

LANDSCAPE CONSERVATION

# THE CROWN OF THE CONTINENT

ONE OF AMERICA'S LAST INTACT ECOSYSTEMS

**I**n the late 1800s, pioneers exploring the transboundary region of northwest Montana saw fortune in these hills: gold, silver, timber, and cattle. The prescient founder of the Audubon Society, George Bird Grinnell, however, saw riches of a different sort along this Rocky Mountain stretch of U.S.-Canadian borderland.

Inspired by glacier-sculpted mountains and spring-fed rivers draining into the Arctic, Pacific, and Atlantic Oceans, he dubbed this international wonder the “Crown of the Continent,” and in Montana helped establish one of the nation’s first and most beloved national parks. Today, Glacier National Park still glories in superlatives. It encompasses more than one million acres of old-growth forests, 10,000-foot peaks, glaciers, lakes, marshes, and native grasslands. Unlike any other place in the country, it remains home to all the major species that resided here when Lewis and Clark passed through, including the continent’s largest inland population of grizzly bears.

In 1932, Glacier—in conjunction with adjacent Waterton Lakes National Park in Canada—was designated the world’s first international peace park, now a UNESCO World Heritage Site. But the magic of the broader 18-million-acre Crown ecosystem lies in the sum of small things found nowhere else: a wolverine careening down a snowfield in Montana’s Bob Marshall Wilderness; a white bark pine tree 33 feet in circumference, clinging to a cliff in British Columbia’s backcountry; and peaks so rugged few people have ever summited them, the rocky backbone of this world where BC, Alberta and Montana meet high on the Continental Divide.



Glacier National Park © tandemstock.com





## A Multitude of Threats

**I**ncredibly, the Crown of the Continent ecosystem surrounding Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park is largely intact, offering a rare haven for long-ranging wildlife. Unfortunately, all that could change very quickly.

Climate change is a major concern in these ice-fed lands. Glaciers are receding and, scientists predict, likely will disappear by the time today's children graduate college. With them, a universe of wonders will recede—from the rare mist forestfly, which lives only in meltwater streams within 100 feet of the glaciers, to the abundant clear-water reservoirs that sustain downstream communities.

In addition, coal mining in the northern Crown is releasing selenium and other toxins into streams. Energy companies are drilling for coal-bed methane and

fracking for oil, which brings roads, pipelines, well pads, and pollution. Industrial logging also threatens key parts of the landscape, and new timber projects are carving away at the northern edges of Waterton-Glacier.

Meanwhile, condo developments, subdivisions, and road-widening projects are fragmenting habitat critical to iconic species such as bears and wolves and invasive species are devastating parts of the park. Lake trout, for example, have nearly wiped out native bull trout in Glacier's sparkling lakes.

## Grizzly Bears

**P**rotected by the Endangered Species Act, grizzly bears have persisted here for millennia, from a time when large mammals roamed much of North America and fairly covered the Great Plains. One of the few places grizzlies still roam freely is the Crown of the Continent, which hosts the largest inland population of grizzlies on the continent. These spectacular mammals can stand tall at 8 feet, and large males sometimes weigh in at more than 800 pounds; but despite their heft, grizzlies can run up to 30 miles per hour.



## Big-Thinking Solutions

**T**he Crown of the Continent's size (a full four degrees of latitude), its diversity (wetlands to mountaintops) and its history (a place of protected parks, wildlands and wilderness areas) make the region uniquely robust and resilient to environmental pressures, including climate change. The Crown represents a tremendous opportunity to get it right—to conserve this rare landscape

before it becomes fragmented by industry and development like so many of America's lost wildlands.

NPCA's innovative approach to ecosystem-wide conservation is two-fold. First, we push for major legislation that will connect and protect large parts—or all—of the Crown ecosystem. Second, we build creative coalitions of community members, from far-leaning liberals to firebrand conservatives, gun clubs to

churches. Through these unusual coalitions, we identify the values—wild open spaces such as Glacier Park—that bind us together as a community, and we build irrefutable support for conservation goals that legislators can't ignore.



