

On the Path

Crown of the Continent Roundtable

By Keith Hammer

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The First Annual Conference of the Crown of the Continent Roundtable was held at Waterton Townsite in late September. Over 200 participants met to review a draft Statement of Values and Principles intended to help guide the over 100 government agencies, non-government organizations, and community-based partnerships helping to shape the future of this 18 million acre ecosystem.

The Crown of the Continent runs from the Canadian Crows Nest Pass and Elk River areas on the north to our Blackfoot River on the south, and from the Tobacco, Flathead and Mission Valleys on the west to the Alberta and Rocky Mountain Fronts on the east. At the heart of the ecosystem are the adjoining Waterton Lakes and Glacier National Parks, which were designated in 1932 as the world's first International Peace Park. Hence the title of the conference: "Remarkable Beyond Borders."

Indeed the immediate objective of the conference was to garner broad-based feedback on the statement of values and principles that would reach across political boundaries and jurisdictions in a voluntary and non-binding fashion. The effort is not intended to duplicate existing laws, agreements and policies but to instead create a regional network that sustains the identity, integrity and legitimacy of all folks working to help shape the future of the Crown of the Continent.

As currently drafted, the Statement of Values and Principles would "create a framework to 1) promote a deeper sense of place and regional identity; 2) foster a common understanding of the people, place, and forces shaping the future of the region; 3) guide future actions to enhance and sustain the natural and cultural assets of this remarkable region; 4) advocate for the interests of the Crown [of the Continent]; and 5) assess progress in meeting common values and shared principles."

The draft emphasizes that "Citizen participation is the cornerstone of developing and implementing public policies that promote a clean environment, strong economy, and high quality of life. [It] ensures that the needs and concerns of interested individuals are heard, understood, and incorporated into policy and management plans."

The Roundtable on the Crown of the Continent is "an ongoing forum to bring together people who care about the Crown of the Continent" and is currently co-convened and staffed by UM's Center for Natural Resources and Environmental Policy, the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, and the Sonoran Institute. A broad-based steering committee provides input and advice on the activities of the Roundtable and even broader-based advice is now being sought on the Statement of Values and Principles.

One of the cornerstones of the conference was a presentation on ecotourism by Jonathan Tourtellot, a founder of National Geographic's Center for Sustainable Destinations. He defines ecotourism as "tourism that sustains or enhances the geographical character of a place - its environment, heritage, aesthetics, culture, and

well being of its residents.” The simple premise is that tourists given opportunities to learn about a place and its people are more likely to better care for them.

The objective of sustainable “touring” is to distinguish it from “rest and recreation” destinations like developed beaches and golf courses and from “entertainment” destinations like Disneyland or Las Vegas. While the latter may be appropriate in certain locations, not all tourist destinations should follow such a path of development, lest they no longer offer the types and quality of touring they once did. Ecotourism aims to sustain local culture and environment through education and retention of tourist dollars in the local communities.

The goal, as Tourtellot noted at the conference, is not more tourists, but higher quality tourism and a greater investment in local communities by each tourist. If wild country, wildlife habitat, farms, and ranches are simply replaced by “tourist traps,” we’ve killed the goose that laid the golden egg – the goose that once presented opportunities for quality visits, investments in local communities, and appreciation of their natural and cultural heritage.

For more information on the Roundtable for the Crown of the Continent and links to its primary co-conveners, visit <http://www.crownroundtable.org>. For more information about ecotourism and an example of National Geographic’s Geotourism Map Guide program, visit <http://www.crownofthecontinent.net>.

Keith Hammer grew up hiking, skiing, camping, hunting, and fishing in the Swan Mountains. He has worked a number of jobs, from Forest Service trail worker to logger to backcountry guide, and currently works as an environmental consultant and head of the nonprofit Swan View Coalition. His column appears regularly in this paper and is archived at www.swanrange.org. Keith can be reached at 406-755-1379 or keith@swanview.org.



From lakes to mountaintops, the Flathead is a wonderful place to live, work and visit. Keith Hammer Photo.