

UNESCO RECOMMENDATIONS ON THE FLATHEAD RIVER VALLEY: A REPORT CARD ON PROGRESS



The Flathead River Valley is home to the highest density of grizzlies anywhere in the interior of North America.

Photo: Joe Riis, iLCP

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On February 9, 2010, three days before the start of the Winter Olympic Games in Vancouver, then-B.C. Premier Gordon Campbell announced a ban on mining and energy development in the Flathead River Valley. Campbell made the announcement after his officials reviewed a confidential copy of a World Heritage Committee mission report, which made numerous land-management recommendations regarding the Flathead and adjacent wildlife habitat in Montana, Alberta and B.C. Among those recommendations: that Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park be placed on the list of World Heritage Sites in Danger if a proposed mountaintop removal coal mine proceeded in the adjacent Flathead Valley. In November 2011, that proposed mine and other planned mining and energy development were taken off the table when the B.C. government passed legislation banning mining and energy development in the Flathead. That action, while important, was not sufficient to address all the World Heritage report's concerns. The world class wildlife and wilderness values and pristine water quality of the Flathead Valley remain at risk. Specifically:

1. B.C.'s legislation does not apply to the Dominion Coal Blocks, which are owned by the Canadian federal government. One-third of Dominion Coal Block Parcel 82—6,290 hectares of the block—extends into the Flathead River Valley. Nothing has been done federally to secure the Dominion Coal Blocks through an act similar to the provincial legislation. As a result, the ban on oil and gas and mining in the Canadian Flathead has not been fully accomplished.
2. The B.C. government has taken virtually no action on other key recommendations made by the World Heritage Committee—recommendations that are intended to preserve a globally-significant wildlife corridor through the Rocky Mountains, in which the transboundary Flathead is a critical link. In the neighbouring Elk River Valley, all five existing open-pit coal mines are expanding and new mines have been proposed.
3. Similarly, the Government of Montana has only partially followed through on the commitments made before the 2010 Olympics and on recommendations made by the World Heritage Committee mission and the Committee itself. Montana has banned surface access for oil, gas and mining on state lands, but no other actions have been taken.



4. The Government of the United States has yet to pass its legislation banning oil and gas development and mining on the extensive area of federal National Forest Land on the U.S. side of the Flathead.

UNESCO Report Recommendations

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Committee recommended:

- Establishment of a “single conservation and wildlife management plan for the transboundary Flathead”;
- Drafting of a “new B.C. Southern Rocky Mountains Management Plan that gives priority to natural ecological values and wildlife conservation”;
- “Taking steps to minimize barriers to wildlife connectivity, including a long-term moratorium on further mining developments in southeastern B.C., including in the Elk Valley,” within the wildland corridor that “allows the unimpeded movement of carnivores and ungulates between Waterton-Glacier and Canada’s Rocky Mountain parks”;
- Coordinating between the governments of B.C. and Montana to ensure “that connectivity is considered a key factor in planning and environmental assessment” of all developments close to the Waterton-Glacier World Heritage, “in order to ensure the protection of the Outstanding Universal Value of the property”; and
- Expanding the Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park to include the small, mainly alpine, Akamina-Kishinena Provincial Park in B.C.

To date, no steps have been taken to comply with these World Heritage recommendations, and the situation has worsened. B. C.’s Flathead is now subject to intensive logging, new roads are being built, and roads that were recently closed to protect wildlife have been reopened to motorized traffic. The entire Flathead remains open to trophy hunting of grizzlies and other animals that are fully protected in the adjacent Waterton-Glacier World Heritage Site.

