Vital News

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Cover photo by Jamie Scarrow

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EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S CORNER

A Look Back, and Forward

By pure chance, I found myself in the Salt Lake City airport on Saturday, May 15, 2004. I was changing planes en route home to Missoula, Mont., following a wildlife conference in Denver. I wasn't supposed to be in Utah that day, but for the first time in all my years of flying, I had been bumped from an overbooked flight the day before. I spent an extra night in Denver and returned home a day late.

As I walked out of the airport restroom, I noticed a grizzly-looking mountain man following me. He stared at my cap (which was embroidered with a bear silhouette and the words "Bear Trust"), tapped me on the shoulder, and said "What the heck is "Bear Trust?" I didn't know whether this guy was dangerous, so I quickly explained that Bear Trust was a bear conservation organization. He grinned and said, "Hi! I'm Doug Seus, with Vital Ground – ever heard of us?"

"Of course," I replied. We had a brief, but energized conversation about mutual friends, my consulting work with Bear Trust and the Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee, and Vital Ground's habitat projects in northern Idaho. Meanwhile, Lynne Seus was several gates down the concourse frantically calling …"Come on Doug … the plane's leaving!" Doug and Lynne were headed to Knight Inlet, British Columbia, for Vital Ground's annual Wild Bear Adventure.

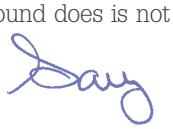
A missed flight; a chance meeting in the airport; five minutes of enthusiastic discussion with Doug Seus; the coincidence of seeing "Growing Up Grizzly 2" on Animal Planet the day after I got home; and the overlap of Vital Ground's conservation projects with my own work and interests whetted my desire to learn more about this group. As I researched, I was inspired by their passion and commitment and impressed by the small organization's focused conservation mission and noteworthy project accomplishments. And I learned that Vital Ground was conducting a search for a new executive director, and was considering relocating to Montana. One thing led to another…and a few months later I had given up my independent consulting business and had a "real job" again.

The serendipitous encounter with Doug seems like only yesterday, but it was 11 years ago this month, and it opened the door for me to become associated with a truly remarkable outfit. Working with Doug, Lynne and the Vital Ground team has been an incredible experience, and we have accomplished much together during the past few years – relocating Vital Ground's office from Park City, Utah, to Missoula, Montana; transitioning the organization from primarily a grant-making foundation to an accredited operating land trust; negotiating and acquiring 19 conservation easements and nine fee-title conservation properties in Montana and Idaho; expanding conservation partnerships throughout grizzly country; and building Vital Ground's credibility in the conservation and philanthropic communities – just to mention a few.

Working for Vital Ground these past years has been a highlight of my 40-year professional conservation career; but at age 66, it is time for me to begin the next stage of my life.

I announced my retirement plans to the board of trustees at Vital Ground's October 2014 board meeting. While I am going to miss the day-to-day involvement, I am confident I am leaving Vital Ground in good hands. We have a talented and dedicated board of trustees, and a top-notch staff. And Interim Executive Director Ryan Lutey is more than up to the task. Ryan has been Vital Ground's director of lands and conservation and in-house attorney since early 2005, and has spearheaded most of our conservation efforts during that time. And, of course, we have Doug and Lynne to continue providing inspiration and encouragement.

Vital Ground is celebrating its 25 Anniversary this year, and I am fortunate to have been a member of the Vital Ground team for much of that time. In parting, I would like to recall Lynne Seus' insightful words—*Where the Grizzly Can Walk, the Earth is Healthy and Whole*—because the habitat conservation work that Vital Ground does is not just for the Great Bear, it benefits all species, including us!



Photos by Ryan Lutey

Dave and Tina Petrig partnered with Vital Ground to protect 240 acres of wildlife habitat a few miles west of Vital Ground's headquarters in Missoula, Mont. The conservation easement serves as important grizzly bear linkage and also secures winter and seasonal habitat for elk, deer and other ungulates.

