

**Large Landscape Conservation:
A View from the Field**

Jamie Williams

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Abstract

The biggest challenge facing the land conservation community is how to get its work to scale. Just as communities are looking to sustain entire landscapes, conservation biologists have concluded that the protection of large, connected natural systems is imperative to stem the decline of species and maintain resilient ecosystems in the face of a changing climate. The need to move beyond piecemeal conservation to systemic success has never been greater, as an estimated three million acres of land a year is lost to development—dividing watersheds, fragmenting wildlife corridors, and disrupting sustainable economic uses of the land.

In this paper, Jamie Williams shares some stories from community-based conservation efforts in Colorado, Montana, and the Northern Rockies that are conserving some of the country's largest, intact landscapes. The magic behind these collaborative efforts lies in local landowner leadership backed by strong private-public partnerships. There is an emerging consensus among scientists, conservation groups, donors, and local communities for conservation of whole landscapes and systems. This kind of work on a national scale, however, requires expanded and more creative deployment of funding, capital, and tax incentives, as well as a new level of collaboration around large, connected landscapes.

About the Author

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Large Landscape Conservation: A View from the Field

Introduction

The central question facing land conservationists today is how to scale up efforts to protect entire landscapes and whole natural systems. The land trust movement has been built on the individual successes of conserved, private properties, but many landowners entering into conservation agreements want to know what is being done about their neighbor, their neighborhood, and most significantly, their landscape.

Farmers and ranchers talk of the need to sustain a continuous network of working lands—a critical mass of agricultural activity—or risk losing the supporting businesses and community cooperation they require to survive. Fire fighters say that keeping remote lands undeveloped reduces the hazards and costs of firefighting for local communities. Sportsmen are losing access to public lands and wildlife when scattered rural development fragments habitat. Conservation biologists have long suggested that protecting bigger places will sustain more species, and conversely, that fragmentation of habitat into smaller islands is the leading cause of species decline and loss. Finally, a rapidly changing climate reinforces the need to protect large, connected ecosystems to be resilient over the long term.

With many funders and public partners currently seeking to focus on collaborative, landscape-scale conservation efforts, the land trust community has an excellent opportunity to leverage its good work by engaging in landscape partnerships. Recognizing that most successful conservation projects are built from the ground up, land trusts, with their grass roots base and collaborative working style, are in one of the best positions to help support local initiatives. The process of building these efforts requires a commitment beyond the urgency of transactions and fundraising, however, and necessitates a sustained focus that is much broader than the immediate objectives of many land trusts.

Through 21 years of working with local, collaborative conservation initiatives, primarily in Colorado and Montana, I have found some common themes and learned some important lessons about what does not work. This paper draws from that experience to highlight a few major principles and immediate opportunities that can help efforts to sustain very special places across the United States for future generations.

What Does Success Look Like?

Shortly after becoming the state director of The Nature Conservancy's Montana Program in 1998, I had the great fortune of being introduced to Jim Stone, Ovando rancher and chairman of a local landowner group called the Blackfoot Challenge. Established in 1993,

this collaborative group brings the Blackfoot Valley's diverse interests together around consensus-based approaches to sustaining the rural character and natural resources of the valley. The Conservancy had been working in the Blackfoot area since 1978, when it helped secure the first conservation easement in the state and then supported private landowners in their pioneering initiative to conserve the Blackfoot River corridor. Jim Stone, however, was not satisfied and believed that the Conservancy and other groups could do more to help the Blackfoot Challenge address some of the biggest issues facing the valley.

