2020 TOP 100 GOOD PRACTICE STORY

Title of the Story:  Resilience and Adaptation in the Face of Adversity

Destination Name: (include any state, province or region)
Vail, Colorado
Country: United States

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Nomination Category: (Please check the boxes that indicate the focus of your story)
☐ Culture & Communities
☐ Environment & Climate
☐ Nature & Ecotourism
☒ Islands & Seaside
☒ Immediate responses in dealing with the COVID -19
☒ Post COVID -19 recovery
☐ One of the 17 SDGs* (if yes, which one) Click or tap to choose

*The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), also known as the Global Goals, were adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015 as a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity by 2030. The 17 SDGs are integrated—that is, they recognize that action in one area will affect outcomes in others, and that development must balance social, economic and environmental sustainability. What are the Sustainable Development Goals?
https://www.unsd.org/content/undp/en/home/sustainable-development-goals.html

For further information on Tourism for SDGs: http://tourism4sdgs.org/

Find detailed instructions for submitting good practices here
DESCRIBE YOUR GOOD PRACTICE STORY

Address each aspect of your good practice story in the different sections being specific including relevant quantitative and qualitative information.

Issues faced
During World War II, the Army’s Tenth Mountain Division used the Vail area for backcountry survival training. After the war, many of these soldiers were drawn back to the mountain valleys and founded Vail Mountain ski resort and the Town of Vail. The founders of Vail were strong, resilient, and able to adapt in the face of adversity. When the livelihood and thriving community of Vail was hit by the COVID-19 global pandemic, it illuminated the importance of a strong and resilient community. The community channeled its founding roots to ensure the community will persevere, adapt, overcome, and strengthen through the adversity presented by the global pandemic. As a tourism-based economy, the community and economy have been hit hard as Vail Mountain closed in the height of ski season, special events were cancelled, and restaurants and other businesses shut their doors. The vibrant streets of Vail filled with tourists and locals alike came to a grinding halt as visitors left and community members sheltered in place at their homes. Unemployment in Vail and Eagle County skyrocketed from 2.1% in 2019 to 20.5% by April of 2020. The mountain resort community experienced much higher unemployment rates than the state of Colorado (11.3%) and throughout the United States (14.7%). Businesses that have thrived in Vail for decades were not sure how or if they would see it through this pandemic.

Methods, steps and tools applied
In light of the incredibly challenging and uncertain times faced, the Vail Destination quickly responded and began recovery efforts to adapt, support local community members, and reboot Vail’s business economy, bringing vitality, tourism, and economic drivers back to the valley with public health and safety at the forefront of all decisions and initiatives implemented. Following the Eagle County Transition Trail Map guidelines for re-opening and all public health and safety requirements, Vail initiated recovery efforts to benefit residents, businesses, employees, and visitors. The Town of Vail continues to effectively communicate key updates and provide critical resources with residents, visitors, employees, and the business community through the Town of Vail COVID-19 website. In addition, the Five Commitments of Containment pledge was created for all residents and visitors to Vail and Eagle County to adhere to. The Town adopted the slogan Vail Strong to show the unity and strength within the community.

Town Operations: Town of Vail increased cleaning and sanitizing in all areas of town. The free bus system initially stopped operating; however, resumed operations in May with additional measures to protect drivers and passengers as it is a critical transportation source. As an alternative transportation method, the Town of Vail launched an electric bike share pilot program. This offers riders an opportunity to get fresh air and exercise while maintaining social distance. The program was implemented in compliance with all health and safety requirements with an emphasis on personal responsibility. Bikes and stations will be thoroughly cleaned daily.
Community Support: The Vail Town Council established a $500,000 Community Relief Grant funding program to provide local financial relief associated with COVID-19 impacts in the areas of food, shelter, and health for those who live or work within Vail. Additionally, to assist community members who cannot leave their homes, Town of Vail also offered assistance with grocery shopping, picking up medications, or any other errands.

