

The “Aspenization” of Roslyn, Washington

Roslyn, Washington is on the easterly side of the Cascade Mountains in Kittitas County, central Washington State. Slightly north and west of the town of Cle Elum, Roslyn was, according to the Roslyn Library, originally established as a company town for a coal mine discovered in the 1880's. When the coal became unprofitable, logging became the primary economic driver of the area. In the 1970's many artists moved to the area and somewhat revitalized the town. The Spotted Owl later terminated the majority of the logging, leaving the forests for viewing and recreation. The area is covered in snow in the winter making for picturesque scenic drives. The summers are comfortable and the rivers and streams provide various types of enjoyment. Plum Creek Timber land surrounded the town and was open access for hiking, Morel mushroom gathering, and other recreation. While I was living in Ellensburg, about 20 miles to the east, this area became a favorite spot for day trips to enjoy the mountains and escape the windy farmland.

For me Roslyn and the surrounding area was a place where time slowed down and a relaxed, diverse group of local residents added a comfortable character to the establishments. Roslyn was a place where loggers in cork boots, struggling to survive, cracked jokes with starving artists wearing tie-dyed t-shirts at the next table. Life was simple; it was ok to work hard at what you did, whatever you did, a place to be yourself, whoever you were. The area was a place where all could enjoy life and nature to the best of their ability while everyone else did the same.

Roslyn was discovered when the Brick Tavern, the oldest continuously operating tavern in Washington, was utilized for the television show *Northern Exposure* and Roslyn became the fictitious Cicely, Alaska. Soon after the discovery Trendwest Development purchased all of the land surrounding the town, over 7,000 acres, from Plum Creek Timber to build a resort with a master plan consisting of three golf courses. The land around Roslyn became off limits to locals and the town's inhabitants found themselves in competition with a major development corporation. Roslyn citizen's group, RIDGE, fought the development and eventually received some compromises on the size of the Master Planned Resort (MPR).

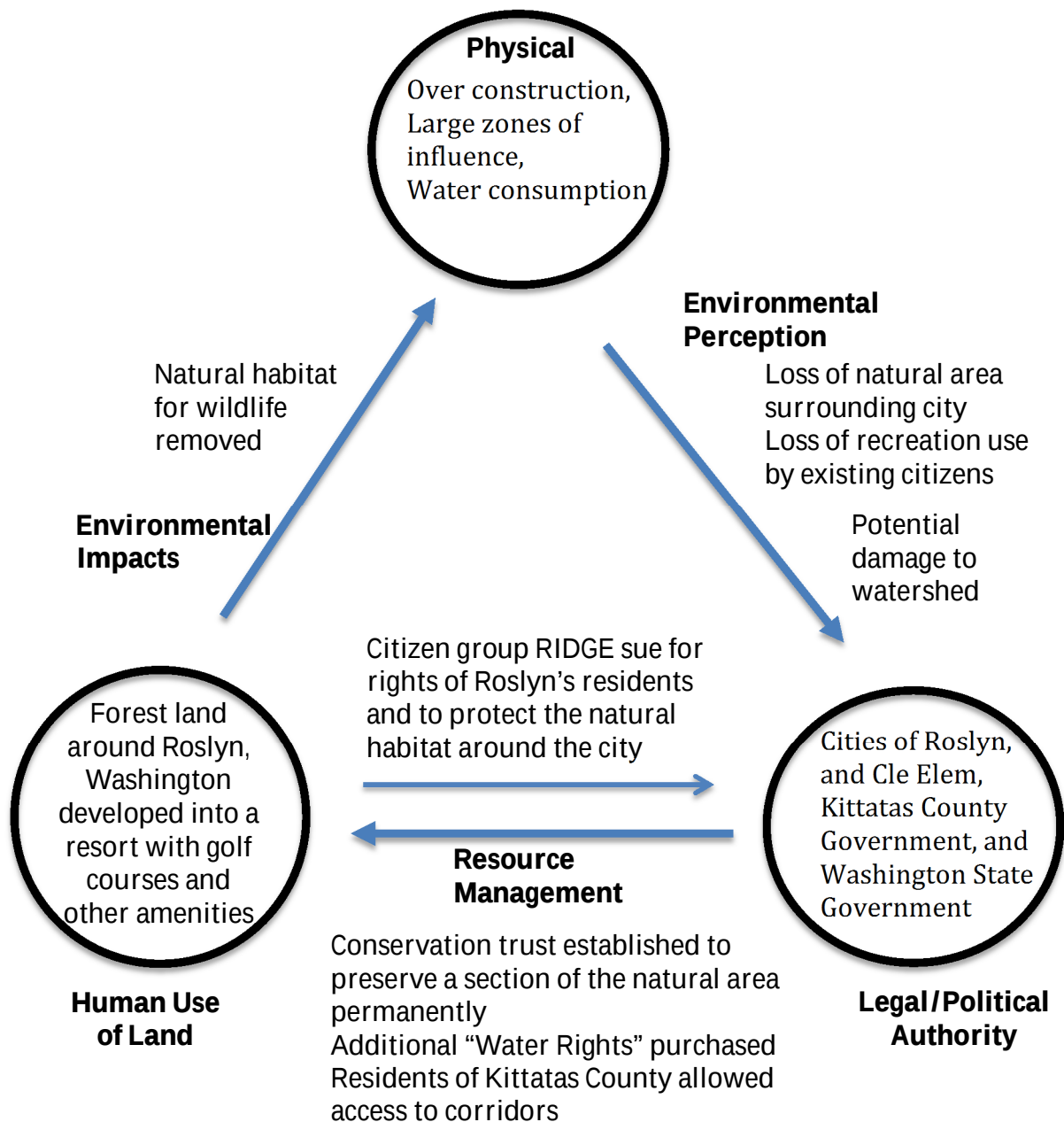
In the settlement with RIDGE the MPR received permission from the county to create 2,695 single family lots, 790 condominiums, and 300 hotel units. The first phase of the development added 10 linear miles of asphalt road, a 300 room hotel, an 18-hole golf course, and approximately 600 homes, some valued at over \$1 million. The owners of the homes are predominantly from outside of Kittitas County where Roslyn is located. According to the Census Bureau, median home values in Roslyn almost doubled from 2000 to 2010, and the population of Roslyn declined by around 12 percent from 2000 to 2010. Much of the existing natural habitats have been replaced by golf greens and miles of asphalt golf cart paths. The zones of influence greatly limit the remaining wildlife habitat areas surrounding the residential areas and golf courses. The wildlife migration routes are now blocked by houses and greens keepers.