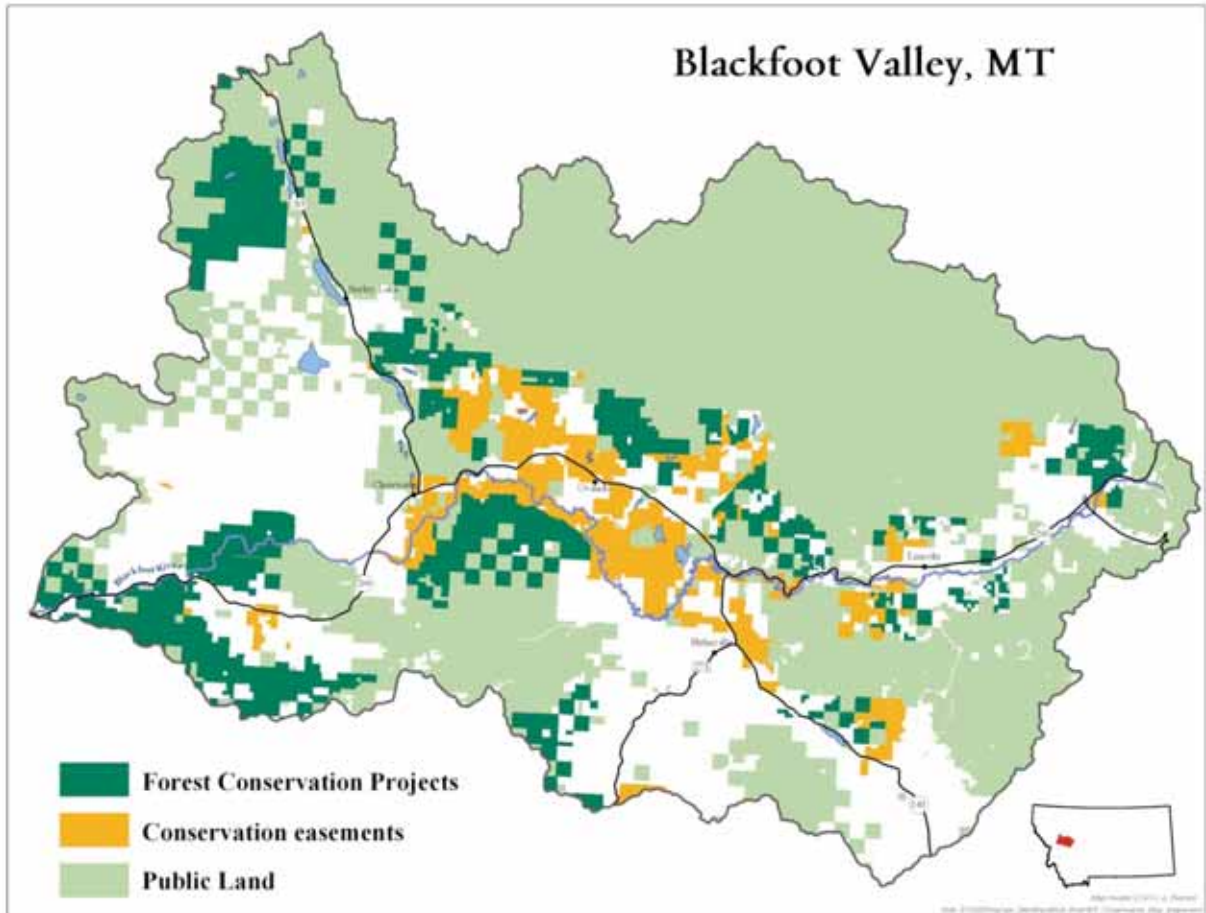
As a result, the Conservancy, along with other agencies and groups, redoubled its efforts in the region and significantly deepened its support of the Blackfoot by joining the Blackfoot Challenge board, participating regularly in the Challenge's meetings, and committing to a larger vision championed by local landowners. When landowners argued there were not enough resources for conserving working ranches, the Challenge raised private funds to match an innovative U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) program to purchase conservation easements through the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF). When landowners said they were not getting enough help to control weeds, the Challenge established one of the largest weed control districts in the West. When landowners were wringing their hands about the potential sale of vast forest lands in the valley, the Challenge launched a comprehensive acquisition of forest lands encircling the valley that connected protected private ranches on the valley floor with public lands above. When landowners recognized the need for systemic river restoration, the Challenge developed a strong partnership with the Big Blackfoot Chapter of Trout Unlimited, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, and 200 landowners to help restore more than 48 tributary streams for native trout and watershed health.¹

Clearly, Jim Stone's vision for the area was not limited to just a few ranches, but rather focused on the long-term health of the entire river valley, from "ridge to ridge." What happens on public lands is just as important as on private lands, he argued, and he and his neighbors have been working together to achieve an integrated, sustainable stewardship approach at the landscape level (see figure 1).

The wonderful aspect of the Blackfoot story is that it is no longer a rare exception but rather an emblem of a much larger movement of collaborative conservation efforts rising from the West and the entire country. These landscape partnerships confirm an emerging consensus that what is important is not the isolated victory of a conserved property, but the need to protect and sustain entire landscapes that are vital to the health of fish and wildlife as well as to the vitality of local communities, their economy, and their quality of life.

¹ Big Blackfoot Chapter of Montana Trout Unlimited, "Working Together to Restore the Blackfoot Watershed," February 2011.

