

Guest Column

Appropriate, timely to add Southern Crown

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I enjoyed Rob Chaney's excellent article, "**Expanding the Crown: Push to add Lincoln landscape as a jewel.**" Chaney described the University of Montana Geography Department's Rick Graetz and students' efforts to catalog, map and evaluate the biological diversity and connectivity of public wildlands to the south of Lincoln.

Graetz and his colleagues concluded the area remains largely intact and should be viewed as a natural extension of the ecologically important 13 million acre Crown of the Continent region extending from north of Lincoln into Canada. Graetz's proposal to add this "Southern Crown of the Continent" region to the whole would not create new management restrictions or bureaucracy. It would rightfully recognize in name the uniqueness of the country to the south of Lincoln.

The article stated, "The country ... hasn't been messed with too much. Everyone agrees it's a pretty big apple left in the bowl." What needs to be added is that the area remains wild today by no accident. Decades of persistent attention by the people who live here and long ago recognized its ecological integrity were and still are the key to its protection today.

The Nevada Mountain Inventoried Roadless Area comprises most of the Southern Crown country. In 1981, plans were announced to road and log the central core of Nevada Mountain. Hundreds of concerned sportsmen showed up, wrote letters and spoke out. The logging plans

were withdrawn. A few years later, the Helena National Forest began working on a new forest plan. Locals came together to develop a citizen's alternative for the area. The final 1986 forest plan adopted the citizen's recommendations for roadless and wildlife emphasis management prescriptions.

In 1988, Pat Williams introduced a Montana wilderness bill that included protections for this area based on a thousand petition signatures, hundreds of letters and extensive citizen testimony at congressional hearings. The bill passed but was pocket-vetoed by the president. Most recently, the Blackfoot Non-winter Travel Plan extends non-motorized management of the Nevada Mountain Roadless Area based on extensive public comments. There are too many more examples of citizen influence on the area's preservation and management to mention here. In the end, it has always been the local citizens and sportsmen stepping up to represent and maintain the long-term perspective on the unique values of this area.

Incrementally, over the last 40 years, the ecological integrity of these wildlands south of Lincoln have not only been maintained but improved. Recent research sponsored by Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks; the Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forest, Montana Wilderness Association, Wild Things Unlimited, and assisted by citizen volunteers, has documented the increasing importance of this "Southern Crown" to sensitive species from lynx to wolverine, grizzly and bull trout, and as security habitat for big game extending from Lincoln to Helena. Their value as biological reserves and migratory linkage areas between increasingly fragmented habitats has increased exponentially. The 50-mile-long Continental Divide corridor through this area is a critical snowpack area that sustains water supplies for downstream water users and supports trout fisheries in the Blackfoot, Missouri and Little Blackfoot rivers.

Graetz's proposal is appropriate and timely, both ecologically and economically. Concurrently, the Helena Forest is soliciting public comment until Sept. 6 on a new forest plan to replace the 1986 plan. Open houses have been scheduled in Lincoln on July 30 and Helena on July 25. In the Forest's proposed action, Supervisor Bill Avey acknowledges the uniqueness of the area south of Lincoln by recommending special protections for the Nevada Mountain Roadless Area. Adoption of Avey's recommendation will ensure that this Southern Crown of the Continent will remain intact for another four decades and beyond.



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