

NATURAL LANDS

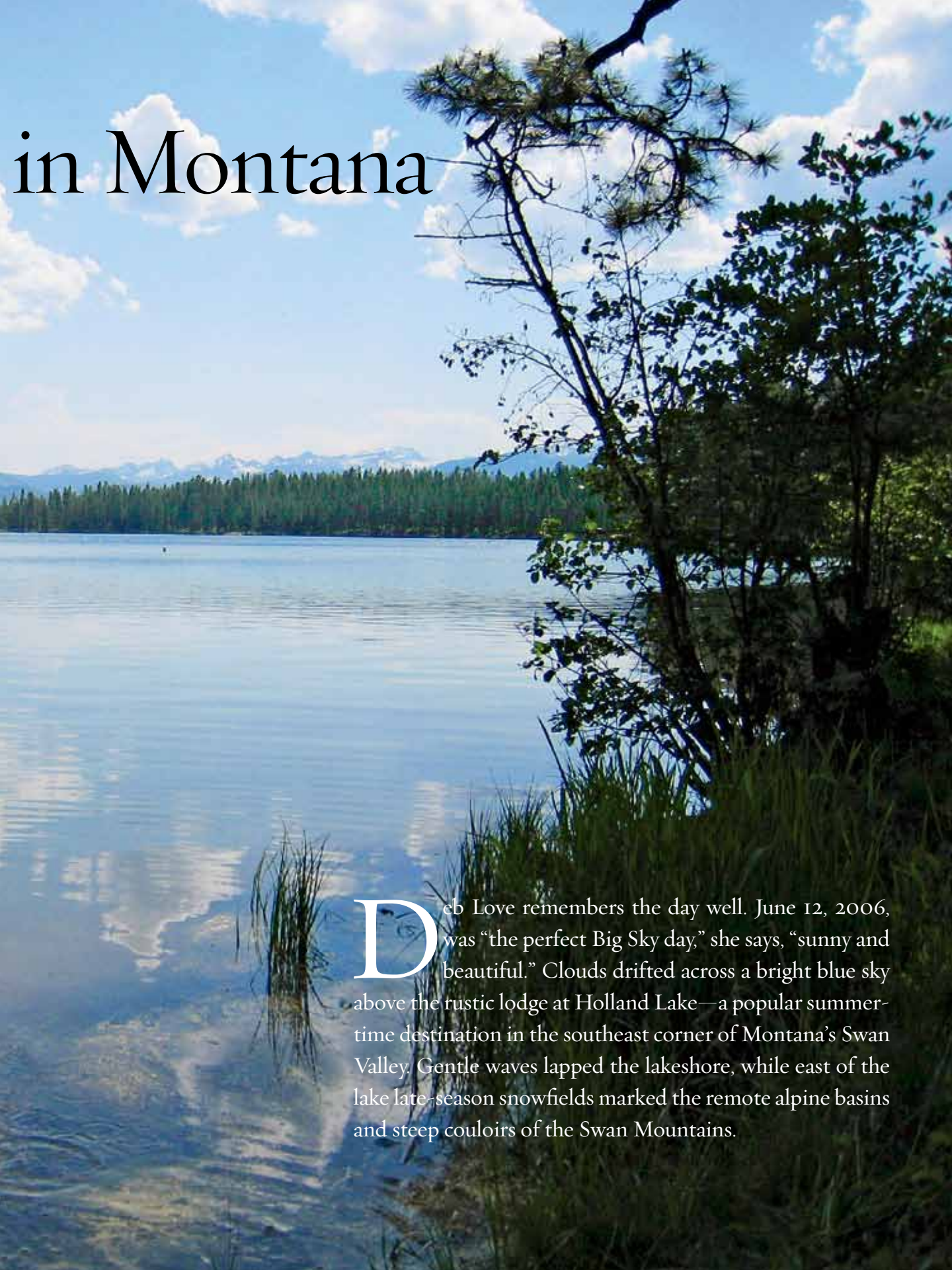
Conservationists Go Big

For more than a decade people in an isolated Montana valley worked to protect private timberlands from development. Their efforts grew into one of the largest conservation projects in U.S. history.

