

HOW A GREAT PLACE WAS SAVED

Montana, British Columbia, Canada, and the United States work out a remarkable deal that protects the pristine North Fork of the Flathead region. **BY SCOTT MCMILLION**



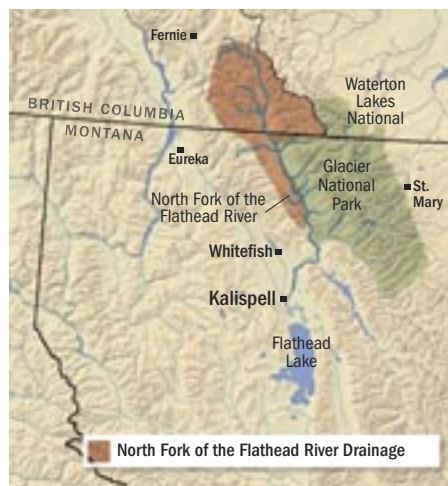
MINOR DISTURBANCE To produce this seemingly hair-raising shot of a grizzly in the North Fork of the Flathead region, photographer Joe Riis set up a remote camera along a wildlife trail. Riis was part of a Rapid Assessment Visual Expedition (RAVE), coordinated by the International League of Conservation Photographers, in which a team of photographers visited the region for ten days to document landscapes and wildlife threatened by proposed Canadian mining operations. All other images in this article (except on page 27) came from the Flathead RAVE.

The North Fork of the Flathead River carves a broad valley rimmed by stunning peaks and ridges. Wade into the water, even on a hot August day, and the coldness will make your shins ache. Dive in and it will punch the wind from your lungs. Look up at those mountains, where the snow never goes away, and you'll know why.

The river churns south from the Canadian province of British Columbia and splashes clear, green life into Montana, where the valley forms the western boundary to Glacier National Park. Mountain goats and grizzly bears sip from these waters. So do wolverines and lynx, elk and bighorns, pine martens and wolves.

Nobody lives in the Canadian North Fork and visitors are uncommon, even in hunting season. But the drainage is not unknown. Though wild, it's not wilderness. Old logging roads twine all over the place, but they've seen little traffic since logging ended in the 1970s and a flood in 1995 took out many of them. Brush and trees sprout in the ruts, reclaiming ground at their own pace.

Isolated though it is by geography, bad roads, and weather, the North Fork has been at the center of some of the continent's thorniest fights over development. For a century people have tried to pull fossil



fuels from the ground beneath the valley—on both sides of the border—without much success. A well drilled in the early 20th century in what is now Glacier National Park didn't prove out. During a spike in energy prices in the 1970s and '80s, oil companies punched deep holes on the Canadian side of the border, seeking oil and gas. In the end, the prospective cost of building a permanent mining infrastructure up the wild, 80-mile-long valley kept drilling rigs at bay. In Montana, oil and natural gas developers purchased rights to drill along parts of the river.

Several proposals to develop the valley

have resurfaced in recent years, but this time the plans were on a much larger scale. In 2005 Canadian companies announced plans to build massive coal mining operations—the kind that grind up whole mountains—near the headwaters of the northern end of the valley, and they spent millions of dollars exploring the deposits there.

The possibility of giant mining projects in such a wild area caused dark ripples on both sides of the border.

Getting wilder all the time

“You can spend a week or two up there in the summer and never see anybody,” says Bruce McLellan, a grizzly bear researcher for British Columbia's Ministry of Natural Resource Operations who has been working in the Canadian North Fork since 1978. “It's even wilder now than it was when I first started working in there.”

While wildness is shrinking almost everywhere, it is blooming in the North Fork. McLellan says the grizzly bear is a yardstick for measuring the health of this ecosystem. Glacier National Park is famous for its bears. And the Canadian North Fork has twice the park's grizzly density: That's one bear every seven square miles. Nowhere else in inland Canada boasts so many grizzlies.

The Canadian stretch of the North Fork—because it's so productive, so rich in wildlife—provides a source of predators for nearby areas, says McLellan. In fact, Glacier's first resident wolf pack since the 1930s, the Magic Pack, drifted in from the Canadian North Fork in the 1980s.

