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UNESCO Considers “World Heritage Site in Danger” Designation for Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park: Proposed Coal Mine in BC’s Flathead River Valley Triggers United Nations Assessment

BACKGROUNDER

There are 30 World Heritage Sites in Danger globally. If Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park is designated a World Heritage Site in Danger due to proposed development in B.C.’s Flathead River Valley, it will be the only site in North America that is currently in danger. There are 878 World Heritage Sites, including 15 in Canada.

In June 2008, 11 conservation groups from Canada and the U.S. petitioned the World Heritage Committee to ask that Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park be declared a World Heritage Site in Danger due to proposed mountain top removal coal mining and other energy and mining development in B.C.’s Flathead River Valley. The petition was submitted by Ecojustice in Canada and Earthjustice in the U.S. on behalf of the 11 conservation groups, including Sierra Club BC, the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society and Wildsight.

The World Heritage Committee agreed to consider the petition at its June 22-30 session in Seville, Spain.

Article 11.4 of the World Heritage Convention provides for listing a “World Heritage Site in Danger” if the site is threatened by “serious and specific” dangers. BC’s current land use plan for the Flathead River Valley—immediately north and west of the Waterton-Glacier World Heritage Site—prioritizes energy and mining development above all other values, including wilderness and wildlife conservation.

Specific Threats

The BC Environmental Assessment Office is considering a proposal by Cline Mining Corp. to remove 40 million tonnes of coal from a Flathead mountain and dump waste rock into Foisey Creek, a headwaters stream of the Flathead River. Scientists have identified Foisey Creek as “critical” habitat in the lifecycle of threatened bull trout, which migrate from Glacier National Park to spawn in the Flathead. It is also prime habitat for the genetically pure westslope cutthroat trout.

Multiple phosphate and precious metals exploration drilling permits have been issued for the Flathead River Valley in recent years. Vancouver-based Max Resource Group began drilling for gold in July 2008 above Howell Creek in the headwaters of the Flathead River.

In December 2008, the BC government granted BP Canada a controversial coalbed methane tenure in the East Kootenay, but exempted the Flathead from the tenure. However, BP Canada still says it wants to drill in the Flathead. Until the Flathead is permanently protected, it remains

vulnerable to future proposals for coalbed methane drilling. Bill Bennett, the East Kootenay Liberal MLA, said in May 2009 that “we're going to have to decide whether BP should get tenure there, and that's not imminent....it is an issue we have that's outstanding.”

Industrial development in the Flathead River Valley could harm water quality in the Flathead River, which flows south from BC to form the western boundary of Glacier National Park. A report from the US Department of the Interior says heavy metals such as selenium and high levels of nitrates from blasting compounds at the proposed Cline Mine would enter the Flathead River and reach the U.S. border in 24 hours.

Ecological Importance

The Flathead River Valley is one of the last unsettled low-elevation valleys in southern Canada. *National Geographic* magazine calls this area “one of the most diverse and ecologically intact natural ecosystems in the temperate zones of the world.” The Flathead has long been recognized as the missing piece in Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park, established in 1932 by Alberta and Montana. Waterton-Glacier is the world’s first International Peace Park, and a World Heritage Site and UNESCO Biosphere Reserve.

The Flathead River watershed contained eight “blue-listed” species (of special concern) in B.C. and six species listed as endangered or threatened under the U.S. Endangered Species Act, including the grey wolf and bull trout. Blue-listed species in the Flathead are the tailed frog, grizzly bear, Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep, northern goshawk, turkey vulture, Lewis woodpecker, bull trout, and mottled sculpin.

Canadian Geographic magazine describes the Flathead River Valley as “a nursery, incubating wildlife that disperses and repopulates neighbouring habitats.” The Flathead has the highest density of grizzly bears in the interior of North America. It also has the highest density and diversity of carnivores in North America—16 species ranging from the marten and fisher to lynx, wolverines and grey wolves—as well as six ungulate species.

The Flathead is compared with Africa’s Serengeti for its richness of plant species. It has the greatest diversity of plants in all of Canada—1,000 species of wildflowers alone.

The Flathead River is one of North America’s last wild rivers. Water in the Flathead is so pure that scientists use it as a benchmark by which to measure water quality in rivers around the world. In March 2009, the BC Outdoor Recreation Council named the Flathead the most endangered river in B.C. due to proposed energy and mining development. Two weeks later, on April 7, American Rivers association named the Flathead the 5th most endangered river in the U.S. for the same reasons.

CPAWS, Sierra Club BC and Wildsight are calling for the lower one-third of the Flathead River Valley to be made a National Park. We are also urging the BC government to establish a Wildlife Management Area in the rest of the valley and adjoining habitat. We ask the BC government to declare immediately a no-staking reserve in the Flathead River Valley. The Flathead is a critical part of the Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative, which aims to preserve North America’s most significant remaining wildlife corridor.