

# The Healing Mountains



GREG GRIFFITH

Standing in a snowstorm, on the mountain, the wind humming through the trees and the sky laying down a fresh white blanket around your skis, you can't help but feel cleansed.

by **PETER VOGLER**

The past is erased. Footsteps and ski tracks are gone. Perhaps even your sins are expiated. Only you know for sure. Your spirit comes up clean and feels as pure as the driven snow.

People have always come to the mountains to heal. Maybe it's the altitude, the remoteness or the ozone, but the mountains really do lift our spirits. When the pace of the city overtakes our nerves, when the noise pollution and the stress leave us frazzled, we go to the mountains to rejuvenate ourselves – at least those of us who are lucky enough to head to the hills. What about those that aren't healthy or wealthy enough to escape the confines of the city?

Above: Sit-skiing is one way for those with mobility challenges to enjoy the mountains.

In the past decade, Whistler has seen a rise in the number of programs that aim to include everyone in our mountain life, not just those that are healthy and wealthy enough.

The Whistler Adaptive Sports Program (or WASP), the granddaddy of these programs, has grown from just teaching 15 lessons a year when it started to some 550 every winter now. Its mandate is to make alpine recreation accessible to everyone and it delivers with a fascinating variety of equipment and a flair for creative solutions.

Just about everyone has seen the sleds and ski-bobs used for sit-skiing – you know, the contraptions that look like bicycles for snow and toboggans ➤

Whistler-based programs make snow sports accessible to those with physical, emotional and economic challenges



with outriggers. WASP volunteers help those without full mobility, and look like a lot of fun to ride. Less noticeable but no less important are rider-bars, board buddies and radios – tools that help visually impaired skiers feel the thrill, the smell, the glory of skiing and boarding. WASP has really reached out and opened a door for all to partake in the giddiness of the mountains.

WASP – formerly known as the Whistler Adaptive Ski Program – has become so popular in fact that the organization has expanded its programming to include summer activities as well. Kayaking, canoeing, hiking and hand-cycling have all been included – because hey, life in the mountains is rejuvenating all year round.

The growing inclusiveness of mountain culture goes beyond programs for just the physically challenged. In fact, only 30 per cent of WASP's participants are challenged in this way.

Those with developmental difficulties comprise the other 70 per cent and though the equipment they require is less technological, the care they receive as they explore the mountain life is no less vigorous.

The Olympics and the Paralympics are coming to Whistler in 2010 and that has helped the community to reach out to a larger participant base. It began before the Olympic announcement in 2005



JOERN RICHIE, WWW.INSIGHTPHOTOGRAPHY.COM

but it has positively blossomed since. Money from the municipal government, from financial institutions such as Scotiabank and from corporations such as Intrawest have allowed a surge of programs to become truly effective in inviting everyone to partake in the mountain experience.

CampCare and Zero Ceiling are programs that use the power of mountain culture to heal and to teach youth at risk. They largely use snowboarding to reach out to inner-city and abused kids. It's >

CampCare teaches disadvantaged and at-risk youth to snowboard.

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Kayaking,  
canoeing,  
hiking  
and  
hand-  
cycling  
have all  
been  
included...

kind of ironic that boarding culture began as an adolescent, urban invention but those very kids have been largely excluded from the mountain version of their sport, snowboarding, because of cost and lifestyle issues.

CampCare and Zero Ceiling bring disadvantaged and at-risk young people from the Vancouver area to the mountains and teach them to snowboard.

CampCare hooks the young people up with some of the top people in the sport, providing role models in the process. Zero Ceiling focuses on a slightly older group, providing the skills for them to become snowboard instructors. Many graduates of both programs are now leading happy, productive lives, in the mountains and elsewhere.

Among mountain recreation enthusiasts, there is a new appreciation of the essential healing nature of being on the hill, which for decades was a distant dream for those who couldn't afford it financially or physically.

Perhaps now North American society has arrived at a stage in which everyone is welcome. Whatever the cost, it is worth it.

For information, please  
contact:

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### campCARE Children's Foundation

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### Whistler Adaptive Sports Program

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