Honoring The Crow Nation’s Sacred Ties
HONORING MONTANA’S TRIBES

No doubt, public land and all of the priceless things that come with it – beauty, clean water, abundant fish and wildlife, outdoor recreation of all kinds, and on and on – are what make Montana so special. Ensuring those lands are protected for future generations is why MWA exists.

But for far too long, we’ve failed to acknowledge the history of those lands and how they became public. That happened because the U.S. government forcibly removed Indigenous people from these lands in the 19th century and broke treaty after treaty it had signed with the tribes, dramatically reducing the original size of reservations those treaties had established. Millions of acres of those lands that tribes had to relinquish are now public and managed by the federal government.

In recognition of that painful history, we have made it a priority to listen to and learn from tribes throughout the state and find ways we can support them in protecting lands and waters that are integral to the preservation of their cultures and to the well-being of their members.

Our support of the Blackfeet Tribe in keeping oil and gas development out of the Badger-Two Medicine, a place Blackfeet hold sacred, is one example of our commitment to protect public lands that are important to Montana’s tribes.

Over the past year, we’ve also supported efforts by members and officials of the Crow Tribe to persuade the Forest Service to manage the Crazy Mountains in a way that honors the historical, cultural, and spiritual connection the Apsáalooke (Crow people) hold to these mountains.

As part of that effort, we worked with Crow tribal members to release an eight-minute film entitled “Awaxaawipiia” (pronounced a-wuh-kaw-wapee-uh), which explores that connection (the title of the film is the Crow name for this range of mountains). We also hosted – in Bozeman, Livingston, and Billings – a panel of Crow and other Indigenous people to discuss public lands as seen through their eyes. Coupled with screenings of the film, the panel discussions drew hundreds of people and filled each of the venues in which they were held.

Moreover, we are supporting the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes and the Fort Belknap Indian Community in their efforts to pass legislation that would uphold tribal water rights that the federal and state governments have violated over the past 100-plus years. The bills would also restore tribal management of lands that were taken away from those two tribes, also in violation of their treaties.

There’s so much more we need to do to support Native tribes in Montana and across the nation, and to ensure that equity, inclusion, and justice are woven into the fabric of our organization. But we have committed ourselves to these undertakings, because our work would not be as meaningful or as essential if we didn’t.

– Ben Gabriel, executive director
We watched mountain goats traverse cliff sides with an agility that made our jaws drop. We watched the reflection of a mountain turn orange on a lake so still that you could hardly tell the difference between the reflection and the mountain.

But there’s so much more to this range than the wilderness character we were documenting. It also is a profoundly significant place in the lives and culture of the Apsáalooke (Crow people).

continued
Last year, I began working with members and officials of the Crow Tribe in an effort to protect Awaxaawippia (pronounced a-wuh-kaw-wah-pee-uh), which loosely translates as “Ominous Mountains.” That’s the Crow name for this range. It’s also the title of a film that MWA produced in partnership with Dr. Shane Doyle, an Apsáalooke educator and tribal member.

We started work on the film in the spring of 2019, when the Forest Service was in the home stretch of a public comment period addressing how the agency will manage the Custer Gallatin National Forest, which includes the southern half of the Crazies, for the next 20-plus years. We provided administrative and communications support during the comment period that helped Crow tribal members and officials make it abundantly clear to the Forest Service that the Crazy Mountains deserve protection because of how historically, culturally, and spiritually significant the range is to the Crow people.

In May, Doyle joined Crow Tribal Chairman A.J. Not Afraid and Crow Tribal Historic Preservation Office lead monitor Adrian Bird, Jr. on a joint op-ed that conveyed the profound ties the Crow have to the Crazies.

“The Crazy Mountains are an ancient source of power that modern day Apsáalooke people can draw upon to create a better future,” the op-ed reads. “That future depends on the medicine of the Crazy Mountains, and on future generations of leaders being able to draw upon it when it needed. That means that we must be able to fast and pray in ceremonial solitude as we have since time immemorial in the sacred places that define and embody the essence of our identity as Apsáalooke people and as human beings.”

After this op-ed ran, we organized an overflight of the Crazy Mountains, inviting journalists from around the region to join the flight and interview Doyle, Bird, and other tribal members. Several newspaper, television, and radio stories followed, highlighting the significance of the Crazy Mountains to the Crow people.

As a result of this media coverage and MWA’s outreach to our members and supporters, the Forest Service received 426 comments addressing the Crazy Mountains, the most of any landscape in the Custer Gallatin National Forest after the Gallatin Range. Almost all of the comments, including from the Crow Tribe’s government, called on the Forest Service to recommend Wilderness for the Crazies and to consult with the tribe on management decisions.

