

Progressive Stewardship of Mountain Ecosystems: Next Practices for Sustainability

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Working Towards Sustainability

“Sustainability can be defined as a state of dynamic equilibrium achieved by taking responsibility for balancing long term economic, environmental and social health – for our communities, our world and ourselves. Sustainability brings to light the connections between natural and human communities. It implies evolving our local and global civilization in a manner that makes sense socially, ecologically and economically. It involves treating our world as if we intend to stay.”¹

The helicopter and snowcat skiing (helicat) industry has a strong dedication to sustainability. The industry relies on remote locations, land tenures, winter climates and pristine mountain environments to operate. The success of helicopter and snowcat skiing operations directly depends on efficient and responsible use of these necessary resources.

We have an opportunity to act as a leader in adventure tourism and the greater business community by implementing practices for sustainability in mountain ecosystems. We recognize that currently available technology does not allow for a perfectly sustainable helicopter or snowcat skiing operation. However, committing to current best practices and looking towards the next practices possible will allow operations to continue to evolve towards a more sustainable future.

By acting as a leader and demonstrating the possibilities of sustainability to our staff, guests and the public, the helicat industry hopes other recreation, tourism and outdoor resource industries will join us in our vision of a sustainable future.

The Sustainability Next Practices Mission

The purpose of this document is to be a resource for the industry. It serves to assist operators in understanding regulations and prioritizing sustainability when planning their next practices. The practices suggested within are voluntary and not a list of requirements for operators or HeliCat Canada. This document is meant to encourage individual operations to take their own unique steps towards a sustainable future, on their own accord.

¹ BC Helicopter and Snowcat Skiing Commercial Operators Association. (2003.) *Stewardship of Mountain Ecosystems: Best Practices for Sustainability*.
<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/55cc00fae4b0bd947546ba72/t/55fb0acde4b0a1a03de797de/1442515661332/20030500+-+Stewardship+of+Mountain+Ecosystems+-+Practices+for+Sustainability.pdf>.

You will notice the term *next practices* being used throughout this document. The more commonly used *best practices* describes activities that an entity can take to operate at a high standard. However, using the word *best* implies there is one set of best practices for everyone. The word *next* demonstrates the commitment of the industry to push the envelope on its own unique next practices, which can be built on to increase sustainability in the future.

HeliCat Canada’s sustainability next practices mission is to provide a living document that informs and guides operators in prioritizing and implementing strategies and next practices that consider all focus areas of sustainability relevant to mountain operations, and acts as a model for other industries and stakeholders.

Background

HeliCat Canada is the trade association of the helicopter and snowcat skiing industry that was originally formed to define standards and operating guidelines to increase the safety and collaboration of the industry. These objectives still stand today including an accreditation program as a mandatory part of membership.

Our Mandate

“We are dedicated to developing and holding our members accountable to the highest operating standards in the industry; to supporting research programs that will better our land use practices; to educating ourselves and the public about current trends in safety and risk management; and to promoting the continual improvement of the helicopter and snowcat skiing industry.”²

Helicopter and snowcat skiing (helicat) operations in Canada have a valuable “combination of perfect snow, terrain and accessibility” that allow unrivaled opportunities for skiing³. With this opportunity comes a recognition of the responsibilities involved in sustaining the snow, terrain and access necessary to provide these operations. As a result helicat operations are increasingly realizing the importance of the relationship between our operating practices and the climate, mountains and communities in which we operate.

A History of Sustainability

HeliCat Canada has long recognized the need to include discussions on sustainability in its member operations. In 2003, *Stewardship of Mountain Ecosystems: Best Practices for Sustainability* was published to outline the best practices of sustainability as a guideline around which the industry could build its operations. This document was forward facing, combining the then prominent perception of sustainability as an environmental concern with emerging social and economic components.

² HeliCat Canada. Overview. <http://www.helicat.org/overview>

³ HeliCat Canada. *A Social and Economic Impact Assessment of Helicopter and Snowcat Skiing in British Columbia*. <http://www.helicat.org/socio-economic/>

The current definition includes a more holistic view of the different social, environmental and economic focus areas that encompass sustainability in current theory and practice.