Father–Daughter Team Conserves 240 Acres Near Vital Ground Headquarters

Ellis Mountain Property Serves as Crucial Corridor Habitat

Vital Ground and a father-daughter team partnered in December 2014 to permanently protect 240 acres of wildlife habitat near the confluence of the Ninemile and Clark Fork valleys, just a few miles west of Missoula, Mont.

A year and a half before the agreement was finalized, Tina Petrig of Decatur, Ga., began working with Vital Ground to certify her father's original vision of protecting the property.

"The {conservation} easement will serve to protect the land itself, allowing it to flourish naturally, as well as protecting habitat for all animals that find it to be a good home," she said. "As I grow older, I can't think of much that is more satisfying than believing that this small piece of habitat will thrive undisturbed long after my lifetime."

After retiring in 1995, Dave Petrig visited several Montana properties and acquired the Mount Ellis acreage because of its stunning views and to enjoy its wildlife. Tina said her dad once said he thought the ideal property would have no access. "He just wanted to preserve it," she said.

Since then, they have worked to restore the property to its natural state. "Long ago my dad had the notion of owning a 'piece of the Rockies,' Tina said. "He grew up in Seattle, and both his parents were Swiss immigrants, so mountains are in his nature."

In conjunction with Missoula's Watershed Consulting, the Petrigs have since worked tirelessly to control knapweed, restored a small stream, thinned encroaching conifers and planted Ponderosa pine, and have nurtured native grasses and shrubs for the benefit of wildlife.

Near Vital Ground's headquarters, the acreage and corresponding settlement completes Missoula County's 200th voluntary private land conservation easement.

Similar to many rural areas in western Montana, subdivision and development is a growing threat to wildlife habitat, open space, and forest and agricultural resources. Conservation easements like this one help secure important winter and seasonal habitat for elk, deer and other ungulates, and may carry significant tax benefits for participating landowners.

(continued on page 4)

(Father-Daughter from page 3)

"The Ellis Mountain Conservation Easement is Vital Ground's first conservation easement in the Ninemile area, and the Petrigs' willingness to fully donate it first attracted the organization's attention," said Ryan Lutey, Vital Ground's interim executive director. "Then our preliminary review of the area's conservation values indicated that this location serves an important role in linking larger expanses of relatively intact wildlife habitat north and south of the Clark Fork Valley. That primary human travel corridor and its associated development represents one of the most significant obstacles to wildlife movements between the Cabinet-Yaak and Northern Continental Divide Ecosystems and the Bitterroot-Selway Grizzly Bear Recovery Area."

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) has documented use of the Petrig acreage by at least one grizzly bear. According to FWP Bear Manager Jamie Jonkel, in 2001 the "Ninemile Grizzly" frequented the property. "This bear used both the Sixmile and Ninemile drainages and spent time in the Ellis Mountain area," Jonkel said. "One of this young male's favorite crossing sites was to follow a drainage coming off of Ellis Mountain, then he would swim the river and walk downstream and cross under the I-90 overpass." (See related story, page 14.)

The Petrig property is situated at the top of the drainage, and there are other verified grizzly sightings in the vicinity, including the well-known wandering bear named "Ethyl," the 20-year-old female that was recently documented traveling more than 2,800 miles during the past couple of years.

Jonkel said information extracted from Ethyl's radio collar verified that she visited the Ellis Mountain area just north of Ellis Creek, which is only a couple of miles from this conservation easement.

Since Tina Petrig's first visits to Montana in the early 90s, she's been interested in grizzlies and their survival. "The fact that their habitat has dwindled to such limited areas seems symptomatic of much that's wrong with our culture and history," she said.

"It wasn't until I learned of Vital Ground that I realized that grizzly bear recovery in these areas is a realistic goal," Tina said. "I am hopeful that other landowners may join this effort to protect just a few key parcels that it would take to maintain this irreplaceable connection."