by Jason D. B. Kauffman



in Montana



Deb Love remembers the day well. June 12, 2006, was “the perfect Big Sky day,” she says, “sunny and beautiful.” Clouds drifted across a bright blue sky above the rustic lodge at Holland Lake—a popular summertime destination in the southeast corner of Montana’s Swan Valley. Gentle waves lapped the lakeshore, while east of the lake late-season snowfields marked the remote alpine basins and steep couloirs of the Swan Mountains.

“The valley’s got a lot of magic even after all the changes it’s seen in a hundred years.
It’s just a very, very special place.”

—Conservationist Melanie Parker

Love, the Northern Rockies director for The Trust for Public Land, had joined other TPL staff, fellow nonprofit partners, private conservation funders, and two dozen Swan Valley residents to discuss the future of 66,000 acres of private forestland owned by the Plum Creek Timber Company. On a map of the valley, these lands appeared as pink squares alternating in checkerboard fashion with green squares denoting the Lolo and Flathead National Forests and blue squares showing land owned by the state. Such “checkerboard” patterns, common throughout the West, resulted from a 19th-century federal policy that awarded every other section of land to railroad companies—sections that eventually passed to Plum Creek.

As part of a larger transition in the forest products industry, Plum Creek—the nation’s largest private landowner—had begun taking land out of timber production and selling it for development, which threatened to block wildlife corridors, disrupt habitat, and close lands to local uses such as hunting, fishing, and other recreation.

For more than a decade TPL had been working with valley residents to protect important parcels of Plum Creek checkerboard land. But more recently the company had announced that a certain 20,000 acres would

be sold—lands crucial to wildlife and to people’s way of life in the Swan Valley. TPL and its partner, The Nature Conservancy (TNC), turned to the private philanthropy community for help. Would they be interested in making a significant investment in the Swan Valley?

Listening that day were representatives of the Wyss Foundation, founded by Swiss philanthropist Hansjörg Wyss; the David and Lucile Packard Foundation; and other funders. Their consensus was that TPL and TNC needed to think bigger—much bigger—if they wanted support for this work. “Either protect the whole Swan Valley or we’re not interested,” Deb Love recalls them saying.

Go big the nonprofits did. The effort that kicked off that day evolved into the Montana Legacy Project, the largest conservation project of its type in U.S. history. TPL and TNC crafted a deal with Plum Creek under which they ultimately acquired 310,000 acres, including sensitive landscapes throughout western Montana. The project has been a victory for wildlife and residents; a tribute to the tenacity of local conservationists; a sterling example of what conservation groups, residents, and government leaders can accomplish together; and a model for future conservation projects of its kind. And



DEB LOVE

Conservationists, community members, and foundation representatives gather at Holland Lake in 2006 to discuss the future of conservation in the Swan Valley. The meeting led to the Montana Legacy Project, the largest conservation project of its kind in U.S. history. Previous page: A young visitor enjoys Holland Lake.

A LANDSCAPE FOR BEARS

“Large landscape conservation” efforts such as the Montana Legacy Project reach beyond conserving individual parcels to protect large networks of public and private land, bringing multiple environmental and economic benefits. Conservationists and government agencies more and more favor this approach.

One key goal of large landscape conservation is to preserve the habitat wildlife need to thrive, and the Swan Valley’s checkerboard lands are proving vital to a long-range effort on behalf of the endangered grizzly bear. For a long time, wildlife managers working on grizzly bear recovery assumed that bears in the region spent most of their time in the 1.65-million-acre Bob Marshall Wilderness complex—consisting of the Bob Marshall, Great Bear, and Scapegoat Wilderness Areas—rather than in the valley’s patchwork of private and public land. As it became clear that Plum Creek was going to sell its lands in the Swan Valley, managers began studying bear migration routes to determine the highest-priority lands for protection. Beginning in 2000, researchers led by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s Chris Servheen equipped ten grizzlies with GPS collars.