The term “Sustainable Development” was coined in 1987 with the release of the *Our Common Future* and the Brundtland Report. It defined sustainable development as:

“Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”⁴

This definition outlined three pillars, or the triple bottom line: social, economic and environmental. Over the last 30 years, there has been considerable attention paid to addressing the environmental and economic pillars of sustainability. However, recently there has been a resurgence in recognizing the importance of social sustainability to enable environmental and economic sustainability.

An updated view of these three areas sees them as nested concepts, while companies see their operations bounded by the social and environmental systems that surround them.⁵ The relevance of this model is becoming increasingly obvious in all industries and particularly for the helicat industry which nests literally as well as figuratively within a close social and natural environment.

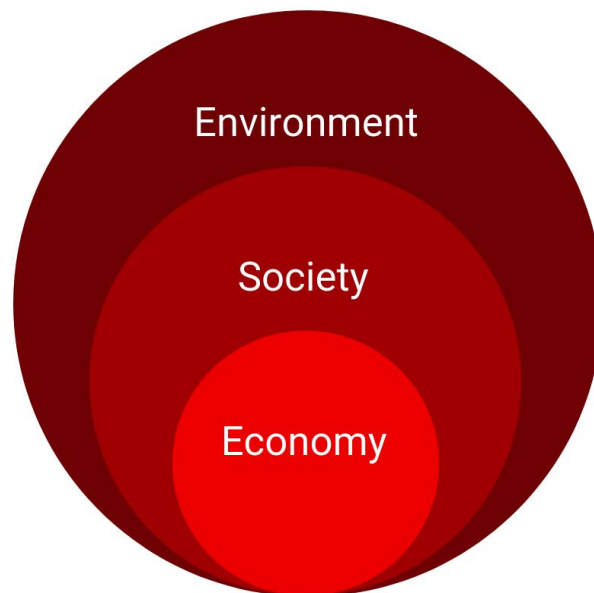


Fig 1. A nested approach to sustainable development. The economy is a key part of society, and the economy and society operate within the ecological limits of the natural environment.

⁴ Brundtland, G.H. *Our Common Future: Report on the World Commission on Economic Development*. Section I.3.27. <http://www.un-documents.net/our-common-future.pdf>

⁵ The Embedding Project. *The Road to Context: Contextualizing your strategy and goals*. https://www.embeddingproject.org/system/attachments/documents/000/000/078/original/EP_The_Road_to_Context_Guidebook.pdf?1527885106

The Future of Sustainability

Right now, we can't predict what will create a perfectly sustainable future. This document is not meant to provide guidance for the long term. It is meant to begin an evolving process that will grow and change with developments in science, technology and policy. The title of the document, *Next Practices for Sustainability*, serves as a reminder that this commitment will require progressive monitoring and updates to be a valuable resource for next practices into the future.

The Sustainability Process

Sustainability is a process, not an end goal. Developing operational processes ensures the effort put into sustainability is meaningful and important.

Sustainability Planning

A sustainability plan is a necessary tool for obtaining maximum benefit from an operation's resources. With the help of a sustainability plan an operator can build a central resource of local operation-specific regulatory requirements and prioritized next practices.

In an initiative born through Simon Fraser University, the Embedding Project has developed a resource to help organizations build a sustainability plan with strategies and goals within their individual operational context.⁶

Their plan includes four steps:

1. Acknowledge the need to operate within global, regional, and local social and environmental thresholds
2. Transparently understand and prioritise a set of focus areas in relation to key social and environmental trends at the global, regional, and/or local level
3. Set strategy and goals by articulating the current gap between business operations and targets, and how the business will address it
4. Transparently track performance against realistic targets

This document serves to guide the industry on steps one and two of the process by acknowledging the need to operate within our social, economic and environmental thresholds and prioritizing a set of focus areas for the industry. It is up to the operators to set strategies and goals and track their progress towards more sustainable operations. This model will help organizations plan and prioritize the next practices that can implement sustainability into their business model, and ensure the process continues into the future.