Business Support: To assist the business community, the Town of Vail collaborated with the regional chamber of commerce and other municipalities in Eagle County to create industry-specific task force groups to compile a business toolkit. This is designed to help businesses apply the local public health orders and properly communicate with employees and customers when re-opening. The kit provides tools and resources to help businesses understand the three phases of the Transition Trail Map, share success stories and best practices, and provide an overview of the county-wide path to economic recovery. The Town of Vail has also provided local businesses additional tools to help constituents feel comfortable within the public health orders, signage graphics to provide a unified approach to requirements, and other tools to support Vail businesses including expansion of premises information and personal protection equipment (PPE) provision. The Town procured a bulk quantity of PPE items to pass along to businesses to supplement their supplies and lighten the burden created by the public health orders.

Restaurants and retail shops have re-opened, but at reduced capacity. In order to support their ability to accommodate more patrons, restaurants can apply for a modification of premise of their liquor licensed outdoor seating area in order to allow for an expansion of their existing licensed area. An Emergency Ordinance was passed by Vail Town Council allowing for consumption of alcoholic beverages in designated public places and additional picnic areas have also been established throughout Town to allow for additional outdoor dining capacity for patrons wishing to enjoy carry out food and drink. These efforts will help the restaurant community accommodate more patrons than would be allowed in their establishments and allow restaurants to do substantially more carryout business. Retail stores can also apply for a modification of premise of their footprint in order to allow for an expansion to create more outdoor space for retail sales. With the additional capacity and sales, businesses can re-hire employees, allowing more people to get back to work. To help businesses economically, Town of Vail also deferred all sales tax payments until late summer.

Special Events: Vail is home to several special events each year, which are large economic drivers for the town and local businesses. Town of Vail is working with event producers to reschedule, reformat, and/or reimagine their events within current or anticipated public health orders, to occur later this summer and fall. The approach is quality over quantity in number of events as well as creating a safe and quality experience for fewer people rather than striving to bring in the masses. Messaging and communication about personal responsibility and public health orders is required and a key component of and integrated into all events.

Tourism: The Vail Sustainable Destination Stewardship Council and Steering Committee has initiated discussion around re-envisioning and re-creating sustainable tourism offers to focus on quality of experiences rather than quantity of tourists attending programs or events. They are also exploring options for more independent, self-guided tours and experiences. For example, Betty Ford Alpine Garden developed a self-guided or private tour of the high alpine gardens to experience the gardens while avoiding crowds.
Key success factors

The ability to coordinate efforts county wide, collaborate, adapt, and pivot have been critical as the community begins to recover and continues to navigate the challenges presented by the COVID-19 crisis. Vail and the Eagle County community have shifted from a hotbed of COVID-19 cases in March to nearly zero hospitalized patients today. The community took an aggressive approach early, and it has made it very manageable for the local health care system. The tough decisions local leaders and community partners made in mid-March in terms of closing the ski resorts, hotels, and businesses came early on with cooperation by all. These were life-saving decisions, a sacrifice for the greater good, and it has allowed the community to look ahead to a more normalized way of life sooner.

Local governments, businesses, non-profits, and community members collaborated to create industry specific task force groups that served as a catalyst for planning a safe, measured and effective re-opening for each industry. Community members came together and showed incredible compassion and support as they helped one another out during these times of isolation. The community also followed the example set by local leadership and embraced the importance of following stay at home orders, social distancing, and mask-wearing requirements when going out in public. Employees in essential positions in Vail stepped up with courage to continue providing the services needed, from working at the grocery store to plowing snow to providing medical care, putting themselves at risk to provide for others. When hand sanitizer and PPE was sold out, local businesses pivoted from distilling liquor to producing hand sanitizer or creating other PPE, like masks, that could be used in the medical field and for other essential business operations. Vail is a premier year-round mountain destination, and Vail and Eagle County’s collective response to COVID-19 is a prime example of how it lives up to that world-renowned reputation. Preparation and collaboration have enabled the community to protect the local community and begin economic recovery.

Lessons learned

The Vail community had never previously experienced a public health or resulting economic crisis on this magnitude. This was the first time all non-essential business was forced to close, and produced the largest unemployment rates seen since the Great Depression. While Vail and Eagle County had developed a Resiliency Plan in terms of climate change, there was not a specific plan in place to respond to the impacts of a global pandemic. However, the Vail and Eagle County communities came together to develop processes and a plan to respond and begin to recover through a unified approach. During a crisis such as this, leadership and collaboration are critical. Communication and trust are foundational. The example set by leaders are those the community will embrace. In light of the challenging and uncertain times faced, the Vail Destination will utilize the lessons learned to continue planning to strengthen mitigation, adaptation, and resiliency on all fronts. The community response to this global emergency has shown how strong, spirited, and compassionate the Vail community is as it works together to emerge from the pandemic stronger, more resilient, and sustainable. While the road to recovery will be long, we are Vail Strong and will overcome.

