

# Why integrated planning is important for mountain destinations

**ECOSIGN** In an interview with ISR, Ryley Thiessen, CEO of the Canadian planning company Ecosign, which celebrates its 50th anniversary in 2025, talks about the growth opportunities for mountain destinations in challenging times..



„Our unique selling point is how we combine technical expertise with creativity.“, says Ryley Thiessen.

**ISR: Half a century of Ecosign Mountain Resort Planners Ltd.: What is the basis of the company's success?**

**Ryley Thiessen:** Ecosign's success is driven by strong client relationships, innovative planning, and collaboration. Ecosign's founder, Paul Mathews, revolutionized ski resort design with a scientific, data-driven approach, using large-scale mapping to identify optimal development areas. Having so many return clients underlines our proven track record of delivering both visionary and practical plans.

**ISR: How is the anniversary being "celebrated"?**

**Ryley Thiessen:** We are celebrating our 50th with a commemorative 50th-anniversary logo, a new website that boasts an interactive map of our 1,000+ projects worldwide, a detailed project portfolio showcasing over 100 of our projects, and a suite of our core and specialty service offerings. In-person celebrations will take place at trade shows in Canada, the USA, and Europe (visit [Ecosign.com/Ecosign50](https://www.ecosign.com/Ecosign50) for more information!).

**ISR: Ecosign has implemented over 1,000 projects in 46 countries. It is certainly difficult to focus attention to individual projects, but what were the highlights?**

**Ryley Thiessen:** You're right, it is hard to pick the highlights – so we're happy that our new website allows us to showcase so many in equal measure! Our home base in Whistler, British Columbia is of course one of our greatest highlights, which has grown from a single ski area with about 200,000 skier visits when Ecosign was first founded, to the largest ski resort in North America with over 3 million visitors annually. Other highlights the team are proud of include designing 45

resorts throughout Japan in the 1980s; completing a transformative master plan for Zermatt, Switzerland; designing six Winter Olympic alpine venues; Sun Peaks Resort, Canada; Changbaishan, China, and Ruka, Finland: a thriving tourism destination within the arctic circle.

**ISR: There are many planning companies. What would you say is Ecosign's unique selling point?** We think our unique selling point is how we combine technical expertise with creativity. Our team delivers forward-thinking, flexible master plans that align with regional needs, infrastructure, and sustainability. We ensure resorts maximize guest flow and revenue by emphasizing pedestrian-oriented villages and optimizing bed-base capacity - balancing guest experience, operations, and staffing.

**ISR: How has the company developed over the years? Which business units have become more relevant?**

**Ryley Thiessen:** We started out in 1975 concentrating on ski lift and piste design, then quickly grew to offer real estate design, resort village design, and economic analysis. In the past two decades, an influx in summer recreation planning has emerged as an important aspect of planning for mountain resorts, so we are making sure we are staying up to date on all the exciting and new recreation activities that are being released. Another new market is the rise of transportation-focused urban gondolas and sightseeing projects with no ski component – this burgeoning field is particularly exciting, because it is a low carbon strategy for moving large groups of people efficiently in urban environments.

**ISR: What is more important for mountain resorts in working with a planning company today than it used to be?**

**Ryley Thiessen:** Mountain resorts today are more complex operations than ever before. They require detailed planning to manage large-scale transportation systems, efficient guest flow, and infrastructure. Unlike the past, when resorts expanded gradually with single lifts, modern resorts must efficiently transport tens of thousands of guests daily across vast areas. Moreover, resorts now cater to many different user groups (such as new skiers, non-skiing guests), requiring a wider view of planning beyond catering to the core skier. Environmental preservation and minimizing construction impacts are also crucial. With rising development costs, having a well-executed master plan that can occur over multiple phases while maintaining operations throughout construction is essential to ensure efficient and sustainable long term growth.