PHOTO COMPOSITE BY CHRIS SERVHEEN/USFWS

The yellow lines in the photo composite above show the summer travels of grizzlies through the valley and surrounding wilderness areas. Much to everyone’s surprise, the bears were spending most of their time in the valley lands that could be sold for development, putting the bears’ primary habitat at risk and almost assuredly increasing conflict with people. Once this was understood, preserving bear habitat became another of the many reasons to complete the Montana Legacy Project.

it got started because a group of residents wanted to preserve a valley they cherished for its timber resources and natural beauty alike.



FLO WILLIAMS

Swan Valley conservationists Tom and Melanie Parker with their children, Kyra and John.

RACING TO SAVE THE SWAN

Lying between the rugged peaks of the Swan and Mission mountains, the Swan Valley is a mosaic of lowland forests, meadows, and wetlands traced by the snaking path of the Swan River. Condon, the valley’s main settlement, offers little more than a post office, a general store, and a tavern named Liquid Louie’s along two-lane Route 83. While the valley’s human habitation is thin, it is home to one of North America’s densest populations of grizzly bears, healthy numbers of endangered lynx and bull trout, and other sensitive wildlife. And it lies at the heart of the ten-million-acre Crown of the Continent ecosystem—also encompassing the Bob Marshall Wilderness to the east and Glacier National Park to the north—which is unique in the contiguous United States in sustaining every single native species of large mammal that lived there when Lewis and Clark made their famous expedition.

“It’s just a very, very special place,” says longtime Swan Valley resident Melanie Parker, who attended the



KENTON ROWE PHOTOGRAPHY

Anglers enjoy a morning on Holland Lake in Montana's Swan Valley.

Holland Lake meeting and whose work has been critical to the preservation effort. “The valley’s got a lot of magic even now,” she declares, “even after all the changes it’s seen in a hundred years.”

Parker and her husband, Tom, and two children, Kyra, five, and John, three (along with assorted horses and mules and a new puppy) live in a modest cabin tucked beneath the Swan Mountains. In addition to running a hunting guide service, they together founded Northwest Connections, a community-based conservation organization that conducts scientific research and environmental monitoring in the valley and helps educate the public on habitat issues there. In 2001, Melanie—a skilled naturalist, environmental educator, and impassioned community activist—helped develop the Swan Lands Coordinating Committee, which brings together every state and federal agency, nonprofit, and business or individual landowner with a stake in the Swan Valley to come up with a collective vision for its future.

The valley once was prime hunting and fishing ground for the Salish, Kootenai, and other Native American groups. And for more than a century it has been home to loggers, hunters, trappers, back-to-the-land settlers, and others who have used Plum Creek lands as de facto public lands, thanks to the company’s generous policy of opening its properties for recreation. On these lands local folks taught their kids to hunt and fish, and went to try to harvest an elk each winter.

The first hint that this traditional use could change came in 1997, says Parker, when residents learned that Plum Creek intended to sell for residential development 2,500 acres surrounding one of the valley’s most beautiful, historic, and environmentally sensitive lakes. Nested in the shadow of the Mission Mountains, the lake is named for pioneering aviator Charles Lindbergh, who camped there for two weeks in 1927 after spotting the water from the air on a cross-country journey. TPL stepped in and, working with the local community, was



LINDA ROBERTS/ISTOCKPHOTO.COM

Protecting interconnected habitat for wildlife such as this lynx kitten was a key goal of the Montana Legacy Project.

Fragmentation of such large, linked habitats is one of the greatest threats to wildlife and environmental values in the Rocky Mountain West—and protecting them is part of a national movement that is being called “large landscape conservation.”

able to add Lindbergh Lake and the surrounding land to Flathead National Forest.

