

John Meyer

Category III is the logical final building block to Vail master plan

One of the problems I have with the debate over Vail's proposed Category III expansion is that I don't trust either side.

I have a big problem with Vail's corporate management over the past year or two. Its fundamental misunderstanding of the mountain environment is symbolized by that ridiculous mountaintop amusement park, Adventure Ridge, which is an abomination.

And it did not make me more sympathetic to Vail's position recently when I heard a Vail local make reference to Category III and its supposed impact on the lynx, which no one can find. "If people want to see a lynx," he sniffed, "they should go to the ski museum and see one -- stuffed."

But I also have a problem with professional environmental activists (isn't that an oxymoron?) who make wild assertions and ridiculous arguments to support their case. I have a real problem with the way they stake out a position -- often with a hidden agenda fueled by class envy, left-wing politics and a juvenile anti-business mentality -- and declare it moral high ground.

I think Category III should go ahead -- although I'm not crazy about the idea -- because I am not persuaded by the environmental arguments against it. I think we can trust Vail to do the right thing if only because a host of government agencies and a skeptical media will be scrutinizing every step of the project.

I just wish the media would challenge environmentalists to prove their claims once in a while, too. Unfortunately, there are many media people who believe there is no "other side" when it comes to reporting on the environment. The environment is too important for balanced journalism.

One argument environmentalists make about Category III is that if Vail isn't stopped now, it will continue to grow. That's bogus, and they know it.

Category III is the last piece of Vail's master plan with the forest service, and it has been for decades. Category I was the front side of Vail, Category II the Back Bowls. Vail officials concede there is virtually no chance Vail ever will be allowed to grow beyond Category III.

For another argument against Category III, listen to Rocky Smith, hyperbolic spokesman for the Colorado Environmental Coalition: "It's just not needed. Vail is already huge."

Vail is huge, but if Vail is as "greedy" and "bottom-line" oriented as Smith and his cronies say, why would Vail spend \$14 million developing terrain that isn't needed? Vail believes it will get a return on its investment because people will want to ski.

On one hand, the CEC says Vail will "reap millions in profits from the use of taxpayer-owned lands and pay only a fraction of those profits to lease the area." We certainly hear that argument enough. But when I argued Category III with Smith recently he said: "They don't make money on skiing. They make money on everything else." So which is it?

Then there's the lynx -- the *Canada* lynx -- which hasn't been seen in Colorado in 24 years. Environmentalists want to stop Category III because it is viable -- *potential* would be a better word -- habitat for an animal that might not exist within hundreds of miles. And they're not satisfied even when Vail agrees to create enhanced (potential) lynx habitat on adjacent land.

A media darling because of his bombast, Smith seems to know what's better for the land and its wildlife than all those professionals charged with conserving it. What is his background? He has a degree in communications and public address from the University of Wisconsin (1972).

"I taught myself forestry," Smith said.

I think many Category III opponents oppose Vail simply because it's a playground for the wealthy. But Smith and his cohorts are running out of ways to obstruct the project, which is likely to begin next summer. "We are not giving up," Smith said, "believe me."

At the risk of being called a tool of the ski industry and a foe of the environment -- and I'll be happy to refute both accusations -- I think Category III is a logical final piece in Vail's master plan build-out.

"That's your right as an American," Smith said, "to have any view you want."

How condescending.

e-mail John Meyer at

jmeyer@denver-rmn.com

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