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Eye on the Environment

Crown Ecosystem Sustains Our History, Environment & Jobs

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The title Crown of the Continent is a statement of pride as well as a name given the Northern Rocky Mountains in Montana, Alberta and British Columbia. It's a huge ecosystem encompassing 16,000 square miles (42,000 sq. km if you are Canadian) of wild and scenic country and its surrounding communities.

With Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park and the greater Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex at its heart, the Crown encompasses British Columbia's Elk River, Alberta's Crowsnest Pass and the Old Man River, which flows through the Pikani Nation Reserve. It takes in Montana's Blackfoot and Swan River Valleys, the Mission Mountains Wilderness, and the Flathead and Blackfeet Reservations. It includes the towns of Cranbrook B.C., Pincher Creek, Alberta, and Choteau, Seeley Lake and Hungry Horse, Montana, to name a few.

The Crown is a place of work and a home to people who like wind in their hair and the silence of cedar groves. It's for people who aren't comfortable for long without snow in their socks or rain down their necks. It's where humans and wildlife attempt to live in harmony and where people make use of Nature's riches with an eye toward future supplies for the generations of workers to come.

The Crown of the Continent is a destination for tourists seeking outstanding scenery and genuine Western experiences, which they find in the region's

small towns and on its ranches, rivers and mountainsides. They come to sightsee, float rivers, hunt and fish, cross-country ski, to meet rural people at local events and celebrations, and to enjoy the amenities offered by towns like Kalispell and Lethbridge.

Geologically, the Crown is a collision point of tectonic plates. Layers of ancient sedimentary rock have been buckling and lifting upward for 100 million years since the North American continent separated and began its westward slide away from the European plate. This uplifting coupled with the erosional forces of glaciers and water created the Crown's spectacular scenery.

The geologic story is summarized in the "Crown of the Continent, Profile of a Treasured Landscape." This educational guide was written by Kalispell author Ben Long and published in 2002 for the Crown of the Continent Ecosystem Education Consortium (COCEEC), a group of educators providing opportunities for learning about the Crown Ecosystem since 1995. The guide also covers the history and ecology of the area.

The long human history of the region belongs first to the K'tunaxa (Kootenai), Salish and Blackfoot Confederacy, people who have made a living here for at least 10,000 years. The most recent glacial period came to an end about 11,000 years ago, and it is believed the first people arrived as soon as the land was able to support large prey species, such as the mountain buffalo, now extinct. Archaeologists believe the Old North Trail, remnants of which remain along the eastern foothills, was followed by people for at least 10,000 years.

According to the "Crown of the Continent Profile," Hudson's Bay Company surveyors may have been the first early Europeans to visit the area in the late 1700s followed by Meriwether Lewis on his return trip in 1806. David Thompson was an early explorer of the Canadian Rockies and northwestern Montana, working for the Northwest Company around 1810.

The conservationist George Bird Grinnell dreamed up the name Crown of the Continent in 1901. The Great Northern and Canadian Pacific Railways brought settlers and visitors, beginning in the 1890s. Waterton Lakes became a national park of Canada in 1895, followed in 1910 by the designation of Glacier National Park in the U.S. Historians believe Glacier was established in part to encourage travel on the new railway. Grinnell helped to establish the park and also named several of its peaks.

The U.S. Wilderness Act of 1964 enabled the establishment of the Bob Marshall, Scapegoat, Great Bear, Mission Mountains and Rattlesnake wilderness areas, securing an additional 1.6 million acres (640,000 hectares) of wild undeveloped land in the Crown ecosystem.

People moved to the Crown of the Continent to mine coal in British Columbia, farm the valleys of the Elk, Old Man, Flathead and Clark Fork rivers, graze cattle in the Blackfoot watershed and along the eastern front, and log the forests and mountainsides of the Swan and Clearwater valleys. The towns cropped up to support these enterprises. As tourism expanded, entrepreneurs created outfitting and lodging establishments to serve the demand.

Jump forward to September 23-24, 2010, in Waterton Lakes National Park, where 200 people convened to acknowledge the collective sense of pride people have for the historical, social, ecological riches of the Crown of the Continent, and to consider the advantages of protecting those riches.

Over the past hundred years, the region's economy has grown to support a population of about seven million hardworking people, while also maintaining sources of clean water for three oceans (the Arctic, Atlantic and Pacific). The ecosystem provides habitat for nearly all the plant and wildlife species indigenous to the region, and home to a network of relatively stable natural resource extraction communities. The recent discussion at Waterton centered around the ability of the region to sustain itself without losing its proud heritage.

A National Geographic "geotourism" map and a Web site, www.CrownoftheContinent.net, produced in 2008, address the issues of sustainability regarding tourism. The map features activities, sites and destinations that celebrate the Crown's unique heritage. The map text describes "geotourism" as activities that "sustain or enhance the geographical character of a place—its environment, culture, aesthetics, heritage, and the well-being of its residents." It identifies "geotravelers" as "people who...enjoy an authentic sense of place and care about maintaining it."

The map makes note of the Blackfoot Challenge, Holland Lake Lodge and Swan Ecosystem Center among hundreds of others sites and activities. The Web site is marvel of technology and information that is fun to look at, whether you are techie geek, a "dude" in search of an outfitter, or a seeker of local food or art, such as provided by Alpine Artisans, Inc. in the Swan, Clearwater and Blackfoot watersheds.

For Swan Ecosystem Center the question of sustainability is focused not only on a viable lodging and outfitting economy for the Swan Valley, but also on our traditional forest-based economy as we undergo the social and climatic changes on our horizon. Similar conversations are rightfully occurring in communities around the region. This discussion will be continued on a broader scale at subsequent annual roundtables like the recent event in Waterton Lakes National Park, and we will be there.