Figure 1. The Blackfoot River Valley, 2011



The Blackfoot valley is a large, 1.5-million-acre watershed on the southern end of the Bob Marshall / Scapegoat Wilderness and the Crown of the Continent ecosystem. Historically, the watershed has been approximately 60 percent public lands, 20 percent corporate timber lands, and 20 percent private lands. After 35 years of conservation work, approximately 250,400 acres of private lands in the Blackfoot have been conserved, connecting private and public lands over the entire watershed. This work includes approximately 123,800 acres that have been placed into conservation easements and 173,060 acres of timber lands that have been purchased for conservation and continued community access.²

The Five Valleys Land Trust, the Montana Land Reliance, The Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, The Nature Conservancy, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks have all been important players in securing conservation easements in the Blackfoot, and the U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, and the State of Montana have helped acquire timber holdings to consolidate public lands according to a Blackfoot community plan. Trout Unlimited has been the lead partner on river restoration. The Natural Resources Conservation Service has been very active in stewardship enhancement projects. The Wilderness Society has been the lead partner on collaborative forest restoration. The Blackfoot Challenge partners with more than 160 landowners, 30 businesses, 30 nonprofits, and 20 county, state, and federal agencies.

² Amy Pearson, GIS Specialist for The Nature Conservancy, "Blackfoot Map," 14 February 2011.

Landowner-Driven Conservation Efforts

Given the growing movement of collaborative efforts in the West, many conservation groups and public agencies have asked how they can help expand these successes to other places. These organizations should keep in mind the advice of Ed Marston, former publisher of *High Country News*. He observes that local, collaborative initiatives generally arise from local people taking action into their own hands to solve their problems, and that “we need to respect and honor that rebellious kind of work and not domesticate it.”³ What he is suggesting is not that there isn’t a very important role for public agencies and conservation groups in collaborative efforts, but that these groups will be far more successful if they figure out how to empower landowner-driven initiatives from behind.

If there is one thing I have learned in 21 years of collaborative conservation work it is that local landowners must be in front and everyone else behind. An example from the Yampa River in western Colorado illustrates this well. In the early 1990s, conservation groups were trying to protect the area, but were met with major mistrust by the local ranchers. The valley had no shortage of groups trying to conserve the region and a whole parade of community visioning exercises, but none of them had really taken hold in a meaningful way, precisely because local landowners were not in the lead. That dynamic was then turned on its head by several landowner initiatives, the most significant of which was the Routt County Open Lands Plan. With the help of consultant Marty Zeller and sponsorship by the county commissioners, this plan was based on a series of landowner meetings in each part of the county. The plan called for eight significant measures to better manage explosive growth in the valley, ranging from a right to farm ordinance to a purchase of development rights program on working ranches. Seven of the eight measures were quickly implemented, and Routt County was one of the first rural counties in the West to voluntarily raise its own taxes through a local ballot measure to protect working ranches. That program has now been reauthorized by voters and is a great success. Without the leadership of local ranchers, landowners, and business people (as well as the Yampa Valley Land Trust) this initiative never would have passed.

The kind of work Ed Marston was talking about is what Arizona rancher Bill Macdonald has called “the radical center.” After years of conflict between ranchers and federal agencies over the management of public lands around the Animas Mountains in the boot heel of New Mexico and southeastern Arizona, Macdonald helped spearhead a landowner collaborative called the Malpai Borderlands Group to help reintroduce fire for the health of grasslands and the local ranching economy. That landowner-driven effort grew into an innovative partnership among ranchers, conservation groups, and public agencies to conserve and sustain this one-million-acre “working wilderness” through conservation easements, grass banking, and a more integrated stewardship approach to the system as a whole.

³ Ed Marston, from recollection of comments he made at a workshop in 2001 on community-based conservation (reconfirmed 2 March 2011).

The Critical Role of Land Trusts

As significant as landowner leadership is to collaborative, landscape-scale conservation efforts, land trusts perform a vital function as these initiatives cannot succeed without them. The land trusts can serve the very important role of leading from behind as a reliable partner with deep local ties and knowledge of outside resources that can be brought into play as needed.