⁶ Bertels, S., Dobson, R. *The Road to Context: Contextualising your Strategy and Goals*.
https://www.embeddingproject.org/system/attachments/documents/000/000/078/original/EP_The_Road_to_Context_Guidebook.pdf?1527885106

The Focus Areas

Helicat Canada has determined a list of the priority focus areas that contribute to the sustainability of the industry. These include:

1. Energy use and climate change
2. Social and community
3. Environmental - including:
 - Wildlife
 - Fuel storage and handling
 - Waste management
 - Fisheries and watersheds
 - Vegetation management
 - Forestry and trail construction
4. Economic

Each specific focus area for sustainability has its own background and complexities. These focus areas do not operate in isolation – there is a complex interrelation between the different priorities. For example, waste management of septic systems involves paying attention to the importance of watersheds, and the preservation of wildlife is a concern closely influenced by the interests of society. To maintain simplicity and structure this document presents each focus area within its own section; however, it is important to be aware of the overall interrelated nature.

How to Use this Resource

The technical sections of this document have been compiled by subject matter experts, and through industry engagement and work completed through HeliCat Canada special projects and research. The document outlines the regulatory requirements that operations must follow in each focus area and includes relevant links and resources to allow for easy reference.

Each focus area document includes:

- Important **BACKGROUND** information
- A **VISION** for the focus area
- **SUSTAINABILITY STANDARDS** including the mandatory actions operators must take with links to the Acts and Regulations that guide them
- **SUSTAINABILITY NEXT PRACTICES** that guide operators to take action beyond the mandatory minimum requirements with links to valuable resources and tools

To build upon sustainability HeliCat Canada has prioritized next practices that operators can take above and beyond the minimum requirements. As operators adopt these practices and as the external environment allows more progressive options, these practices will be updated to continue progression towards sustainability.

Monitor and Evaluate

Sustainability is an ongoing process. Implementing these best practices will be the first step towards sustainability, but will not create perfectly sustainable operations. As technology and external factors change, the next practices for sustainability will continue to evolve.

These sustainability next practices should be reviewed regularly to bring accountability and progression to operations. Annual monitoring and evaluation of the sustainability plan will be necessary to track progress and set new goals for the future.

International Certification Programs

HeliCat Canada recognizes the value of becoming involved with other sustainability programs and certification frameworks. There are a wide variety of these certification programs with connections to profitable and not-for-profit organizations, which focus on different areas of operations.

It is important that members research these programs fully before making a decision in order to ensure the certification will help to create tangible measures and change towards sustainability within the operation.

Some potential certification programs are listed below:

[Global Sustainable Tourism Council](#)

[Biosphere Tourism](#)

[B Corp](#)

[Green Key](#)

[The Natural Step](#)

The information presented in this document is a resource for industry-specific practices that may or may not be captured within the broader scope of these certification frameworks.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the vision of HeliCat Canada is to see helicopter and snowcat skiing operate sustainably into the future as an industry that provides value to the business owners and operators, the community that surrounds the operations, and the beautiful natural environment in which we operate. If the helicat industry can bring value to those around us, we will be able to continue to provide memorable mountain experiences to our guests, who typically do not otherwise get to connect with our communities and our mountains in such a way.

Our weakness is our relative size. As a small industry, we cannot directly control the influence of other industries on our environment and operations. However, we can consider the influence we have on people and tackle our own operations. Sustainability is an easier lesson to learn when you are surrounded by the natural environment.

One of the common themes of guest experience is that they had “the best day of their life.”⁷ There are not many industries that have such a strong and genuine influence over their customers. By communicating the need for change and demonstrating our strength in sustainability leadership, the industry has an opportunity to reach beyond our immediate surroundings and send our guests home with an education in sustainability. If we are lucky, they will see the importance of implementing sustainability into their businesses as well.

The whole experience of helicopter and snowcat skiing, including the mountains, snow, wildlife, rural communities and local people, is paramount to our industry’s success. We must have a goal of successfully sustaining the social, environmental and economic climate in which we operate to ensure people can continue to experience the mountains and the “best day of their life” in the same glory as we do today.

⁷ HeliCat Canada. *A Social and Economic Impact Assessment of Helicopter and Snowcat Skiing in British Columbia*. <http://www.helicat.org/socio-economic/>