

## The Columbia Valley Golf Trail: Collaboration of Regional Recreational Assets



(Columbia Valley Golf Trail, 2009)

Not every region will have panoramic views or world renowned powder skiing. Recreational amenities such as this are limited and unique. Other recreation amenities, such as golf, are a little more ubiquitous, making it harder for regions to set themselves apart. However, these amenities should not be understated given their contribution to not only tourism, but to quality of life for residents. As one community member observed *“if there wasn’t a golf course and a curling rink I wouldn’t live here”*.

Within the Regional District of East Kootenay, the Columbia Valley exists as one of several self-identified sub-regions. Stretching North-South along the Columbia River and Highway 93/95 the Columbia Valley extends roughly from Spillimacheen to Canal Flats encompassing two Electoral Districts as well as the municipalities of Invermere, Radium, and Canal Flats, although the boundary is flexible depending on who you speak with. As with the Kootenay region on the whole, the Columbia Valley has an extensive list of recreational amenities both natural and man-made, including several golf courses. The origin of the Columbia Valley Golf Trail stems from an observation made by many including one interviewee, *“Nobody comes to play one course. They come to play a number of them”*.

In 2004 nine Columbia Valley golf courses (with six different owners) came together. Pre-existing knowledge had shown an informal “golf circuit” was already in existence in the area, where tourists came and played on multiple courses throughout the duration of their stay. When the courses came together it was under the premise that there was potential for them to work together, marketing the Columbia Valley as a whole, instead of competing with one another. It took between 1 – 2 years to achieve buy-in from all the owners, a challenge that involved selling the benefits of the idea. What began as an ad hoc marketing campaign has since evolved. Each course initially contributed a set amount to a joint marketing campaign. One member of the six member board of course directors was completing his MBA at the time and was able to use the golf trail as a final project. He created a three year plan, as well as the golf passport. The passport centres on each of the courses donating 450 rounds of golf. These rounds are packaged together and for \$299 there are 450 passports for sale, allowing each customer one round (Sunday to Thursday) at each of the nine courses. All profits from the passport sales go to the marketing of the golf trail, benefiting each course.

This evolutionary process has been arguably successful, although the recession hit all the businesses hard. Monthly reports are generated for the courses as an attempt to track results. While there is no hard data at the moment able to evaluate the outcomes to date, there results seem positive, and have not resulted in losses.

The initial set up did not include public consultation, but in partnership with Tourism British Columbia (a provincial level organization) a customer survey was completed pre-passport development to determine what people were looking for. While the courses are used locally, the area does not have the population base to support this number of facilities on its own. The target audience was identified as being primarily Albertans. As a result of tourism and second home owners, this region can support world class golf courses, with a diversity of size, skills, and cost, something which may otherwise not be available. Geography and distance play a key role in the target audience, in terms of how to get people to this relatively isolated area, with Calgary supplying the closest metropolitan market. However, once you are there the courses are in relatively close proximity, allowing for a varied experience. Local deals also exist to encourage locals to use the courses.

The six owners form the basis of the collaboration. While no other organizations have a seat on the board, there have been partnerships with Kootenay Rockies Tourism, the Invermere Panorama Destination Marketing Organization, and some involvement with the Radium Chamber of Commerce. The group has also taken advantage of social media (e.g., their Facebook can be found at <https://www.facebook.com/cvgolftrail>), as well as participating in loyalty programs (e.g., golf trail gift certificates may be purchased through the exchange of Air Miles: <https://www.airmiles.ca/arrow/ProductTicketingDetails?productId=prod1714396>).

As far as linking to other areas of regional development the strongest link is economic. While difficult to track, the golf trail provides spin offs within the local economy. As the golf trail develops they have included links on their websites to local accommodations and restaurants, and plan to also link to other activities in the region (Columbia Valley Golf Trail, 2009). In addition to promoting the courses, the region is sold as a destination with many amenities to offer, leading to development of package deals.

Environmentally, financial resources pose a challenge, as economic downturn leaves less room for initiatives outside core business. However, sustainability initiatives such as working with the Audubon society for certify courses to a certain environmental standard (Audubon International, n.d.), while slow processes, are in place. Additionally the Golf Trail is tackling issues where golf courses are traditionally seen as being at odds with the environment (water and pesticides) by promoting licenced and regulated pesticide use.

This example is worth highlighting for several reasons. This initiative presents a strong tie between the fields of recreation and economic development, environmental stewardship. As well, the Golf Trail started at a grassroots level. And, perhaps most interestingly, is the potential surrounding this initiative. From an outward perspective this example provides a fairly straightforward model that could be applied in other places, not only in terms of golf, but to other recreational and business opportunities as well. While I am unsure if they are connected, a recent visit to Radium showed a local business passport idea, where purchases made at local businesses earned stamps that could be submitted for prizes. There is also potential for this program to evolve (if so desired) in many directions in terms of regional development overall.

**Visit the Columbia Valley Golf Trail website for further information and resources:**  
<http://www.columbiavalleygolftrail.com/>

## **References**

Audubon International. (n.d.). Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program for Golf. Retrieved September 12, 2012, from <http://www.auduboninternational.org/acspgolf>

Columbia Valley Golf Trail. (2009). Columbia Valley Golf Trail. Retrieved September 12, 2012, from <http://www.columbiavalleygolftrail.com/>