**ISR: In which business areas do you still see potential for growth?**

**Ryley Thiessen:** Mountain resorts have strong growth potential when it comes to developing year-round operations as more people flock to the outdoors – a pattern that was accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Expanding recreational offerings beyond skiing and mountain biking is nec-

essary to accommodate new types of guests. Increases in real estate development go hand in glove with recreational growth, as buyers feel more connected to nature and the active lifestyle it offers.

Considering the global markets, we see growth opportunities across Europe, North America, and Asia. Of note:

- China continues to experience destination tourism growth following the 2022 Beijing Olympics;
- Japan is emerging from a long stagnation. With aging infrastructure, international interest in its deep powder snow, and a weak yen, it is an attractive market for redevelopment and tourism growth;
- The Province of Alberta's new Bill-35 opens opportunities for year-round resorts with real estate outside its national parks; and
- Our home province, British Columbia, continues to see strong growth due to its strong global reputation as an outdoor adventurer's ideal destination.

**ISR: Infrastructure, quality and service are becoming increasingly important to guests. What developments in guest needs do you expect in the future?**

**Ryley Thiessen:** Resorts that prioritize quality services and technological innovation for operations will be best positioned to meet evolving guest needs and remain competitive in the industry. Guest expectations are steadily increasing due to healthy industry competition. In the future, we expect to see greater demand for high quality and more varied on-mountain dining; better beginner skier experiences (from the rental process to the learning terrain and the lifts); and improvements to the children's experience (such as dedicated children centres, activities and terrain).

**ISR: Snowmaking on ski slopes is now essential in many places. What role does snowmaking play in planning for the expansion and optimization of mountain resorts?**

**Ryley Thiessen:** Regardless of where a resort is located, reliable snow coverage allows resorts to plan for long-term growth with confidence. Fortunately, snowmaking technology has advanced significantly in the past 20 years and continues to evolve with systems proving to be more cost effective and efficient. Snowmaking is increasingly vital as climate change impacts snowfall reliability, and recent advancements in warm-weather snowmaking is welcome news to protecting mountain resort's consistent operations and full-season stability.

**ISR: In many regions worldwide, there is a shortage of skilled workers. How should mountain resorts react to this?**

**Ryley Thiessen:** The question of automation comes up often and can help reduce workforce needs in some areas of the operation, but we feel that the human touch remains essential for a positive guest experience. Mountain resorts have a unique value proposition when it comes to attracting skilled workers: they can 'sell' the mountain lifestyle to attract young talent for seasonal jobs, infusing their resort with energized, eager employees that fulfill peak-season staff requirements. In return, young talent are introduced to the tourism and hospitality industry, and become marketing channels of their own. In this respect, workforce housing becomes critical, so resorts must plan to build a variety of housing options to attract and retain employees, especially providing good options for long term employees that want to settle.



Ecosign realizes projects worldwide, for example at the Hanazono Resort in Hokkaido (Japan).

**ISR: How can mountain resorts best prepare for the effects of climate change? What does the future hold for ski tourism and winter sports?**

**Ryley Thiessen:** People love to come to the mountains and experience nature and that won't change. That being said, there is no question that mountain resorts must continue to adapt to climate change through year-round product offerings and technological innovation. The industry has been doing a lot to move and evolve to less carbon intensive infrastructure and operations, so we see this trend to continue as guests' expectations for corporate responsibility rise. Having a master plan in place will be essential to resorts future-proofing their economies.

**ISR: If the focus shifts to even stronger year-round tourism in mountain regions, can this also economically compensate for a possible reduction in ski tourism caused by climate change?**

**Ryley Thiessen:** Yes, the shift to stronger year-round tourism can help compensate for potential declines in ski tourism due to climate change, and Whistler is a great example of this. Originally a winter destination, nearly a third of Whistler's guests now visit for sightseeing and other mountain activities year-round. However, not all resorts have the same potential. Resorts located within a two-hour drive of major cities are most likely to succeed in year-round tourism due to their access to larger markets. Volume is critical to making summer activities economically viable, and some resorts may face challenges based on their location and environment.

**ISR: Thank you for the interview.**

**Thomas Schweighofer**