Tina Petrig said a statement from Vital Ground Trustee Doug Chadwick best expresses her conservation hopes: "If a countryside can still support grizzlies, it will be good and whole and rich and wild and free enough to support all the other creatures struggling to hold on to a place in this world."

"There's no way to say it better than that!" Tina said.

MR. DAVID PETRIG (1922-2015) A True Southern Gentleman and a True Steward of Montana Wildlands

David Petrig on Ellis Mountain

He generously shared his land and land ethic with young Westerners, encouraging an appreciation for the high and lonesome. In addition to his contributions to conservation ethics – working with local restoration practitioners, Mr. Petrig launched and maintained a persistent restoration program that transformed his property and advanced appropriate ecologic trends far into the future.

—Mark Vander Meer,
Restoration Ecologist/Forester/Soil Scientist,
Watershed Consulting, LLC

Berg Family Aids Grizzly Recovery in Montana's Cabinet-Yaak Ecosystem

In March, Vital Ground partnered with the Berg family to permanently secure 40 acres of prime grizzly habitat through a conservation easement inside the Cabinet-Yaak Grizzly Bear Recovery Zone in Montana. This contribution – fully donated by the Berg Family – is also ideally situated to provide high-quality habitat for numerous other wildlife species inhabiting the Cabinet Mountains of northwestern Montana. The property spans the valley bottom just downstream from the confluence of the Yaak River and Meadow Creek, and provides significant riparian habitat fronting the Yaak River while linking vast tracts of U.S. Forest Service holdings immediately adjacent to its eastern and western boundaries.

Douglas, Marcia Lee, and their grandson, Karl Berg were keen observers of how important their property was for the surrounding ecosystem: grizzly bears, along with other

Ryan Lutey photo

View from the Berg Property looking north towards Mount Baldy.

sensitive species such as Canada lynx and wolverines, have been spotted within the region likely due to the prime biological conditions on the land that provide for important spring and autumn forage. This low-elevation site, about 2,800 feet above sea level, is host to approximately 20 acres of thriving forestland with trees dating back over 100 years. The remainder of the property, outside of the quaking aspen grove and mature red cedars (among many other species), offers access to braided riparian areas between Bergie Creek, an offshoot of Meadow Creek, and the Yaak River.

In 2008, Vital Ground teamed up with the Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative to identify areas in north Idaho, northwest Montana and Canada to be top priorities for protection, specifically to maintain habitat linkage for large carnivores. The Berg conservation easement directly complements that effort, and Y2Y has committed an important contribution to the endowment providing for the ongoing stewardship and maintenance of this conservation easement.

Protecting this parcel of land from additional development will also ensure that it remains available for the enjoyment of future generations. The Bergs, who are the newest members of Vital Ground's Silvertip Legacy Circle, updated their estate plans to direct that the property ultimately be devised to Vital Ground in order to amplify their easement donation. The commitment and visionary support of donors like the Bergs, aided by the continued efforts of Vital Ground, brings us closer to long-term recovery goals to once again make our earth healthy and whole.

Alvord Lake Community Forest Update

Vital Ground's Alvord Lake project is unique in several respects, but most importantly it is not a traditional private project between a land trust and landowners to protect their family farm, ranch or seasonal recreational holding – it is overwhelmingly a project of the Troy community and the surrounding area. In its current form, the project was sparked by nearly a decade of local efforts to identify a conservation solution for a treasured piece of the community landscape, and consequently, it has cemented the diverse public/private partnership featured in the Fall 2014 issue of *Vital News*.

Building on the cornerstone $400,000 USDA Community Forest and Open Space Program grant and a $50,000 commitment from the Montana Fish and Wildlife Conservation Trust, numerous conservation groups, private foundations and individuals have stepped forward to join the effort. Most recently, the Montana Loon Society and Flathead Audubon Society have made commitments that will complement standing pledges from the Cinnabar Foundation, First Security Bank, William H. Donner Foundation, Oberweiler Foundation and First Interstate Bank.