Bighorn Sheep © jcrader/iStockphoto



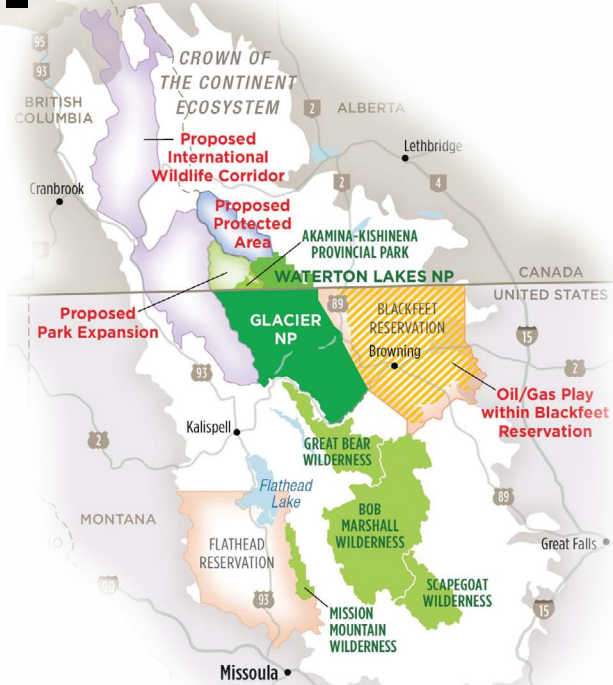


## Major Successes

**O**ur strategy has resulted in historic successes. Here's just one example: We spent a decade building a cross-border coalition to fight mining in the Canadian Flathead, a thickly forested river drainage upstream of Glacier National Park.

The mining would have devastated the park's water quality—and everything that depends on it, including a \$130 million tourist economy. In 2011—prompted by NPCA staffers, who convinced UNESCO to consider listing the peace park as endangered, Canadian legislators banned mining, oil, and gas leasing on 400,000 acres. It was a colossal victory for the international community and for conservation.

Other victories are numerous and range from persuading President Barack Obama to name the Crown a No. 1 landscape conservation priority in the country (which in turn secured funding to buy more park land), to helping the Park Service ban a railroad from dropping avalanche bombs inside Glacier Park.



## Crucial Next Steps

**O**ur victories have shown the power of our tactics, but there is still much work to be done. Here are just a few examples of the vital projects we are working on right now:

### Passing the North Fork Watershed Protection Act

The North Fork Watershed Protection Act will prohibit future mining, oil and gas leases on 400,000 public-land acres west of Glacier Park, in Montana's wild Whitefish Range. We have built broad community support—including large employers, local and Tribal governments and energy majors such as Conoco—and have worked with sponsoring Senators Max Baucus and Jon Tester to champion the bill. They remain committed to passage.

### Protecting the Whitefish Range

We are working with a diverse coalition of local stakeholders to map out a multi-use plan for the Whitefish Range; our goal is to help the Forest Service identify areas suitable for our respective interests. By allowing snowmobiling and logging on existing “working”

lands, we seek to secure protection for pristine areas in the form of a new national recreation area, wilderness area, or other designation. This multi-year project will result in protecting a critical wildlife corridor connecting Glacier to Canadian mountain parks as far north as Banff.

### Securing a Moratorium on Fracking

The Blackfeet Indian Reservation, which shares Glacier's eastern boundary, has emerged as a hotspot for hydraulic fracture oil exploration in the last three years. The “fracking” threats to Glacier are immediate. Just last summer, 850 gallons of crude oil spilled into Cutbank Creek, which is critical habitat for Glacier's endangered bull trout. We are working with tribal allies to secure support for a moratorium on fracking in a buffer zone around the park, among many other tactics.



## Why Act Now?

**M**ore than two million people from all over the world come to explore this unique place every year, bringing hundreds of millions of dollars and creating thousands of sustainable jobs. The parks and protected lands, it turns out, are the engines driving the Crown’s transboundary economy.

But there’s even more at stake. Conserving the Crown of the Continent is not only an opportunity to preserve two national parks and an entire intact landscape, it’s also an opportunity to provide an example to the rest of the world. Waterton-Glacier was the first international peace park. It

could also be a model of large-scale, transboundary conservation, proving that it’s possible to bring together diverse communities and cultures to protect a wild place with economic, cultural and even spiritual value—which is, in the end, priceless. 🐾



Grinnel Glacier © tandemstock.com

## How Your Gift Will Make a Difference

**W**ithout the generous gifts of our donors, it simply would not be possible to do the hard, roll-up-your-sleeves work of conservation that we do best, such as:

- Leading the Crown of the Continent Conservation Initiative, a collective of conservation organizations that coordinates 60-plus local environmental groups, ensuring that we work as a united force.
- Placing editorials and letters to the editor.
- Working alongside Chambers of Commerce, to link parks to economies and to build community support for conservation issues.
- Partnering with logging and energy companies to negotiate better practices near sensitive lands.
- Traveling to Capitol Hill to lobby for conservation legislation and to educate lawmakers.
- Researching and producing the economic reports that have proved the link between wild lands and a healthy economy, and that have convinced unlikely advocates to fight with us for conservation.
- Teaming with Tribal partners to understand and advocate for our shared conservation needs, protecting both cultural and natural resources.



Three Mountain Goats © tandemstock.com