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Eye on the Environment

Art and Stewardship Meet in the Crown of the Continent

By Anne Dahl, Swan Ecosystem Center

Soaring peaks, clear lakes and streams, brilliant wildflowers, green forests and lush meadows inhabited by bears, lions, elk and deer are scenes that spring to mind when thinking of our homeland. These images come to life in art and challenge and inspire us to live well and give back.

The Swan, Clearwater, and Blackfoot Valleys are home to a burgeoning artist community and a workforce of people who not only love where they live, but invest ample energy in caring for the place. Where art and enthusiasm for stewardship mix, you might come up with a celebration that combines the two. Swan Ecosystem Center and Alpine Artisans, Inc. are doing just that.

We live along the southwest edge of the Crown of the Continent Ecosystem, a 16,000 square-mile mountainous area encompassing the Bob Marshall Wilderness, Mission Mountains Wilderness, Glacier National Park, Waterton Lakes National Park in Alberta, and the North Flathead Valley in British Columbia.

Our artists are inspired by the Crown's natural riches and the human communities our corner of the ecosystem supports. As residents, we demonstrate a remarkable commitment to maintaining the integrity of the land while enjoying the social and economic benefits our communities provide.

Swan Ecosystem Center and Alpine Artisans, Inc. are hosting the Crown of the Continent Celebration, an art auction and wilderness event Sunday, September 28, 5-8 p.m. at the MCT Center for the

Performing Arts in Missoula. Funds raised will support the Alpine Artisans Cultural Arts Corridor and Swan Ecosystem Center's backcountry ranger program for the Mission Mountains Wilderness and the Swan Range.

The event will feature a live, juried art auction, a silent auction and a slide presentation by Ralph Waldt, author of the photo journal book *Crown of the Continent*. Waldt's book was published in 2004. It received the 2005 Benjamin Franklin Award for Science and Environment and the 2004 ForeWord Magazine Bronze Award for Nature. Formerly with The Nature Conservancy, Waldt has led over 1,400 interpretive hikes and has walked or snowshoed over 10,000 miles within the Crown ecosystem. His presentation features stories and photographs from these wilderness travels.

Missoula's Dudley Dana, owner of the Dana Gallery, selected 23 art pieces for our live auction, including paintings, photographs and sculptures inspired by the Crown of the Continent and created by artists from the Swan, Clearwater, and Blackfoot Valleys, as well as from other communities as far away as Idaho, Oregon and California. The silent auction will feature 20 additional Crown-inspired art pieces.

Funds from the Crown of the Continent Celebration will help Swan Ecosystem Center care for trails and campsites in the Mission Mountains Wilderness and on the Swan Range, and will equally support arts in the Swan, Clearwater and Blackfoot Valleys.

The Continental Divide runs the length of the Crown, shedding water to the Pacific, Atlantic and Arctic oceans. The southern boundary is the Blackfoot River Valley, while the northern boundary is near the headwaters of British Columbia's Elk River and Alberta's Highwood River.

Geologically, the Crown is spectacular with glacially carved peaks and valleys. Our mountain ranges consist of colorful red, green, blue, and yellow uplifted sedimentary bed rock formed from mud and silt deposited in ancient seas. The ripple marks found on rock slabs high in the Mission Mountains and Swan Range attest to this.

Conservationist and author George Bird Grinnell gave the ecosystem the name, Crown of the Continent in 1901, while the ancient Blackfoot name, Miistakis, translates to Backbone of the World. The sentiments behind these names are reflected in the art selected for the live auction and can be viewed on the Swan Ecosystem Center and Alpine Artisan web sites.

The Crown of the Continent is young. The soils are thin, made up of mineral rock fragments broken down from the parent rock and topped by narrow layers of organic matter from decomposing plants, animals and ash. The most fertile areas are the valleys. The highest mountain tops lack soil altogether.

The Crown's biological components took hold after the glaciers retreated about 11,000 years ago. Despite its youth, the Crown of the Continent is a rich ecosystem supporting nearly all native plants and animals indigenous to the northern Rocky Mountains.

The Crown is a mixing point for climates. Cool, wet air flows in from the Northwest coasts of Oregon and Washington, icy air blasts down from the Arctic, and warm air wafts in from California. The mountains send the air masses skyward where moist air condenses into snow and rain. When the air masses collide, storms develop, feeding our abundant lakes, wetlands and rivers and supporting all life.

Fire plays a vital role. The native plants and animals that thrive in our ecosystem have adapted over centuries to repeated forest and grassland fires. Historically most fires were started by lightning. But Native Americans who followed the retreating glaciers into the Crown's valleys and foothills purposely set fires to increase forage for wildlife, enhance berry fields, and improve conditions for edible and medicinal plants.

The Pend O'Reille, Salish and Kootenai people traditionally camped, hunted and gathered edible and medicinal plants on extended trips from the Mission Valley to the Swan and Clearwater Valleys. Native peoples traveled along the Blackfoot River to hunt buffalo on the eastern plains. In the early 1900s our valleys were settled by people of European descent who moved here to

homestead. They made their living ranching, logging and trapping.

Today we work as teachers, loggers, ranchers, outfitters and artists. Many of us have given up more lucrative jobs that could be found elsewhere because we feel a strong connection to wild places. A vibrant population of tireless retirees have settled here too, after earning a living elsewhere. The common thread, whether young or old, worker or retiree, is a desire to see our valleys thrive while maintaining this rich and beautiful land and all it supports.

Come celebrate with us, share wine, beer and hors d'oeuvres, view exceptional art created in the spirit of the place, and purchase artwork to enliven your home and reflects the riches of the Crown of the Continent. For more information view the Web sites: SwanEcosystemCenter.org and AlpineArtisans.org.

Works from the following local artists are included in the live auction:



Cottonwood Crucible by Russ Abolt



Randomly woven Osier dogwood with antler by Jennifer Dyer



Pine & Rock by Steve Ellis



On The Prowl by Ed Wolff



River's Edge by Beth Layman



Spring Awakening by Richard Scott Morgan



Vessel by Jerry and Martha Swanson