Since the summer, the Forest Service has been writing its revision of the Custer Gallatin National Forest plan (its final draft is due sometime this year). To inspire the agency to protect the Crazies and to bring public awareness to the cultural importance of the range, we worked with Doyle and other tribal members to produce “A waxaawippia: The Crow Nation’s Sacred Ties.”

Directed by Livingston filmmaker Eric Ian, the eight-minute film explores the cultural and spiritual connection the Crow Tribe has to the Crazies.

It features interviews with five tribal members and officials, including Doyle.

We organized screenings of the film in January and invited a panel of Crow and other tribal members and officials to speak afterwards. The screenings packed the auditorium at the Museum of the Rockies in Bozeman and again the next night at the Shane Lalani Center in Livingston. A few weeks later, the screening and panel packed the auditorium at the Billings Library. Members and officials from the Crow and other tribes participated in the panels, offering an Indigenous perspective on the Crazies and other public lands that are sacred to Montana’s tribes.

Learning about how the Crazy Mountains and Crow culture are intertwined has given me a whole new perspective of these mountains and a renewed resolve to work toward ensuring their protection.

I’m confident you’ll feel the same after watching “A waxaawippia,” which you can do by visiting wildmontana.org/crazymountains.

Emily Cleveland, senior field director
In an effort to highlight the connection that Montanans feel to our public lands and waters, we asked participants to submit photos that featured friends, family, or themselves enjoying everything our public lands have to offer. We were inundated with beautiful photos of outdoor enthusiasts exploring our wilderness areas, state parks, national forests, wilderness study areas, and other public lands. Big thanks to everyone who submitted photos.

Our staff chose a dozen or so of the most impressive photos and passed them along to our guest judge Luke Duran, art director at Montana Outdoors magazine. Here are the photos he chose as the four best.

WATERFALL HIKE NEAR SEELEY LAKE
by Bri Sullivan
Reveling in the beauty of Morrell Falls in Lolo National Forest

JUDGE’S VERDICT:
“One of the quintessential outdoors experiences is the reward of a beautiful waterfall at the end of a hiking trail. This image perfectly captures that feeling of being fully present and engaged in a wild space much larger than yourself…. It is about feeling wonder and experience and sharing a special place created by nature.”
OVERLOOKING THE MISSOURI RIVER
by Roland Taylor

Watching the sunset at Hole in the Wall State Recreation Area

JUDGE’S VERDICT: “Montana means ‘mountain,’ but the public lands and wild spaces of Big Sky Country are more diverse than tall peaks and deep conifer forests. Huge swaths of Montana’s beauty are found on open prairies, sagebrush-dotted grasslands, limestone river bottoms, and sandstone badlands. Roland’s wonderful photo reminds the viewer that many people find their special Montana place far away from the mountains.”

A MOMENT OF AFFECTION
by Ben Wickham

A little love while skinning up History Rock Trail in Hyalite Canyon

JUDGE’S VERDICT: “This image focuses more on emotion and experience than the landscape itself. But the public land space is still present and inviting, and the falling snowflakes create a dazzling sparkle and add magic to this joyful moment. This great photo captures the theme perfectly, and is a nice reminder that there are a myriad of opportunities for people in Montana’s public lands throughout the year.”

MILKY WAY OVER PARK LAKE by Chris McGowan

A starry night in Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forest

JUDGE’S VERDICT: “Technically, this is an outstanding photo, and clearly the result of a lot of hard work by the photographer. Thematically, it’s another reminder that enjoying public lands can take on many forms and people can enjoy endless opportunities. It’s also nice to see an image that demonstrates that wild places are incredibly beautiful even at night – yet another example of Montana’s awesome beauty.”
OUR SUPPORT FOR TWO TRIBAL WATER COMPACT BILLS

Late last year we endorsed two bills that acknowledge the history of injustice that several tribes in Montana have suffered and offer them reparations they should have received long ago.

One of these bills, introduced by Sen. Steve Daines and co-sponsored by Sen. Jon Tester, would ratify the Confederate Salish and Kootenai Tribes’ Water Compact. This bill offers a long-overdue measure of justice for the numerous times the federal and state governments violated the water rights guaranteed to the CSKT by the 1855 Hellgate Treaty.

If this bill does not pass and the compact is not ratified, roughly 10,000 water right claims would have to be decided in court, costing farmers, ranchers, and the CSKT millions of dollars. Hundreds of working farms and ranches across western and central Montana would likely go broke litigating those claims, and they would almost certainly lose because the CSKT claims guaranteed in the Hellgate Treaty pre-date those of non-Indigenous farmers and ranchers. If these ranches went bankrupt, one of Montana’s most important industries would be dealt a serious blow, and the livelihoods of hundreds of Montanans would be put in peril. We would also lose the thousands of acres of wildlife habitat and migration routes those working landscapes provide.