“The North Fork is the wildest mountain valley anywhere on the United States-Canada border,” says Chris Servheen, grizzly bear recovery coordinator for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. He's been researching bears and other carnivores in the area for 30 years. “Wildlife corridors don't stop at the border,” he says.

“It's not just bears,” adds Tim Thier, veteran wildlife biologist for Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks. “It's one of the most important locations, to both Canada and the United States, for the movement of many wildlife species.” Large-scale mining could pose particular threats to moose, Thier notes, because of the heavy traffic it would create. In winter, many moose would be



NIMBY (NOT IN MONTANA'S BACK YARD) Fording Coal's “Greenhills” mountaintop-removal coal mine, in southern British Columbia north of Fernie. An agreement between the province and Montana helped prevent similar industrial mines from despoiling the upper Flathead Valley.



Canadian companies announced plans to build massive coal mining operations—the kind that grind up whole mountains—near the headwaters.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: MAP: MONTANA OUTDOORS; VIEW FROM GRIZZLY WIDE PASS, B.C.: GARTH LENZ; NORTH FORK FLATHEAD TRIBUTARY: MICHAEL READY; GARTH LENZ



drawn to the easy passage created by plowed roads and wind up as roadkill. On a larger scale, putting industrial development in the middle of an unpopulated ecosystem could interfere with the genetic interchange that animal populations need to remain healthy. And then there is the water.

The North Fork is a major tributary of Flathead Lake, likely the most pristine big lake in the West, says Jack Stanford, administrator of the University of Montana's Flathead Lake Biological Station. He offers this succinct description of mountaintop

removal mining: "It's turning a mountain upside down and sorting through it." And that's what companies were proposing on the North Fork.

Modern mines are big enterprises. They need support, infrastructure, and supplies. A new town would likely spring up in this unpeopled valley. And even in the best-case projections of various environmental studies, such mines would disrupt wildlife migrations, create water pollution, and put an end to the valley's isolation. Especially vulnerable are the endangered bull trout and

the westslope cutthroat trout. These fish are already in peril because they rely exclusively on this type of pristine river and its emerald pools: cold, clean, and increasingly rare.

Stanford's laboratory staff helped study the water above and below similar mines in British Columbia's Elk River drainage, just west of the North Fork. The downriver effects they measured were stark: They found that mining and associated activities raised nitrogen levels in the water 1,000 fold, sulfate levels 40 to 50 fold, and selenium 10 fold. The changes disrupted the river's ecological

“It’s turning a mountain upside down and sorting through it.”

GARTH LENZ

processes, and caused some aquatic creatures to disappear entirely. For example, if water contains too much nitrogen—a key nutrient for plants—it can fuel algal blooms, which soak up the water's oxygen and suffocate fish and other creatures.

And that was without any major catastrophes, like floods, avalanches, or blowouts of containment dams.

The Canadian mines likely would have directly affected Flathead Lake, 100 miles to the south, according to Mark Delaray, FWP fisheries biologist in Kalispell. "These are fish

that Montana and British Columbia share," he says, adding that bull trout and westslope cutthroats spawn in the North Fork's upper reaches, "right in the immediate vicinity of the mine site." Later in life, those fish swim downstream to Flathead Lake, where they grow to maturity. "It's a key habitat for the survival of Flathead Lake fish," Delaray says.

Delicate diplomacy

When Canadian companies once again proposed mines in the North Fork headwaters in 2005, officials in Montana knew the



This isolated valley—flanked by national parks on both sides of the border—will continue to be little known, hard to reach, and very productive for wildlife.



state's citizens would expect them to act.

Grizzlies, wolves, elk, and wolverines know nothing of the border. The river, too, travels without a passport. But for humans, that national boundary can be a tall hurdle. Protecting the North Fork meant asking British Columbia officials to walk away from billions of dollars in potential royalties and taxes the mines would produce.

Montana Governor Brian Schweitzer reached out to then-British Columbia Premier Gordon Campbell. Building on past collaborations on a number of cross-border issues, the two began working on the state and provincial level to find a solution to the North Fork dilemma.

