



The Crown of the Continent

Partnerships – Tourism

The rule of partnerships. Relationships require more than one person.

If there is one industry that absolutely screams 'partnerships,' it is tourism.

Individual businesses working in a given tourism hot spot area all live and die around the collective success of that area.

While most businesses don't work together, in the day-by-day, hour-by-hour sense, they do pull together in such areas as chambers of commerce or business committees that stage public events, such as the Columbia Valley Chamber of Commerce, which has a sub-committee (Invermere Business Committee) that organizes and stages special events.

Tourism partnerships are making sense and proving themselves on a larger regional and even cross-border scale, including the Selkirk Loop, a joint venture between Northern Idaho and West Kootenay tourism interests, and the Crown of the Continent Geotourism Council, recently honoured by the State of Montana with its Tourism Partnership of the Year award. The Crown of the Continent MapGuide project included partners in Montana, Alberta and B.C.

In late March, at the Montana Tourism and Recreation Industry's 2009 Montana Governor's Conference in Helena, Lieutenant Governor John Bohlinger presented the award to National Parks Conservation Association manager Steve Thompson, of Whitefish, Mont., who is the project coordinator for the Geotourism Council.

Thompson said the MapGuide project celebrates and highlights "what is special about a place and how people are going to keep it that way. There is a lot of richness in this map if you take the time to look into it. It just scratches the surface of what's in the region but does give a detailed look. The map describes geo-tourism as tourism that sustains or enhances the geographical character of a place — its environment, culture, aesthetics, heritage and the well-being of its residents."

Representing the College of the Rockies on the project was Carrie Schafer, who pointed out that it was a great example of a successful partnership comprised of many committed individuals and organizations.

"People from both sides of the Rockies in Montana, B.C. and Alberta poured themselves into this with an eye on creating something as unique as the people who live in the Crown of the Continent area, and with a partner as well known as National Geographic at the heart of the project, we have created a living education and information tool."

Bohlinger stated while handing out the award to Thompson, “The people, partnerships and events being honored highlight the passion and dedication found throughout our tourism industry. Our state is fortunate to have such a committed core of individuals working on behalf of a better Montana.”

Like the Selkirk Loop, the Crown of the Continent Geotourism Council (COTC) is a partnership that has reached beyond the 49th parallel.

The Crown of the Continent joined National Geographic in putting the concepts of geotourism to work, building an international community celebrating the special qualities of the expansive area that includes Glacier and Waterton National Parks – an area covering northwest Montana, southwest Alberta and southeast British Columbia.

Twenty-two U.S. and Canadian organizations, including the COTR, helped with the outreach and product funding.

Begun in early 2007, this group helped National Geographic establish a comprehensive and beautiful map guide after inviting residents of this large region to share what they felt was special and unique about their areas and what they were doing to keep it that way.

A total of 640 nominations were received and 130 sites, businesses, events and experiences are highlighted on the living MapGuide (sic) document. Hundreds more are part of the companion website that the council had created:
www.crownofthecontinent.net.

At the centre of the project area – at its heart, is the root of the partnership, the International Peace Park –comprised of Glacier National Park in Montana and Waterton Lakes National Park in the southwestern corner of Alberta.

These two world famous wilderness areas are fantastic examples of how the natural world exists in a state that does not contemplate borders. In addition, the communities around the parks all operate in similar fashion, whether in Montana, Alberta or British Columbia. People on both sides of the border rely on the same economies, and upon one another, and we live life on the same plane. The human and natural heritage of the Crown of the Continent area is linked, and a glimpse at the MapGuide, either online or the actual National Geographic map that has been produced, provides proof of that.

And the partnership that created the COTC MapGuide is a living example of how these three distinct geo-political regions continue to work together in a symbiotic relationship that spans an international border and personifies the natural heritage and cultured, which residents in all the areas associated with it embrace and embody.

“The Crown of the Continent Geotourism Council is a regional network of communities, tourism bureaus, conservation and business groups, educators, First Nations, government agencies and others working together in the region,” explains the intro to the COTC website, which is loaded with fascinating information and tidbits of local lore.

It depends on local knowledge, giving it more of a grassroots feel than a glossy tourism pitch, which tickles the modern traveler where they want to be tickled – in the brain and the heart.

National Geographic's John Tourtellot said the map works for both visitors and residents, thanks to the enormous amount of information contained on the two-sided product.

"When you live in a place, it's easy to forget how special it is," he said.