This legislation will also enable the CSKT to manage the National Bison Range. This, too, corrects an injustice, of the range having been taken away from the CSKT, and it gives the tribes the opportunity to incorporate the range into its rich network of conservation areas, while continuing to maintain the existing public access.

We also endorsed Sen. Tester’s Fort Belknap Indian Community Water Compact. For more than 150 years, the U.S. government repeatedly violated the water rights and mismanaged the water resources of the Gros Ventre and Assiniboine Tribes, allowing some of those resources to become contaminated in perpetuity by open-pit gold mining. The government also forced the tribes off of land that is sacred to their members, land that had been part of their reservation until gold was discovered there.

The FBIC Water Compact takes a step toward righting these wrongs by establishing resources for critical water infrastructure development inside and outside the Fort Belknap Reservation and returning sacred FBIC lands to federal trust.


—John Todd, deputy director

A LEAP FORWARD IN LINCOLN

After years of meetings and discussions with Lincoln-area residents who represent timber, outdoor recreation, and small businesses, we have forged an agreement that we’re calling the Lincoln Valley Proposal, addressing public lands around Lincoln and along the Continental Divide northwest of Helena.

Our proposal would expand the Scapegoat Wilderness Area by 16,000 acres and create a brand new 40,000-acre wilderness area for Nevada Mountain within sight of Montana’s capital city. It would also safeguard 60,000 acres as conservation management areas.

The proposal also includes forest restoration measures that bolster wildfire protection for Lincoln and plans for new recreation areas for snowmobiling and mountain biking.

Since the agreement was reached last year, we have been building local awareness of and support for the proposal, as well as gathering feedback from Lincoln-area residents. A diverse group of community members are championing the proposal, including motorized users, the Lincoln fire chief, and numerous Main Street business owners. We’ve also gained the support of the Lewis and Clark County Commission.

Stay tuned for more about this remarkable achievement that protects over 114,000 acres of critical wildlife habitat and migration corridors for grizzlies, wolves, Canada lynx, elk, moose, mule deer, and other wildlife.

—Amy Robinson, conservation director

DEFENDING THE LAND AND WATER CONSERVATION FUND

Since the summer, we’ve been advocating for full and permanent funding of the Land and Water Conservation Fund. This program, which disburses offshore oil and gas royalties for conservation, recreation, and community projects, has contributed over $600 million to projects across Montana since 1965, but its future is uncertain – at the time of writing, Congress has granted LWCF about half of its annual $900 million authorization for 2020.

Montana’s senators have been supportive of full funding for LWCF, and we’re supporting them by shoring up local support. To that end, we’ve worked with the Big Horn County Commission, Cascade County Commission, Hamilton City Council, and Billings City Council to secure letters to Montana’s congressional delegation supporting full and permanent funding for LWCF.

We also hosted three media field tours in Cascade, Billings, and Poison to highlight the ways in which LWCF has benefited Montana communities. The fund has contributed to the creation and maintenance of fishing access sites, community and state parks, ball fields, playgrounds, and much more, and it’s critical that Congress fully fund LWCF to support our way of life, our communities, and our outdoor economy.

—Jacob Foster, policy and advocacy coordinator
2020 WILDfest

Mark your calendars and save the date:
WildFest is coming to Helena on Oct. 24.

We’ll revel in our public lands, celebrate our wilderness community, and express our gratitude to our members and partners like you.

More information coming soon!

UPDATES FROM THE FIELD

MONTANA OUTDOOR HERITAGE SURVEY SHOWS STRONG SUPPORT FOR CONSERVATION FUNDING

In October, the Montana Outdoor Heritage Project published the results of a statewide survey exploring Montana’s support for increased conservation funding. The results showed a strong appetite for boosting funding to protect wildlife, improve public access, and conserve working lands.

The survey was completed by 11,000 residents, about 1% of the state’s population. It demonstrated that Montanans across the political, economic, and geographic spectrum believe in the importance of our shared outdoor values, and are united by a belief in the importance of investing in our public lands, waters, wildlife, and working lands to protect them for future generations.

Ultimately, we are hopeful that some of the funding ideas proposed by survey respondents advance as state policy. But there is much work to be done. MOHP will continue to work with state legislators and decision makers to advocate for increased conservation funding leading up to and during the 2021 legislative session.

–Jacob Foster, policy and advocacy coordinator
GET OUTSIDE.
BREAK A SWEAT.
DO SOME GOOD.

Volunteer on an MWA trail stewardship project this summer while exploring wild places. Join the Volunteer Trail Crew.

Choose from 14 trail stewardship projects across Montana as a crew member, camp cook, or photographer. Food, instruction, and fun provided.

For a list of weekend and weeklong projects across the state, visit wildmontana.org/vtc.

Registration opens March 1.