Results, achievements and recognitions
Vail and Eagle County’s immediate response led to the effective containment of COVID-19. Local cases declined and the local health care system has ample capacity to provide care for all COVID-19 related illnesses, as well as other illness and injury and has ample testing ability. With the curve flattened and the collective planning efforts in place, Vail and Eagle County have been granted variances by Colorado Governor Jared Polis to begin re-opening following the Transition Trail Map for both the Green Circle and Blue Square phases earlier than other areas of the state. Economic recovery in the Vail Destination is now underway and visitors are welcomed back, stimulating the economy.

Thirty businesses have submitted applications to the Town Clerk’s Office requesting a modification of their licensed premises. The unemployment rate has decreased from 20.5% in April to 17.7% at the end of May. While still high, the rate is trending downward.

The Town of Vail has awarded $283,000 to 10 qualifying nonprofit organizations in its first allotment of Vail Community Relief Funds. These funds have provided food to 79 Vail households with 960 boxes of dry goods and 800 pounds of produce through the Eagle Valley Community Foundation. The United Way has been delivering 50 meals to Vail residents each week. In addition, over 30 households in Vail and several more families that work in Vail have been provided rent relief through Catholic, Salvation Army, Swift Eagle Charitable Foundation. Several additional applications are being processed. Finally, medical and behavioral health received funding to allow Bright Future Foundation to help 6 additional households in Vail and funding has helped them respond to the 17% increase in requests for emergency shelter, 20% increase in calls to their crisis hotline, and a 30% increase in requests for rental assistance. The Suicide Prevention Coalition has actively provided tools under the “SpeakUp ReachOut” campaign for mental health crisis support. The Hope Center was able to increase capacity of their team of counselors in serving the crisis hotline, in-person visits, and after-hours calls. The Vail Valley Charitable Fund is evaluating medical bill support for several households, and to date has supported a 6-year Vail resident with $5,000 in funding after suffering serious medical issues.

Special Events have been re-imagined in creative ways to safely bring visitors back and are being implemented following public health requirements. Vail plans to host and adapted version of its traditional 4th of July America Days celebration including a reverse parade, with community floats stationed and interspersed throughout Town as art installations for residents and guests to view at their own pace while practicing safe social distancing. The Vail Farmers Market began in a virtual format on June 14 with pick-up and delivery opportunities. The first traditional market will occur on July 5 and the format and protocols will meet the highest standards and reflect public health requirements. Fewer vendors will participate and tents will be placed six feet apart to meet social distancing requirements, handwashing and hand sanitizer areas will be added, one-way corridors will be established, and social distancing protocol will be provided for vendors and visitors alike.

When surveyed, 99% of Vail Community members responded they were following Stay at Home and Safer at Home orders; 83% were practicing social distancing, 74% of community members were only going out to shop for necessities such as groceries and medications. One Community member shared, “TOV (Town of Vail) has acted swiftly in light of COVID-19 and has kept the public informed via email newsletter, public signs, etc. Thank you.” Another community member shared, “With the whole COVID situation, I think the town was proactive in helping the businesses.”
The community response to this global emergency has shown how strong, spirited, and compassionate the Vail community is as it works together to emerge from the pandemic stronger, more resilient, and sustainable. While the road to recovery will be long, we are Vail Strong and will overcome.

Additional references
Transition Trail Map- https://docs.google.com/document/d/1sw1M_zaNpAVegpBkxaqSqpRssoObh8nAi4QfoZBuY/view
Town of Vail COVID-19 Communications- https://www.vailgov.com/covid-19
Five Commitments if Containment- https://discovervail.com/vailstrong/
Business Toolkit- https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1PYyiiFmF7u_h8hG9O3tt2W2ldxR6CkD
Town of Vail Enhancements to Business Toolkit- https://www.vailgov.com/covid-19#2063376-for-businessesworkers
Vail Strong Video #1- https://vimeo.com/408862697
Vail Strong Video #2- https://vimeo.com/421692186