Over subsequent years TPL worked with local residents like the Parkers, and with organizations like the Swan Ecosystem Center, TPL’s main partner in the Swan Valley, to identify and conserve additional Plum Creek lands important to the community. By the time of the

Holland Lake meeting in 2006, TPL had purchased and conveyed to the Forest Service about 7,200 acres, while protecting 7,400 more with conservation easements. Another 5,200 acres in the valley were protected by landowners through voluntary conservation easements. “Unfortunately,” says Parker, “we couldn’t keep up with the pace of protection. How in the world were we ever going to muster the political and financial wherewithal to figure out a big-scale solution?”



TED WOOD

One goal of the Montana Legacy Project was to guarantee a flow of logs to local mills.

GO BIG OR GO HOME

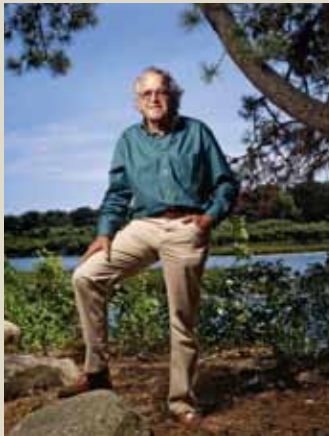
Among the attendees at the 2006 Holland Lake meeting were Eric Love, Deb’s husband and then TPL–Northern Rockies director, and Jamie Williams, then TNC’s Montana state director. Recognizing the power that a partnership between TPL and TNC could bring to a project of this potential magnitude, Eric and Jamie immediately began working together on a conservation solution. Assembling the details would command nearly every waking minute of their attention for the next three years and cement a close collaboration. (Eric would eventually leave TPL to join Jamie at TNC.)

FOR LOVE OF THE WEST

The \$25 million donation that helped launch the Montana Legacy Project came about, one could say, because a Swiss undergraduate answered a “help wanted” ad in 1958.

Civil engineering student Hansjörg Wyss spotted the ad at his university in Zurich: four student summer jobs were available with the Colorado highway department at a salary of \$50 per week. Wyss spent a summer surveying the first four-lane highways out of Denver and, not incidentally, falling in love with the American West. Following the work stint, he hooked up with a fellow student to spend several months touring the region’s deserts, plains, and mountains. “It was unbelievable,” he says. “The West of the late 1950s was wide open space. It was really virgin territory.”

Wyss went on to Harvard Business School and a prosperous business of making and selling medical devices. Over five decades, he would return often to the West to hike, camp, and explore. Eventually he founded the Wyss Foundation to support land



COURTESY OF THE WYSS FOUNDATION

conservation projects across the region he had come to cherish.

As it considered funding the Montana Legacy Project, the foundation’s board held its annual meeting at Holland Lake in the Swan Valley. It seemed to Wyss that the valley “still had a chance” to escape the backwoods sprawl that was claiming much of the West. “It looked like a terrific opportunity if we could put a coalition together,” he says.

The foundation’s lead gift—followed by another grant for \$10 million—paved the way for the funding from state, federal, and other private sources that would make the project happen. It was the partnership of funders, the community, and nonprofits that made the protection effort possible, Wyss thinks. “I can’t do anything on my own,” he asserts.

“I’m still very excited by this project,” says Hansjörg Wyss, “and I always will be.” He believes that the Swan Valley is an internationally important landscape that “should be saved for everyone to enjoy.”

Nationwide, TPL and TNC often partner on large conservation projects, and it was clear to everyone at the initial meeting that the Montana Legacy Project would call on all the technical savvy and financial and political muscle the two organizations could muster. Concurrent with TPL’s work in the Swan Valley, TNC had been working on a similar, 88,000-acre conservation deal on former Plum Creek lands in the Blackfoot Valley.