Negotiations moved in fits and starts, Schweitzer says, but the state, the province, and the U.S. and Canadian governments, with lots of help from Canadian Ambassador to the United States Gary Doer, eventually worked out a deal.

Early in 2010 Schweitzer and Campbell announced some big news. From that day, they said, the prospect of moving mountains to extract coal, gold, gas, and oil—and the traffic, disruption, and pollution that accompany these projects—would no longer be a possibility in the Canadian North Fork. The mining companies had agreed to abandon their Canadian claims if they could be compensated for what they had spent on exploration. That amounted to just under \$10 million.

It seemed like quite a bargain. In exchange for \$10 million, the two countries could help protect nearly 400,000 acres. That's only \$25 an acre, not counting British Columbia's decision to walk away from potentially \$5 to \$7 billion in taxes and royalties on the minerals. "Most of the credit for this agreement needs to go to Premier Campbell," says Schweitzer.

Meanwhile, Montana Senators Max Baucus and Jon Tester had begun to persuade oil and gas companies to withdraw their leases on the U.S. side of the border. Most of the companies did so quickly, a decision no

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BIG NEWS From left to right: Michel Kenmille of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribal Council, Montana Governor Brian Schweitzer, British Columbia Premier Gordon Campbell, and Kathryn Teneese, chair of the Ktunaxa Nation Council, announce an agreement on the North Fork of the Flathead drainage. Mining companies agreed to abandon their claims if they could be compensated for previous exploration expenses.

doubt affected by earlier court rulings that said the leases couldn't be exploited without a lot of extra environmental analysis.

Still, U.S. officials had a hard time coming up with their share of the money. Baucus says Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Interior Secretary Ken Salazar took great interest in the project. But there was a concern in Washington about the U.S. government setting a precedent by compensating foreign companies for their expenses in a foreign country.

Where the money came from

That's when The Nature Conservancy (TNC) and its unaffiliated partner, the Nature Conservancy of Canada, offered a solution. If the countries would protect the North Fork, the two nonprofit organizations would raise the \$10 million needed.

"The deal was all done," Schweitzer said.

“What this package does is remove the big threats, the killer threats.”

"It was just a matter of where the money was going to come from. I give the greatest kudos to The Nature Conservancy and the Nature Conservancy of Canada. Had it not been for them stepping in, I think the deal would have been doomed."

Richard Jeo, who directs TNC's Canada Program, says the organization was a natural player. It had worked for more than a decade on a variety of projects along the Crown of the Continent, the vast swath of mostly wild lands along the Continental Divide. The North Fork is a key component of the Crown. "It became clear that the deal needed money, so we offered to help," says Jeo.

And the clock was ticking: In 2010, when Schweitzer and Campbell announced the

memorandum of understanding that outlined the deal, the agreement called for committing money to the mining companies within a year. "The year was almost up," says Kat Imhoff, TNC's state director in Montana, when the two conservation groups agreed to provide the money.

To further demonstrate U.S. commitment, Senators Baucus and Tester have sponsored legislation that would permanently withdraw the American stretch of the North Fork Valley from oil and gas development. When the U.S. companies walked away from their leases, they did so "with the understanding that nobody would turn around and lease them again in the future," Tester says.

To put icing on the cake, the government of British Columbia approved legislation in November 2011 that permanently withdraws the North Fork from mining and oil

and gas development.

With this deal in place, the North Fork will remain an intact part of the vast Crown of the Continent ecosystem. This remote valley—flanked by national parks on both sides of the border—will continue to be little known, hard to reach, and very productive for wildlife.

"What this package does is remove the big threats, the killer threats," Jeo says.

And that lets the North Fork Valley keep doing what it does, converting old roads into forest, succoring rare creatures like grizzlies and wolverines, feeding elk and deer and fish, and pouring cold, clean water downstream.

"It's doing fine right now," says McLellan, the grizzly researcher. "If it stays like it is for another 100 years, I'll be happy." 🐻

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: NORTH FORK FLATHEAD DRAINAGE; GARTH LENZ; MONTANA GOVERNOR'S OFFICE; WESTS LOPE CUTTHROATS; MICHAEL READY