The Mountainstar Resort, which became the Suncadia Resort during construction, is following the typical evolution of resorts, as described in *New Geographies of the American West* by William Travis. The area was discovered and purchased by a developer who had the means to overcome the opposition of the local citizens. The proposed development was considered the “highest and best use” of the property by the governing agencies. The potential damage to wildlife and the area’s watershed were addressed by the citizen’s group RIDGE. The potential harm of the development was somewhat minimized through a reduction in size, establishment of a conservation trust, and purchase of additional water rights by the developer.

Several factors influenced the conversion of the forested land to the resort. Initially Plum Creek Timber was faced with the sale of land being the “highest and best use” for the company. The location of the property was ideal from a developer’s perspective as it was only a few miles from the I-90 interstate, roughly a one hour drive from Seattle, and 30 minutes from the ski slopes of Snoqualmie Pass. The citizen group RIDGE was able to preserve a portion of the land permanently through a conservation trust and reduce the total build out of the MPR. Many residents of the area, including myself, were employed during various phases of construction. Other residents found employment at the resort after the construction was complete. The cities of Roslyn and CleElum, along with Kittitas County and the Eastern Washington Growth Management Hearings Board also decided that the resort was the “highest and best use” of the land. The citizens had a voice through public meetings and RIDGE. There are two groups of losers in this land use. The minor losers are the citizens of Roslyn who can no longer afford to live there, or no longer desire to live there. The major losers are the wildlife in the area, including a mountain lion that was euthanized for stalking a worker in the early stages of the development.

The changes that came as a result of the forested area being turned into a resort left me somewhat nostalgic for the past. I realized that feeling was based on the camaraderie of the working class struggles that are the great equalizer. The owners of the property had every right to pursue development for a profit. The concessions they made appeased all of the human parties involved and the conservation trust assures a certain amount of wildlife protection. The effort will establish routes the wildlife will eventually learn to use as they avoid the populated areas. Would it have been better to map the migration routes and the areas the wildlife chose to use for grazing, and then designate those areas as open space? I think so. The goal of RIDGE is to encourage sustainable growth and they accomplished this to a level they deemed acceptable. But, did the elk agree? Only the elk know. I can assume they did not. I believe every development should be evaluated in a manner that considers ways to lower impact on existing flora and fauna. I realize this is much easier to say than do, but the tools exist and an effort has to be made whenever and however possible. Establishing higher balances of open space and natural areas to developed areas in rural and exurban projects would be, if not ethical, at least less unethical.

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Sources

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