Private funders are increasingly supportive of large, landscape-scale conservation efforts that involve multiple nonprofits, widespread community support, and state and federal agencies. Knowing this, and with the funders’ message to go big or go home ringing in their ears, Eric and Jamie began working on a plan to purchase all of the remaining Plum Creek acres in the Swan Valley. Tom Tidwell, then head of the U.S. Forest Service Northern Region in Missoula and now the agency’s chief, consulted closely with them. And it soon became clear that among the company’s 1.2 million acres in Montana, areas beyond Swan Valley also deserved protection.

With help from The Wilderness Society (TWS), TPL and TNC identified Plum Creek lands that connect Swan Valley habitat to the massive wildlands of central Idaho’s Salmon-Selway ecosystem. Fragmentation of such large, linked habitats is one of the greatest threats to wildlife and environmental values in the Rocky Mountain West—particularly in the face of habitat damage wrought by climate change—and protecting them is part of a national movement that is being called “large landscape conservation.”

“We have to look at these bigger, broader landscapes,” said Bob Ekey, who was Northern Rockies regional director of TWS at the time of the Plum Creek lands inventory. “There was a sense that we had to act quickly.”

TPL and TNC completed their negotiations with Plum Creek in June 2008. The 310,000 acres that would be acquired included many of the company’s most critical checkerboard lands—parcels already identified by state and federal land agencies as being important for conservation.



TED WOOD

Swan Valley lands support many kinds of recreation, including the Race to the Sky, Montana's longest dogsled event.

FUNDS FOR MONTANA LEGACY

After the Montana Legacy Project was officially unveiled to the public, TPL staffer Robert Rasmussen and TNC outreach director Chris Bryant hit the road, attending more than 80 community meetings to explain the project's aims and ask: who should own and manage the former Plum Creek lands? Initially project organizers believed that Montanans might prefer private sales followed by protecting the land with conservation easements. But while some communities preferred state ownership and others federal ownership, "it turned out they all wanted the land to be public," recalls Deb Love. "People wanted to be able to hunt and fish and hike and camp on these lands, as they always had." There was also a strong interest in maintaining these lands as working forests, contributing to local economies.

With an agreement to acquire the lands in place, TPL and TNC went back to their funders. If the foundations were surprised by exactly how big the final package was, they nonetheless kept their word to support the project. A \$25 million Wyss Foundation donation gave Montana Legacy an early boost and was followed quickly by a \$15 million commitment from the David and Lucile Packard Foundation. Wyss would grant an additional

\$10 million in December 2010, as the project completed its third and final acquisition phase. About two-thirds of the land has now been transferred to its ultimate steward.

Altogether, \$100 million in private money is leveraging approximately \$400 million in public funding, the bulk of which has already been secured through the efforts of Montana governor Brian Schweitzer and U.S. senators Max Baucus and Jon Tester, who continue to work on generating the funding for the remaining lands targeted for public ownership. As chair of the Senate Finance Committee, Senator Baucus played a key role in ensuring that the Montana Legacy Project received the support it needed in Congress. "Montana is extremely fortunate to have political leaders who believe in the vision of conserving land for future generations," says Eric Love.

A GRAND VISION FOR WESTERN LANDSCAPES

The legacy project has remade landownership across a significant stretch of western Montana. Lands that passed from public to private ownership more than a century ago as a result of 19th-century railroad land grants are now finding their way back into public hands.

Owing to the size and complexity of the deal and the degree of partnership and cooperation it entailed,

“At the end of the day, the only reason any of this is possible is that we all worked together.”

—Kat Imhoff, Montana state director,
The Nature Conservancy

the project also has been credited with helping to inspire President Obama’s America’s Great Outdoors (AGO) Initiative: “to promote and support innovative community-level efforts to conserve outdoor spaces and to reconnect Americans to the outdoors,” in the words of the initiative’s April 2010 announcement. When the AGO initiative began its 20-state listening tour of public meetings last year, the kickoff event was held in Ovando, Montana, at the southern end of the Crown of the Continent. Federal officials used the occasion to praise the Montana Legacy Project as an example of community-based conservation done right.

