

THE MONTANA LEGACY PROJECT

a new era for
conservation

Holland Lake ©Kenton Rowe

“ From wolf to grizzly, from bighorn sheep to bull trout, what was then is now. The Crown of the Continent truly is unique in the Lower 48 states. ”

M. Sanjayan
Lead Scientist
The Nature Conservancy

Just over two years ago, The Nature Conservancy took a bold step that transformed the future of conservation in the West.

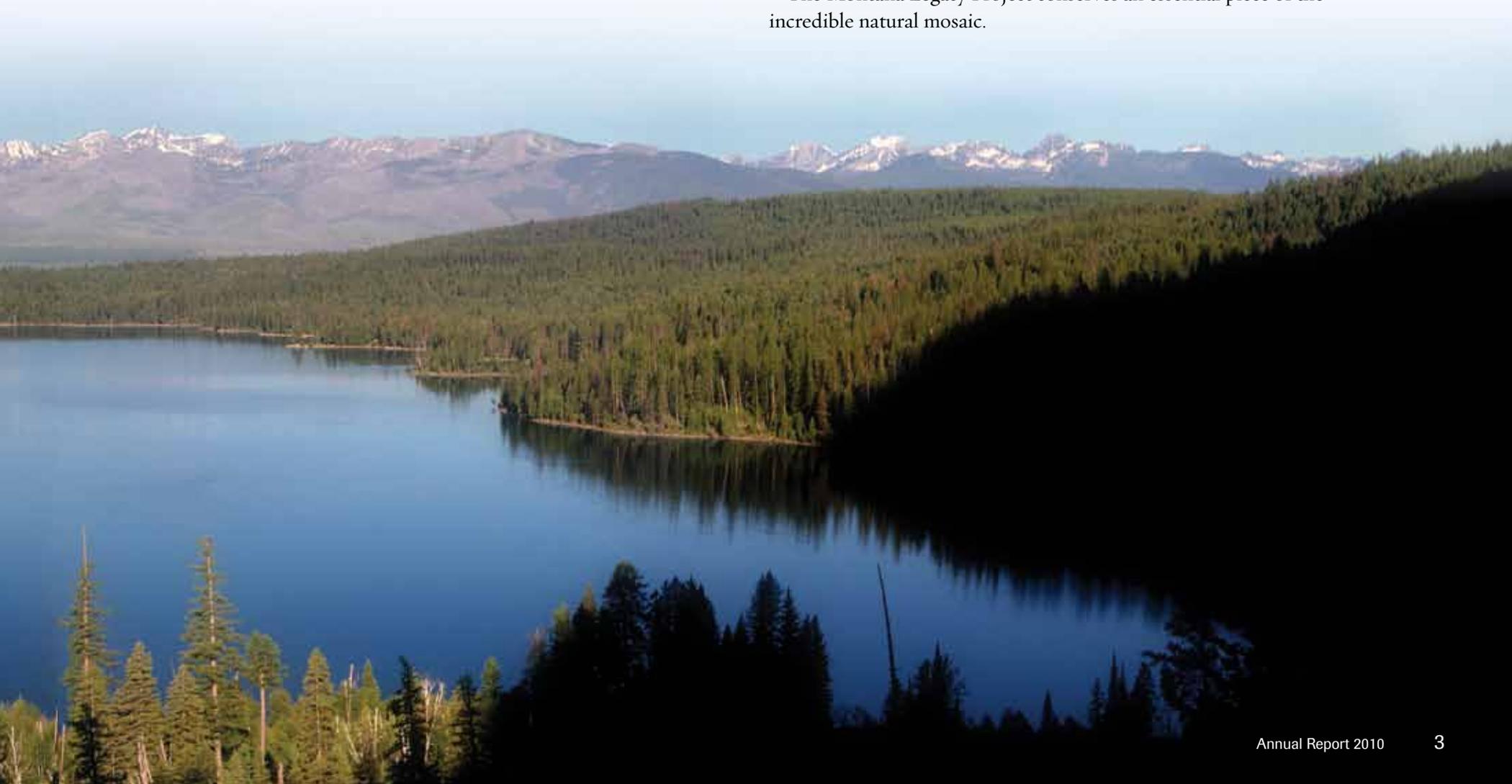
In a single transaction, we brought 310,586 acres of commercial timberland under the umbrella of conservation. As the largest private conservation purchase in history the Montana Legacy Project recognizes that preserving the diversity of life on Earth requires thinking at a scale larger than we've ever worked. It's simply not enough to define conservation by the metrics of a single river valley or by artificial political boundaries. We must undertake conservation at an ecosystem level.

There is no better place to launch this transformative vision than on the Crown of the Continent; one of only a handful of places left on the planet where not a single plant or animal that we know of has gone extinct in recorded history. Its ten million acres span Montana and Canada, enveloping Glacier National Park, the Bob Marshall Wilderness, the Swan Valley and the Rocky Mountain Front.

The Montana Legacy Project conserves an essential piece of the incredible natural mosaic.



Indian paintbrush. © Gail Moser





“ We can't fully predict how climate change will develop or how it will affect individual ecosystems. That's why it's important to conserve large, intact landscapes. With a broad variety of climate and habitat, wildlife will be able to find suitable habitat as their current range changes. ”

Steve Running, Nobel Prize-winning Climate Scientist

Repairing a History of Division

In many ways, the story of the Montana Legacy Project began with the travels of Lewis and Clark. What they found in Montana quite simply overwhelmed them. The ragged peaks of the Northern Rockies dwarfed the genteel swells of Virginia's Blue Ridge. Forests stretched as far as the eye could see, rivers teemed with fish and the valleys were inhabited by thriving native cultures. In their journals, Lewis and Clark described creatures and landscapes that were beyond any they'd imagined. It wasn't long before the push was on to settle and exploit these seemingly inexhaustible resources. In its effort to settle this wild frontier, the federal government doled out millions of acres, in alternating, one-mile square sections, to the railroads. The rails delivered the promised towns and citizens as well as a less-desirable consequence – one that wouldn't be fully recognized for another century.