As passionate as local landowners are about maintaining their place as they know it, they often do not have the time or desire to step into the role of bringing people together around common objectives. Often, a land trust or agency can help catalyze and support the development of collaborative efforts. Usually this takes the form of a person who has worked in the landscape for years and helps support one or more local leaders. On Montana's Rocky Mountain Front, for example, local ranchers are working together with several land trusts and the USFWS to protect working lands through conservation easements. The local landowner committee has been led by Dusty Crary and several other ranchers, but their 20-year friendship with the Conservancy's Dave Carr has been pivotal in their stepping forward and staying engaged. Likewise, Bill Long and Lois Delger-DeMars of the Montana Land Reliance have played a pivotal role in facilitating the Devils Kitchen Management Group to sustain the large ranching landscape and its wildlife just south of the Missouri River near Cascade, Montana.

One of the best agency analogues to land trust work with private landowners has been the USFWS's Partners for Wildlife Program, which has a remarkable track record of building partnerships with private landowners to conserve fish and wildlife habitat through jointly funded stewardship projects. Greg Neudecker is one of the key leaders of this program, and his 21-year friendship with and dedication to the Blackfoot has been central to its success. Tim Love from the U.S. Forest Service has played a similar role in the Blackfoot. Interestingly, these behind-the-scenes leaders often felt they were bucking their job responsibilities to help dedicated landowners out of a passion for a larger vision. It would benefit conservation overall to encourage and support this kind of work whenever possible.

The Need for Private and Public Partnership

Many landowners and land trusts hesitate to bring in public agencies that they have long mistrusted. Land trusts pride themselves on being apolitical and achieving "conservation through private action." It is often counterintuitive to landowners and land trusts to think they need to partner closely with public agencies. As a rancher once said to me, "it's the Fish and Wildlife Service with their endangered species program that is putting us out of business, so why in the world would we want to work with them on ranchland conservation?"

Montana's Rocky Mountain Front is a good case in point. For years, ranchers in this landscape along the eastern front of the Bob Marshall Wilderness had a rather active

distrust of not only federal agencies but also The Nature Conservancy, which had purchased Pine Butte Preserve in 1978 to safeguard an expansive wetland system for grizzly bears. The Conservancy managed this preserve for many years by looking within, but in the mid-1990s realized that its focus needed to turn outward. The home range of a single grizzly using Pine Butte (roughly 28 square miles) was 200 square miles, so to sustain grizzlies as well as the other wildlife of the Front, the entire 200-mile mountain/prairie landscape was important. As local Conservancy staff made that transition in focus, they found that their neighbors were deeply committed to sustaining the Front's special values. Local stewardship of a vast expanse of unfettered, native grasslands and dense riparian habitats is why the Front hosts some of the richest wildlife in the country. Even more significant, these landowners were interested in working together to find ways that would sustain the Front as they knew it.

As a new, collaborative group of ranchers came together on the Front with a vision of sustaining this working landscape, they asked the land trust community to diversify its tools for conservation. Although they liked the idea of conservation easements because they helped landowners protect their land in a manner that keeps it in private ownership and management, many of them were not in a position to donate easements. The landowners said that if funds could be gathered to help purchase conservation easements, even at bargain-purchase rates, it would more likely result in a system of conserved ranches.

The Conservancy initiated several easement purchases in the late 1990s, but private funding was limited to do this at a large scale. The landowner group invited the USFWS, the State of Montana, and the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to see if there were ways of enhancing the easement program with public funds. While all of these agencies deepened their commitment to the Front, the biggest opportunity to secure significant, new funding came through the creation of a new USFWS Conservation Area authorized to use the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) solely for the purchase of conservation easements on working ranches (modeled after the Blackfoot program). The Conservation Fund joined the partnership to match this public funding with major private funding they could secure. As of early 2011, this collaboration of ranchers, land trusts, the state, and the USFWS has leveraged donated easements, private funding, and public funding to help place more than 161,000 acres of working ranches on the Front into conservation easements, and the demand continues to grow.⁴

Collaborative groups like those on the Front, the Blackfoot, and the Malpai Borderlands have achieved a high level of success not only because they were landowner-driven but also because they engaged public agencies in landscape-scale solutions. The corollary is that many landscape collaborative groups have never achieved their full potential because they did not involve relevant federal and state agencies. Although many landowner-driven groups fear losing control, agencies can be included in a manner that still keeps landowners in the lead.

⁴ Mary Tuckerman, The Nature Conservancy in Montana, personal communication, 25 January 2011.

When engaged as part of landscape partnerships, state and federal agencies can be very effective allies. In the Blackfoot, the science, research, monitoring, funding, and restoration work delivered by the State of Montana and the USFWS has made a huge impact on the recovery of the river system. On the land protection front, public acquisition of extensive timber lands has complemented private land trust work by consolidating public lands and maintaining community access to those lands for grazing, forestry, and recreation. Recognizing the problems associated with a century of fire suppression, the U.S. Forest Service has initiated experimental thinning projects of small-diameter, dog-hair stands to restore the structure and function of forestlands and reduce the fire threat to the valley. That work is now being expanded through a new federally funded Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program (CFLRP) across the Blackfoot, Clearwater, and Swan valleys.

The larger principle is that all the major stakeholders have to be at the table, working together toward their common ground. Blackfoot Challenge rancher, David Mannix, says they have what they call the “80–20 rule.” “We work on the 80 percent we can agree on and check the other 20 percent at the door with our hat.”⁵ Jim Stone claims that when you show up at a Blackfoot Challenge meeting, “We ask you to leave your organizational agenda at the door and put the landscape first,” focusing on the health of the land and the community so closely tied to it. What’s really important is having the “right people” at the table for private-public partnerships to work – individuals motivated by a common vision, creative, solution focused, and humble enough to recognize that they do not have all the answers. Collaboration takes time and the most critical factor is that once common-ground approaches are developed, having initial successes, however small, is very important to build the kind of foundation needed for bigger solutions down the road.

The Need for Funding

The biggest barrier local collaborative groups face in achieving landscape-level goals is the lack of adequate funding. Without sufficient funding, collaborative efforts often lose momentum, which can set back this kind of work for years.

Funding is not a static element, but it is responsive to the scale of the outcomes that can be achieved and the breadth of the constituency engaged. Private and public funders alike do not want to participate in partial success unless it is a step toward long-term, sustainable success. And they do not want to fund places where groups are competing. Land trust coordination used to be “you work over there, and I’ll work over here,” but increasingly land trusts have come to realize the potential of what can be achieved through collaboration. The chances of achieving landscape-scale success without multiple organizations and partners are about zero. Donors have consistently led on this issue as they understand a resource-constrained world and the value of leveraging diverse strengths and funding.

For example, a donor who had invested modest amounts in Montana’s Swan Valley was frustrated by the way rapidly approaching development would surround nodes of

⁵ David Mannix, comments made at a Crown of the Continent meeting, Ovando, Montana, 1 June 2010.

protection, compromising decades of conservation investments. The community had a very strong vision for maintaining the valley's working forests and wildlife and had forged strong collaborations with state and federal agencies, but the conservation groups had not really come together and committed in the way they needed to. The donor said, "Go big or go home." After the conservation groups fully engaged with the larger vision and invested in the place-based collaboration in the Swan Valley, the donor increased his giving dramatically, as did many others.

Even when great collaborative efforts come together around landscape-level goals and achieve a heightened threshold of success, affording true scale is often still very difficult. As one landowner put it, "What we have here is a crisis of opportunity." After years of mistrust, many landowners are now interested in conserving their properties, but the funding or the right incentives are often not in place to help make it happen. Indeed, there is a serious funding gap to truly achieving landscape conservation in the United States. Mark Shaffer, while director of Doris Duke Charitable Foundation's Environment Program, sized up this gap to be about \$5 billion per year needed in new funding and tax incentives over the next 30 years to conserve a network of important landscapes in the United States.⁶ The land trust community is now conserving land at the rate of about 2.6 million acres per year (a cumulative total of about 37 million acres according to the last census in 2005), but to sustain whole landscapes before urgent threats close the window of opportunity, the rate needs to double or triple, and efforts be conducted in a more focused way.⁷

Emerging Opportunities for Landscape-Scale Conservation

There are several major trends and near-term opportunities that could really enhance landscape-scale conservation efforts, but the success of these opportunities hinges on land trust engagement and leadership.

First, it is critical that Congress makes permanent the enhanced deductions for conservation easements. As the Land Trust Alliance (LTA) points out, these enhanced deductions can increase the protection of more than 250,000 acres per year above and

⁶ Mark Shafer, Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, personal communication, 14 August 2009 . His figures were based on a sampling of 19 State Wildlife Action Plans (SWAPs) suggesting a need to protect an additional 12 percent of the United States (276 million acres) to protect a complete network of whole landscapes for fish and wildlife . If done over 30 years through conservation easements alone, the cost could be approximately \$350 billion, or \$12 billion per year . While his research showed \$11.5 billion of current federal, state, and private spending for land conservation (\$3.9 billion of which is mitigation), he speculated that only about 50–70 percent of that could be directed to the protection of SWAP priority areas, and thus the \$4–6 billion gap . The \$5 billion per year federal funding need is the same figure recommended by the bipartisan Outdoor Resources Review Group (ORRG) (2009 report) sponsored by Senators Jeff Bingaman and Lamar Alexander and co-chaired by Pat Noonan, Henry Diamond, and Gilbert Grosvenor.