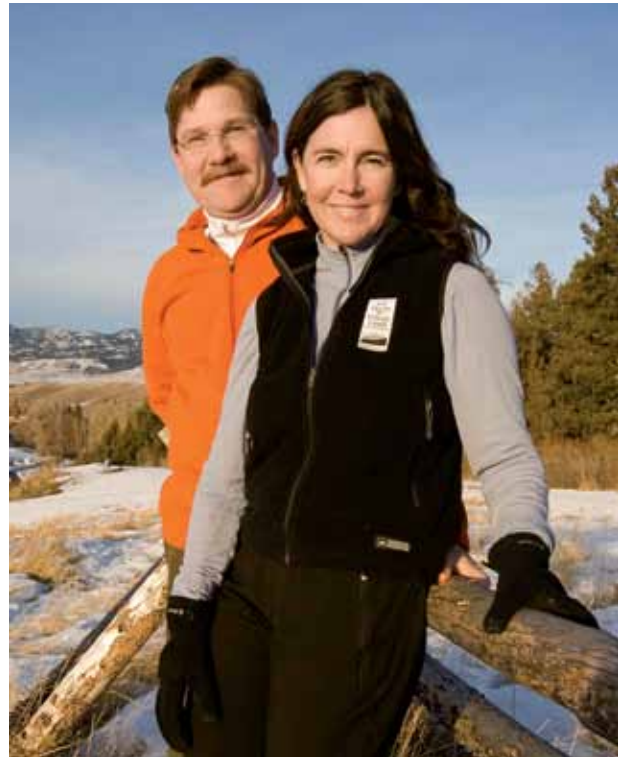
The project’s multiple public benefits have both an immediate impact and great significance for future generations. A positive future for the Crown of the Continent ecosystem seems within reach. And the legacy project ensures that residents will continue to play a vital role in the management of working forests. Public access to cherished recreational lands will likewise continue.

Achievements on this scale depend on a web of public and private partnerships and experienced leadership such as TPL and TNC can bring. “At the end of the day, the only reason any of this is possible is that we all worked together,” says Kat Imhoff, TNC’s Montana state director.

Just as important to the project’s success was the dedication of local residents like Melanie and Tom Parker. “This project would never have happened without the full support of the community, which means folks like Melanie and Tom spending their evenings and weekends talking to neighbors at the grocery store, or at the end of the day on a barstool at Liquid Louie’s,” says Deb Love.

Melanie believes that the full rewards of the legacy project will be reaped by future generations, including her own kids. “Wouldn’t it be cool if our kids inherited a great functional model of where people were working it out with grizzly bears, making a living, having a thriving small rural community in the middle of a wild place like this?”

Jason D. B. Kauffman is a freelance outdoor-environmental writer and photographer living in Missoula, Montana.



MEG HAYWOOD-SULLIVAN

TPL Northern Rockies director Deb Love and her husband, Eric Love, TPL’s primary project manager on the Montana Legacy Project. Eric now works for The Nature Conservancy.

PROJECT SNAPSHOT: MONTANA LEGACY PROJECT

Goal: To protect large, connected parcels of wildlands in northwest Montana for wildlife habitat, as working forestlands, and to support traditional uses by local communities.

The land: 310,000 acres formerly owned by Plum Creek Timber Company in the Swan River Valley; the watersheds of Fish Creek, Lolo Creek, Mill Creek, and the Clearwater River; and in the Potomac and Garnet mountain ranges.

Dates: Land acquired in three phases in 2008, 2009, and 2010.

Funding: \$100 million in private donations and \$400 million in state and federal conservation funding.

New ownership: Flathead National Forest, Lolo National Forest, Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, and Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks.