minimal impact to the destination this group consists of a labour cohort that is central to the functioning of a world class winter tourism destination.

LITERATURE

The Whistler lifestyle migrant represents a small subset of lifestyle migrants. Lifestyle migrants are defined as “relatively affluent individuals moving part-time or full-time permanently or temporarily to places which signify for the migrants something defined as quality of life” (Benson and O’Reilly, 2009 p.610). The terms affluent or relatively affluent are often used to describe lifestyle migrants (Benson & Osbaldiston, 2014) but less applicable to this Whistler migrant who is often sharing a three-bedroom condo with eight other roommates.

Pavelka (2008) developed a typology of lifestyle migrants to Alberta’s Banff – Canmore resort corridor. It includes fulltime migrants seeking a mountain lifestyle and require local employment who work through structural challenges, compromise many traditional goals such as career and home ownership and stay; others attempt the same but decide to leave; others work through and have established long-term stable residence and raise families adding to the community; there are others who often work in hospitality and not especially interested in a mountain lifestyle and have little internal conflict about a resort lifestyle; and other migrants full or part time who do not rely on local employment, generally arrive with more resources and struggle less with the structural environment to live in the area

The Whistler migrant straddles several of Pavelka's (2008) types in that they are full time residents' intent on long term residence; they require local employment to live and therefore negotiate with Whistlers' structural environment; and they generally seek a mountain lifestyle. A common trait of all those who rely on local employment is the constant tension between leisure goals and negotiation of the destinations' structural landscape which includes employment, housing, cost of living and such that determined if they would remain or not (Pavelka & Draper, 2015)

METHODS

Utilizing a snowball sampling method fifteen semi-structured interviews were undertaken with lifestyle residents of Whistler BC during the winter of 2018. The individuals ranged in age from 19 to 34 years and their tenure at Whistler ranged from 1.5 to 7 years. Eight were women, seven men and eight were internationals from UK and Commonwealth nations and seven Canadians. Interviews focused on four question themes including motivation to reside, negotiation of daily life in Whistler, difference between those who stay and leave, and threats to their Whistler lifestyle. Interviews averaged 67 minutes. Data were analyzed using an inductive approach first abstracting major themes then two more reviews until detailed statements are distilled for each major theme similar to that used by Pavelka & Draper (2015).

RESULTS

Four major themes emerged from the analysis. The first, is the breadth and depth of natural amenities and the lure of a 'Whistler lifestyle' that they have either previously experienced as a visitor or learned by word-of-mouth or on social media was their motivation to reside even though they know they can live cheaper and easier at other mountain communities. Second, all participants reported a constant struggle with Whistler's structural environment including housing, cost of living, stagnant wages, lack of professional development and high competition for stable jobs. Structural challenges are why leaving is a constant concern versus access to their own recreation which they deem to be very satisfying.

The third is that the primary difference between those who stay and leave (as reported by a sample of people still residing in Whistler) are that those who stay either negotiate their way to a reasonable life and limit life goals to Whistlers' offerings while those who leave do so because they cannot manage the lifestyle or aspire to goals not possible within Whistlers' domain. Lastly, the greatest threat to the Whistler way of life for this group was reported to be the introduction of the Vail Resorts culture onto Whistler following the Vail Resorts' 2016 major stake purchase in Whistler. Vail culture was reported to be skewed toward high value guests while dismissive of employees' lifestyle opportunities. That Vails' first capital investment was a new lift chair versus staff housing despite the dire housing situation was unanimously viewed as a prioritization of near term yield over long term social sustainability.

CONCLUSION

Benson (2014) states that many lifestyle migrants experience loneliness and isolation at their new destination that often drives them to leave but that is not the case for this Whistler lifestyle migrant. The latter clearly struggles with structural factors that dominate their decision to stay or leave in keeping with the experience of similar Banff – Canmore lifestyle migrants (Pavelka & Draper, 2015). Unique to the Whistler situation is the injection of the Vail Resorts culture that, though in early stages of evolution may ultimately impact the condition and course of this lifestyle labour cohort in the area.

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