Over time, the railroads sold their holdings to various interests; to ranchers, settlers and timber companies. Eventually, Plum Creek Timber Company came to own more than one million acres of this former railroad land in Montana, most of it still embedded in a checkerboard pattern with state and federal property. When Plum Creek began a transition from logging to selling the land, by forming a Real Estate Investment Trust, The Nature Conservancy recognized a tremendous opportunity.

Seizing the Moment

First and foremost, we saw the opportunity to prevent the land from being sold off to an untold number of different, private owners, its natural integrity shattered by the resulting roads, subdivisions and invasive weeds. Such changes are deadly for wildlife such as Canada Lynx and Grizzlies. And while less critical, the public use of the land would also be altered. Imagine trying to hike or hunt, only to encounter “no trespassing” signs at the edge of each mile of public land.

We also saw a tremendous opportunity to restore a place that had been unbalanced by the loss of natural fire and scarred by unneeded roads and stream alterations.

The Conservancy seized a moment that isn't likely to come again but not without taking a very deep breath. Buying nearly 500 square miles of land in one fell swoop called on every ounce of our expertise. Before plunging in, we consulted closely with the local community. We enlisted support from our colleagues at The Trust for Public Land and reviewed the science. Ultimately, we realized that the Conservancy was one of the only organizations with the experience and relationships to even consider conservation at this scale.

Crafting a Legacy for the Future

With our experience, we recognized the economies of negotiating a single deal with a single owner. We had the track record to get Plum Creek to the negotiating table and the wisdom to know when it was time to deal or when to walk away. We listened to the needs of everyone who used this land and assured them it wouldn't be locked away; that these would be “working lands” available for both public recreation and for the local communities who earned their livings in the forests and the grasslands. By breaking the mold, the Legacy Project inspired elected leaders to re-think the value of forest land, and create innovative financial tools that would secure them for the future.

The Montana Legacy Project has set the standard for the future of conservation. It's a future in which science, collaboration, innovation and commitment have produced results of which we once only dreamed. By taking that bold step we have helped secure the future for an extraordinary place, not just for today, but for many generations to come.

“ We have the opportunity to keep a way of life in the West that is shrinking everywhere else you go. This project will keep ranching and timber production part of the fabric of the Montana lifestyle. It's been a dream of mine for a long time. ”

*Denny Iverson
Rancher, logger
and board member of the
Blackfoot Challenge*



Canada lynx. © D. Robert Franz

“ To imagine we are within reach of permanently protecting the Swan Valley... so that female grizzlies will still be able to raise their cubs in the valley bottom and a new generation of families will discover the lakes, streams, trails and back roads of this amazing place. We are so grateful that the Montana Legacy Project is making our dream come true. ”

*Melanie Parker
Swan Valley resident
and conservation leader*



Melanie Parker. © Ted Wood

OUR PARTNERS

The Trust for Public Land
The Blackfoot Challenge
Northwest Connections
Swan Ecosystem Center
Trout Unlimited
Five Valleys Land Trust
The Wilderness Society
U.S. Forest Service
MT Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks
MT Department of Natural Resources & Conservation
U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
U.S. Bureau of Land Management
Missoula County Rural Initiatives
Mineral County RAC
National Forest Foundation

FISH CREEK

HEARING THE COMMUNITY, HEALING THE LAND

Few parts of this project brought the team more pleasure than Fish Creek – the 41,000-acre portion that was transferred this spring to the State of Montana. But the gratification was certainly not instant. Success meant overcoming some serious history. This is productive forestland and crucial habitat for Bull Trout and a lot of wildlife; but much of it has been heavily logged and burned, leaving it scarred with a network of unneeded roads, altered streams and invasive weeds. The social dimensions of working with Fish Creek were at least as challenging as the environmental.

Fish Creek sits in Mineral County where more than 87% of the land was already publically owned by the time the Conservancy bought it. The local community was sensitive to losing any more private land and the tax revenue it generated.

So we started making regular visits to Mineral County—and we listened. We went back time and time again until folks were convinced we'd heard them. What they wanted was to keep public access to the land without losing tax revenue. So, when the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks (MFWP) proposed purchasing Fish Creek, we had a solution that delivered on both community concerns. MFWP

will maintain good wildlife habitat, pay taxes on new acquisitions and keep the land open for hunting, fishing and outdoor recreation.

Meanwhile, the Conservancy's stewardship team led a partnership of public agencies, conservation groups and volunteers that decommissioned 38 miles of unneeded roads, pulled 43 culverts



Bull trout. © Pat Clayton/FishEyeGuy Photography

to help restore stream flow and quality, tackled noxious weeds along some 112 miles of road and seeded another 80 miles with native plants. This is the kind of work where a little goes a long way. Just consider: The removal of a single culvert and less than a mile of road on Chicken Creek opened up the entire 2,000-acre drainage to spawning Cutthroat Trout.

This work began with the Conservancy's purchase and continues today under public ownership. More than that, members of the community have taken well-deserved pride in and responsibility for this project.