

The Vital Ground Foundation

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WILDLIFE
CABINET- LINKAGE
PURCELL INITIATIVE

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Project Description for Phase II

Vital Ground is currently fundraising to secure its first two land acquisitions within grizzly bear/wildlife linkage zones in northwestern Montana via the Cabinet-Purcell Wildlife Linkage Initiative. The projects were identified by the Private Lands Working Group, an international team of NGOs, wildlife agencies, and wildlife biologists. In the U.S. these are Vital Ground, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), and Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (MTFWP); in Canada these are Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative (Y2Y) and the Trans-border Grizzly Bear Project.

Of the land acquisition priorities the Private Lands Working Group has set in the Cabinet-Purcell Linkage Zone priority area, two properties rank highest due to: 1) their current availability on the open real estate market; and 2) their ripeness for development if sold to non-conservation buyers and the subsequent threat of linkage disruption and wildlife displacement. The first property is located in the northern tier of the USFWS Cabinet-Yaak Grizzly Bear Recovery Zone along U.S. Hwy. 2, less than one mile southeast of the Yaak River-Kootenai River confluence. The second property is located just south of the Recovery Zone near Montana Hwy. 200, 2.5 miles northwest of the Bull River-Clark Fork River confluence. Both properties adjoin Kaniksu National Forest lands.

We don't need to protect thousands and thousands of additional acres; but hundreds of acres in exactly the right places.

— Douglas Chadwick

Wildlife biologist, author, and Vital Ground board member

Vital Ground was there when we needed them. They have demonstrated a remarkable ability to respond quickly in support of habitat transactions that are critical to grizzly bears and other large mammals.

— Hank Fischer

Special Projects Coordinator, The National Wildlife Federation

Problem

Subdivision and development are the primary threats to private lands in the identified linkage zone areas, which increase the potential for wildlife-human conflicts as animals travel between large blocks of core habitat. The U.S. Highway 2 corridor from Troy, MT to Idaho, and the Montana Highway 200 corridor are no exception, where grizzly bears and other wildlife must also cross multiple transportation corridors to access other blocks of habitat. These transportation corridors are experiencing increased traffic loads as a result of development in the region. Wildlife must navigate through rapidly developing human inhabited areas, highways with increased traffic loads, and busy railroads.

The Cabinet-Purcell Wildlife Linkage Initiative offers a collaborative approach to maintain habitat and wildlife stability while helping to reduce grizzly bear mortalities across the 2,600 square-mile Cabinet-Yaak Grizzly Bear Recovery Zone area, where the threatened population hovers at a mere 30-40 animals (USFWS).

Long-term Outcomes of Initiative

The long-term outcomes/benefits of this and ongoing work in the region include but are not limited to facilitating:

- The growth of the core Cabinet-Purcell grizzly bear populations;
- Movement, interaction, and dispersal of grizzly bears to and between other ecosystems (Selkirk, Cabinet-Yaak, Selway-Bitterroot);
- Trans-border (U.S./Canada) grizzly movement for genetic interchange;
- Recovery of grizzly bear populations in Cabinet-Yaak and Selkirk Grizzly Bear Recovery Zones;
- Natural grizzly bear recolonization of the Selway-Bitterroot Ecosystem;
- Enhanced protection of the region's wild character; and
- Promoting a tenable coexistence between human residents, grizzly bears and other large carnivores.

Securing linkage habitat will allow for core grizzly bear population growth, dispersal, and re-occupancy/re-colonization from higher to lower density areas. Connections between Cabinet-Yaak, Selkirk, and Canada's grizzly populations will also increase population and habitat resilience by allowing bears and other wildlife to respond to changes in vegetation, food distribution, and seasonal habitats from climate change.

This project has broad transferability to wildlife conservation, particularly in landscapes with mixed ownership or where transboundary or trans-border stewardship is desired. This project will have direct applicability to states in the Intermountain West and provinces of Western Canada where development and agricultural activities overlap with carnivores. Those that stand to best utilize this work will be partnerships involving land-based conservation NGOs, private landowners, wildlife management agencies, watershed groups, and agricultural interests.

About Vital Ground

Founded in 1990, The Vital Ground Foundation works to ensure the recovery and long-term survival of the ESA listed grizzly bear ("threatened"), together with the many native species that share their range, through the protection and restoration of core habitats and landscape linkages.

Vital Ground's dedication to conserving grizzly bear range goes beyond saving a single species. Protecting and expanding habitat and migration corridors important to the Great Bear benefits entire animal and plant communities in the wildest, yet most imperiled places left in North America. To date, Vital Ground has partnered with over twenty other organizations and agencies and has helped protect and enhance nearly 600,000 acres of wildlife habitat in Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, Alaska, and British Columbia.