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UNESCO Votes to Send Mission to Canada to Investigate Threats to Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park

Proposed Coal Mine in BC's Flathead River Valley Triggers World Heritage Investigation

Seville, Spain – UNESCO's World Heritage Committee voted today to send a fact-finding mission to Canada to investigate threats to Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park posed by energy and mining proposals in BC's adjacent Flathead River Valley.

The 21-member committee voted unanimously for a 2009 World Heritage Centre mission that will "evaluate and provide recommendations on the requirements for ensuring the protection" of Waterton-Glacier, citing concern about the threats that potential mining and energy development within the Flathead Valley would have on water and ecosystem connectivity. It asked Canada and the US to work together to prepare a report--by February 1, 2010-- that examines all Flathead River Valley energy and mining proposals and their cumulative impacts.

"We applaud the committee's decision and encourage Canada and British Columbia to take swift action to ensure that Waterton-Glacier does not become North America's only World Heritage Site in Danger," said Ryland Nelson of the East Kootenay conservation group Wildsight. Nelson attended the Seville session on behalf of 11 US and Canadian environmental groups that petitioned the World Heritage Committee to declare Waterton-Glacier a "World Heritage Site in Danger" because of a proposed coal strip mine and other energy and mining threats in the unprotected Flathead River Valley.

The committee noted that "The integrity of the property is inextricably linked with the quality of stewardship of the adjacent areas within the international Crown of the Continent ecosystem" and said "the protection of the property must be managed within the context of this greater ecosystem." It also recognized the "high level of public concern" about a proposed coal strip mine and other energy and mining development in BC's Flathead River Valley, which forms an integral part of the same ecosystem and provides critical habitat for rare and endangered species migrating to and from Waterton-Glacier.

"This is an important step forward," said Will Hammerquist of the National Parks Conservation Association, who also attended the Seville session. "Today the United Nations recognized that both Canada and the United States have a global responsibility to protect Waterton-Glacier, the world's first international peace park."

"We are very pleased that the World Heritage Committee agreed with our concerns about mineral development in the Canadian portion of the Flathead River watershed," said Jessica Lawrence of Earthjustice. "These concerns are shared by more than 50,000 people who wrote recent letters to the BC, Canadian and US governments asking for immediate action to protect Waterton-Glacier."

Chloe O'Loughlin, Executive Director of the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (BC), said UNESCO's decision is not a surprise, due to the longstanding scientific concerns over the area. "BC's Flathead River Valley is the long-recognized missing piece of Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park. We urge the BC and Canadian governments to take immediate steps to grant permanent protection to this special place."

"The Flathead River Valley has the highest density of grizzly bears in North America's interior, and some of the purest water in the world," said Sarah Cox of Sierra Club BC. "Declaration of an immediate no-staking reserve in the Flathead Valley would send a strong message to the international community that BC takes this UNESCO decision very seriously, and is committed to land-use solutions in the Flathead that do not convert world-class wildlife habitat into a coal mine."

Sierra Club BC, CPAWS and Wildsight are calling for a National Park in the lower one-third of the Flathead Valley and for a Wildlife Management Area to be established in the rest of the valley and adjoining habitat.

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