

Preface

Although the region described in this Profile has been inhabited and visited by people for millennia, the landscape that brings magic to this place predates humans by hundreds of millions of years. Native Americans traditionally referred to the mountainous topography as “Miistakis,” or “Backbone of the World.” To indigenous peoples, and others who have come to know and respect this exceptional place, there is a spirituality to the land and an appreciation for the connection between the mountains, plains, rivers, and the plant and animal species that dwell in this ancient landscape.

Using a term first applied by George Bird Grinnell in the early part of the twentieth century, the region is today commonly referred to as the Crown of the Continent Ecosystem. There is an increasing awareness of the ecological importance of this area in its own right and more broadly as a critical part of a much larger mountainous landscape extending from the Greater Yellowstone region northwesterly into the Yukon of western Canada. This is widely recognized as one of the premier mountain ecoregions of the world.

While learning activities—private and public, formal and informal—have gone on in a broader sense since humans first inhabited the region, the past 20-30 years have seen a veritable explosion of education and interpretation. This has mostly been devoted to the study of the cultural and natural history of specific portions of the ecosystem—the Flathead Valley, Waterton and Glacier national parks, the East Front, and Swan Valley, for instance. These sub-parts of the ecosystem have cried for integration, a broader view, a bioregional perspective and understanding. From this need arose The Crown of the Conti-

nent Ecosystem Education Consortium—COCEEC.

COCEEC was founded in 1995 “to bring a bioregional focus to education in the Crown of the Continent Ecosystem.” The inspiration for this collaborative organization began with my longtime involvement in natural resource education, as a teacher of geology and geography at Flathead Valley Community College in Kalispell, Montana, as co-founder of The Glacier Institute, and as a participant in the Flathead Environmental Education Core Group. As natural resource education programs developed around the Crown of the Continent, and federal land management concepts moved from a focus on small areas to watershed- and ecosystem-based management and conservation, it became apparent that we, as educators, also needed to move in that direction. The next logical step was to present local ecological information in a broader context to include the entire Crown of the Continent Ecosystem.

In the spring of 1994, a group of about twenty educators and representatives of agencies and private organizations convened at the Boone and Crockett headquarters in Missoula, Montana. A decision was made to take an educational and organizational leap—to pursue the formation of what was to become the Crown of the Continent Ecosystem Education Consortium. And so our journey began.

COCEEC has since been active in supporting ecosystem-focused curricula, workshops, and projects. Meeting semi-annually, the twenty-one Participants represent the ecosystem from the Waterton and Castle-Crown region in southern Alberta, Canada, to Missoula, Montana, in the U.S. By 1997, COCEEC had gained enough momentum to

take on its first educational resource project, a digital landscape map of the COCE, appropriately named, "A Map Without Boundaries." This map, designed primarily for use by educators within the ecosystem, portrays only landforms, without political boundaries, in order to draw attention to the ecosystem as a whole. With generous donations from the Participant organizations and other supporters, this poster-size map and associated artwork was published in 1998. To date, over one thousand have been distributed at no charge.

In the spring of 2000, The Wilburforce Foundation provided grant monies to further our education and outreach efforts. With this all-important financial foundation, we were able to commission this document, the Crown of the Continent Ecosystem Profile.

COCEEC Participants determined that the Profile would be a science-based description and discussion of the natural environment, history, and culture of the Crown, to be used primarily as a reference for middle, high school, and entry-level college educators, as well as interested laypersons.

This document has been through an in-depth editorial process, guided principally by the COCEEC Editorial Committee. Drafts were reviewed by outside resource professionals and the COCEEC Editorial and Administrative Committees. They were also provided to all COCEEC Participants for review. Of particular significance was the review work done by Janice Smith, Lisa Flowers, Teresa Wenum, and John Fraley. Written by Ben Long of Kalispell, with general editing by Barbara Grinder of Waterton, selected editing and proofreading by Judith Pressmar, illustration collection and placement by Ashley Emerson Mason, and layout by Diane Conner, the Profile represents the work, talents, and cooperation of many dedicated people.

The Crown of the Continent Ecosystem

Profile is a first attempt to bring together voluminous and widely scattered material from two Canadian Provinces, one U.S. State, and two federal governments in a useful, readable manner. Given the scatter and often-conflicting nature of the material, its broad geographic reach, and the difficulty of coordinating many highly dedicated, but very busy, volunteers, Ben Long has done an admirable job in creating this foundational document.

Let there be no mistake, whenever three or four scientists get together, there are generally differing opinions on factual information and its interpretation. Ben took on the challenging task of combining these perspectives and tried to reconcile those differences within the text of this document, though some will always remain. We recognize that this is an evolving document. As this First Edition is used as an educational resource, comments and suggestions will be collected and considered for use in subsequent editions.

It is our hope and expectation that the Crown of the Continent Ecosystem Profile, in conjunction with the Map Without Boundaries, will serve as a ready source of information about the Crown of the Continent Ecosystem and as the basis for ecosystem-based educational activities and projects. Thanks to the dedication and hard work of so many, the journey continues today.

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