⁷ Land Trust Alliance, "2005 National Land Trust Census," 30 November 2006 . Total acres conserved between 2000 and 2005 by local, state, and national land trusts was 13 million acres, raising total conserved acres from 24 million acres to 37 million acres.

beyond what is already being accomplished.⁸ Given congressional focus on spending cuts as well as on tax cuts, this is one of the few conservation finance tools that may be achievable in the near term. Over the longer term, a transferable tax credit program could be legislated nationally, similar to what Colorado, Virginia, and other states have done, given the enormous incentive this creates for securing conservation easements.

The second trend relates to increasing federal focus on protecting whole landscapes by empowering communities that are working together. In 2001, Liz Claiborne and Art Ortenberg assembled a meeting in Red Lodge, Montana of community-based practitioners around the West to learn how to better empower this kind of work, especially at the federal level.⁹ Inspired by these findings among others, the Bush administration launched a Cooperative Conservation Program in 2005 that provided improved agency coordination and support for local collaborative work. The Obama administration has launched a similar effort, called America's Great Outdoors Initiative, focused on helping communities better sustain their land and water through locally-driven partnerships and reconnect America's youth to the great outdoors.

While federal resources are highly constrained in the near term, the opportunity is that existing programs and funding will be more focused on whole landscape conservation projects (as well as urban parks, trails, and blue ways). Access to that funding will be difficult without a collaborative landscape approach. Already, NRCS has figured out how to use unspent funding from some of its existing programs and re-invest it in areas like the Northern Everglades, where it recently committed approximately \$89 million in Wetland Reserve Program (WRP) funds for the purchase of conservation easements over 26,000 acres of working ranches.¹⁰ Similarly, the agency is investing significant funds for sage grouse on the high prairies of Wyoming and Montana. The USFWS announced a new conservation area in the Flint Hills of Kansas that builds upon a local rancher collaborative to secure conservation easements on working ranches, covering an area of more than 1 million acres.¹¹ U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack announced a major policy shift for the department to an "all lands" approach to conserving and restoring the big systems of the United States. America's Great Outdoors presents an excellent opportunity for substantial, focused funding and a renewed commitment of agency staff to landscape partnerships. The challenge facing the land trust community is to ensure that these funds are applied in a manner that builds broad support for this work over the long term.

⁸ Land Trust Alliance, "Enhanced Tax Incentives for Conservation Renewed Through 2011." ENews Alert, 17 December 2010.

⁹ This workshop on Collaborative Resource Management in the Interior West was held at Red Lodge, Montana, on 18–22 October 2001. For more information, see the Red Lodge Clearinghouse Web site, www.rlch.org.

¹⁰ USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, press release, "USDA Announces Major Wetland Restoration Project in the Northern Everglades Watershed," 19 July 2010.

¹¹ U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, press release, "Secretary Salazar Marks Establishment of Flint Hills Legacy Conservation Area," 12 November 2010.

The third opportunity is the importance of passing local and statewide measures to increase funding and tax incentives for conservation. Despite the weak economy and pervasive talk of less government and lower taxes, voters passed 83 percent of the ballot initiatives nationwide to fund land and water conservation in the 2010 elections. Overall, 41 of 49 funding measures passed, generating more than \$2 billion dollars for land, water, parks, and farmland conservation over the next 20 years.¹² Although the winners in the past have been big states like Florida and California, victories this past year included Iowa, Oregon, Maine, Rhode Island, and Texas, as well as other states and counties. Where local measures used to be primarily urban open space programs, they are increasingly being applied on a county or state level. Montana is a perfect example where Bozeman, Helena, and Missoula had all passed city measures initially, but more recently have each passed countywide ones.

The final trend and opportunity in which the land trust community could better engage is the ability to partner with private capital on major land conservation projects. Over the last 26 years (1983–2009), more than 43 million acres of forest lands traded hands.¹³ New private equity groups called Timber Investment Management Organizations (TIMOs) and Real Estate Investment Trusts (REITs) picked up 27 million acres of this land in a very short period and many of these investment groups have been interested in conservation as part of their business model, including Lyme Timber, Conservation Forestry, Ecosystem Investment Partners, Beartooth Capital Partners, and others. While they hold these lands for their respective investment window (8–12 years generally), some TIMOs have engaged in monetizing various non-timber values, including development rights (through conservation easements), wetland mitigation rights (mitigation banks), and various stewardship enhancement programs. Entire landscapes cannot be conserved with donated easements or traditional conservation purchases alone; land trusts need to engage profit-making ventures in sustainable land use as a critical pathway forward, and these investor groups need conservation partners to achieve conservation results.

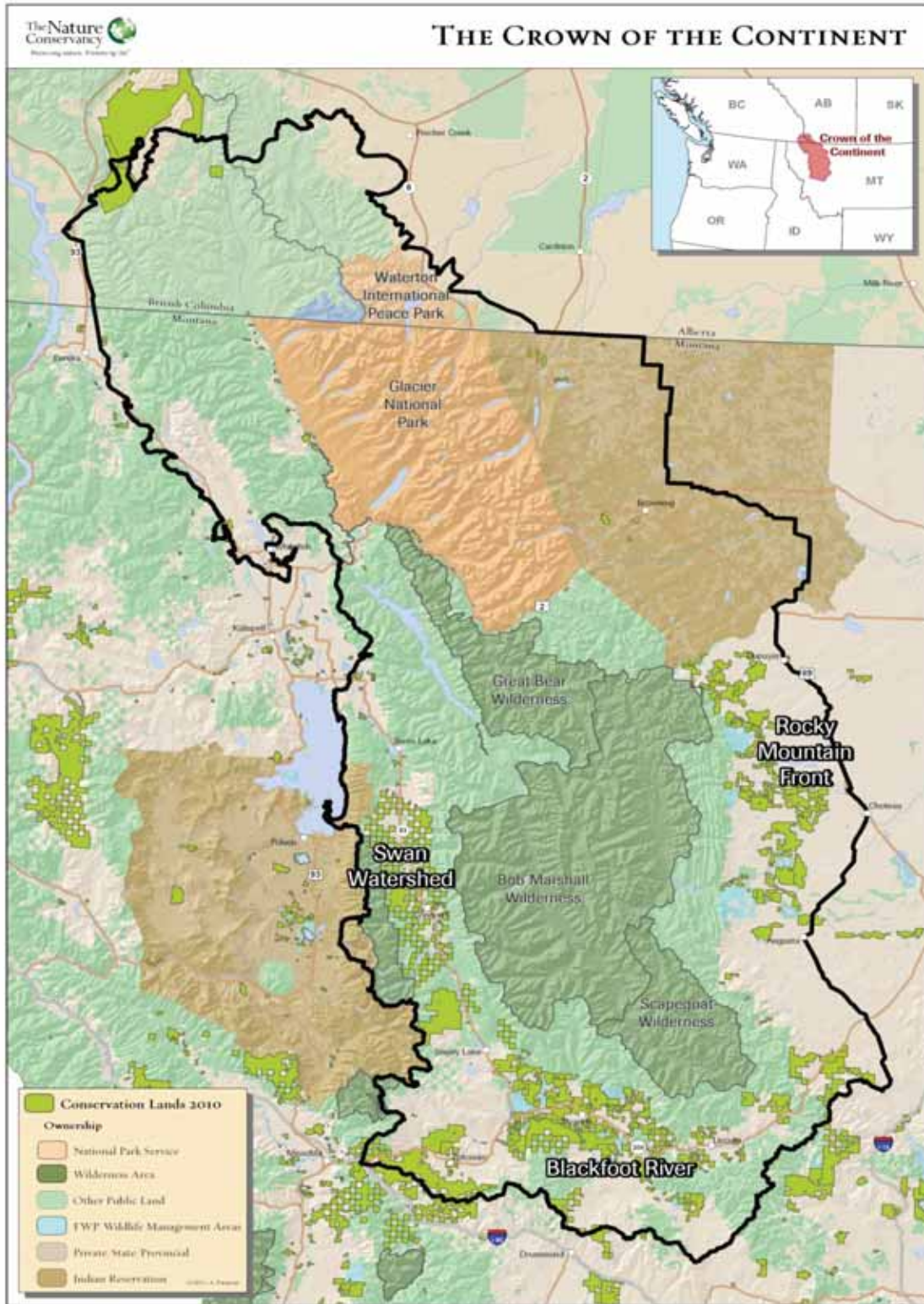
The Question of Scale

The great trend in conservation has been from small to big: starting with the protection of individual properties, to neighborhoods, to landscapes, to ecosystems, and now to networks of ecosystems. For their part, landowners in the Blackfoot, the Swan Valley, and the Rocky Mountain Front have come to realize that the health of their individual places depends on the health of the larger Crown of the Continent they all share (figure 2). Surrounding the Bob Marshall Wilderness and Glacier-Waterton International Peace Park, the 10-million-acre Crown is one of the most intact ecosystems in North America. Thanks to a century of public land designations and 35 years of private land protection by local communities, this system has not lost a single species since European settlement. Now, landowners and other partners are reaching across the Crown in a variety of ways to see how they can work together more closely for the good of the whole.

¹²The Trust for Public Land, www.landvote.org.

¹³Jim Rinehart, R&A Investment Forestry, “U.S. Timberland Post Recession,” April 2010.

Figure 2. The Crown of the Continent



As big as the Crown is, the sustainability of its wildlife populations also depends on being connected to other populations throughout the Northern Rockies. That larger network of natural systems, however, can only be realized if critical linkage areas can be conserved. For this reason, land trusts working in Wyoming, Idaho, Montana, and Canada have been collaborating at this larger scale through a framework called the Heart of the Rockies to identify common priorities and conservation needs. This level of regional collaboration has not only resulted in a new level of conservation results but also brought more attention to the region by funders. It has also been pivotal for land trust collaboration around common policy priorities and helped spawn the Montana Association of Land Trusts (MALT).

Organizing at these larger scales is truly imperative if we are to sustain large, connected natural systems, but one of the real lessons I have learned is to understand what can be achieved at each scale. Large regional initiatives are important for creating a big, compelling vision but not for implementing conservation on the ground. What they do well is apply science at nature's scale, create regional collaboration around common priorities, create a forum for exchange on innovative ideas, and bring greater attention to the area. They provide a large, compelling context for why local work is so significant. However, Melanie Parker from the Swan Valley, one of the great local advocates for networking across the Crown, has some very cautionary advice. She says, "We need to aggregate our efforts across the larger region to influence policy, and to access resources, but anyone who thinks that conservation work can or should be done at the scale of 10 million acres is seriously misguided. This kind of work has to be done at the scale at which people live, work, and understand their landscapes."¹⁴

Local people are moved to act by the power of their own place and in their own way. Every place is unique and to begin designing strategies at such a large scale is often too abstract for landowners at best or outright alienating at worse. One of the important lessons learned from the Blackfoot Challenge is that even the Challenge, representative as it is of the valley's landowners and ranchers, was not willing to take on a valley-wide forest project without holding more than 14 meetings in each neighborhood throughout the valley to determine how best to meet their specific needs. As in politics, all conservation is local. Likewise, politicians are most responsive to homegrown projects devised and backed by local residents. For their part, donors, while looking for big vision, are most likely to fund specific projects championed by someone they believe in. How big can place-based efforts really be and still hold community cohesion is an important question, but certainly the Blackfoot, Rocky Mountain Front, and the Swan are pushing the outer limits. Each is addressing lands at the scale of 0.5 million to 1.5 million acres.

Regional collaboration is where land trusts can greatly add value to local efforts. While landowners and local residents often do not have the additional time to participate in these larger initiatives, they want their place and specific issues to be well represented. As one landowner from the Swan Valley said, "We really need to be part of the Crown partnership as long as it is not me." Land trusts and conservation organizations can play the very important role of connecting local, place-based collaborative groups. But to do

¹⁴ Melanie Parker, Northwest Connections , personal communication, 10 February 2011.

this well, they need to stay tightly coordinated with those collaborative groups and not get out in front of them.

In the end, I believe that the land trust community would be well served by strengthening its collaborative work, by deepening its engagement in landscape partnerships, and by collaborating with each other at larger scales for the purpose of achieving conservation success.

Conclusion

After many decades of outstanding work by more than 1,700 land trusts across the country, we should now use that momentum to conserve the large systems that matter for people and nature. Indeed, this is what communities are asking for and what nature needs to survive. Moving beyond isolated victories to a more interconnected conservation vision is just as important for local sustainable economies and recreational access as it is for wildlife corridors and healthy watersheds. To be successful at this scale requires real collaboration and a reorientation for everyone involved. With the many opportunities currently rising for whole-landscape conservation, the moment to act is now.