The current owners of the parcel – The Friends of Alvord Lake – who stepped in to protect the property for what they originally hoped would be a short-term solution, have offered a bargain sale amounting to an estimated donation

Photo by Ryan Lutey

The USDA Community Forest Grant was awarded to Vital Ground to protect 142 acres of forested land in northwest Montana.

of more than $315,000. But the partnership still needs to raise $306,000 to meet Vital Ground's closing and anticipated stewardship obligations for the acquisition...and our option contract expires at the end of this year. As the largest single acquisition the organization has ever undertaken, Vital Ground needs your help to conserve the only private parcel on Alvord Lake's shoreline to ensure that it remains publicly accessible for future generations of conservationists, forest stewards and wildlife enthusiasts!

Celebrating 25 Years of Grizzly Country Conservation!

In 1990, Vital Ground founders Doug and Lynne Seus recognized the need for wildlife restoration and took action by purchasing 240 acres of grizzly habitat on the Teton River in Montana. This year, we will celebrate that initial land purchase (and tens of thousands of acres since) as we mark 25 years of successful conservation achievements.

With the help of generous donors and supporters, Vital Ground has helped to conserve and restore grizzly bear habitat from Yellowstone to Alaska, an incredible step towards connecting these magnificent landscapes that once belonged to wild grizzlies and all creatures great and small.

In celebration of these accomplishments, we have established an ambitious $1.5 million fundraising goal, $621,000 of which is needed for Vital Ground's Alvord Lake project – our most expensive single land acquisition ever! (Details on page 5.)

To monitor progress toward this fundraising effort, stay tuned to *www.VitalGround.org*.

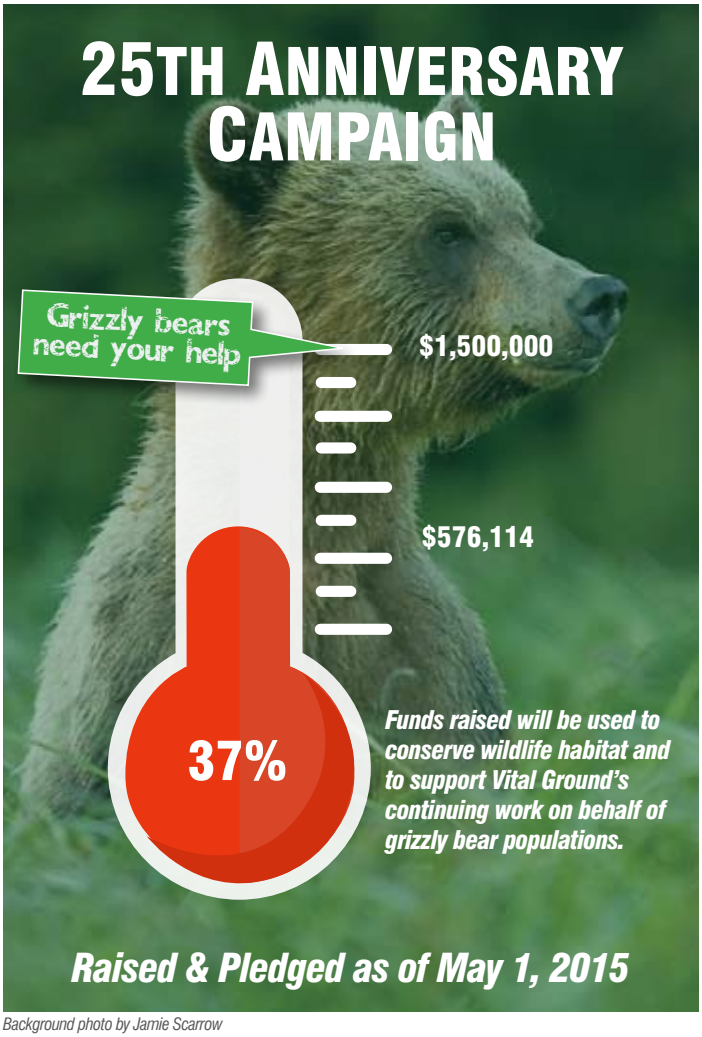
Vital Ground's staff and board of trustees extend their deepest gratitude to our supporters and invite you to the following celebration events:

May 8, 2015
Seven Seas Dolphinarium
Brookfield Zoo, Chicago, Illinois
(Event held before publication)

August 26, 2015
The Vital Ground Foundation
Fort Missoula - Heritage Hall
Missoula, Montana
(TBA)

October 2, 2015
Riverhorse Restaurant
Park City, UT
(TBA)

Please mark your calendars for summer and fall events, and stay tuned to *Vital e-News* and *www.VitalGround.org* for additional events. Full coverage of 25-year anniversary celebratory events will be published in the fall issue of *Vital News*!



Background photo by Jamie Scarrow

New Video Illustrates Vital Ground's 25 Years!

In celebration of 25 years of conservation, Vital Ground has created a media tool for those who would like to host receptions or house parties to share Vital Ground's story! A fantastic tool for large or small gatherings, this plug-and-play DVD (also available in USB flash drive) chronicles the early days of Vital Ground and also features movie bear/animal ambassador extraordinaire, Bart the Bear. With Doug and Lynne Seus as your hosts, this 10-minute video also illustrates what Vital Ground is doing to help enhance, restore and conserve grizzly country, and identifies ways you can help support Vital Ground as the premiere grizzly bear conservation organization in the world. The video also includes special congratulatory messages from television/movie personalities Jeff Bridges, Jack Hanna, and Chris Morgan.

So ... please share Vital Ground's story with your friends! Obtain a copy of Vital Ground's 25th Anniversary Video by phoning 406-549-8650, or email info@vitalground.org. See it online at *www.VitalGround.org*.

Tribute to Bob Koons

Former Vital Ground Board of Trustees' Chairman Bob Koons passed away on Jan. 4, 2015. All who knew Bob will miss his joyful spirit, friendship, caring, and strong leadership skills. He was a dedicated conservationist and held a deep respect for wildlife and wild lands. In addition to his many other worthy endeavors, Bob served for nine years on Vital Ground's board of trustees, six as board chair. During his board tenure, Vital Ground grew into a respected operating land trust focused on protecting and restoring North America's grizzly bear populations by conserving wildlife habitat.

Vital Ground's Board has established the Bob Koons Memorial Fund to honor Bob's memory. Bob was always focused on ensuring Vital Ground's long-term sustainability, so contributions will be directed to the organization's permanent endowment. To contribute, use the return envelope included with this issue of *Vital News* and write-in "Bob Koons Memorial Fund," Or go to *www.VitalGround.org*, click the "Donate" button, then "Tribute Gifts" just below the bear cub photo.

Welcome New Board Members!

Vital Ground's board of trustees selected three new members during the October 2014 board meeting. Wally Becky, John Hechtel and Carroll Ingram were elected to the board, while Russ Fox completed the remaining portion of Carolyn Dobbs' term after she passed way in February 2014. Russ will continue to serve Vital Ground on its Advisory Council.

A certified public accountant, Becky has held numerous leadership positions in the financial arena with companies such as Morton International and Coopers & Lybrand, and he has served numerous boards of directors. With over 30 years' experience in bear management, Hechtel has worked extensively with bears in the Arctic and Interior Alaska with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game. Ingram began his legal career in 1967, held numerous leadership roles in the Mississippi State Senate, and has extensive experience in litigation, business, corporate, and governmental law.

A heartfelt thank you to all of you for helping Vital Ground protect and restore North America's grizzly bear populations by conserving wildlife habitat for future generations. Learn more about Vital Ground's board members and advisors on the "About Us" page at *www.VitalGround.org*.

Welcome Brian Wright

When you phone Vital Ground, it's likely the first voice to greet you will be that of Brian Wright, Vital Ground's administrative assistant, who last October replaced long-time employee Shelly Wear. Brian's primary duty is database management, which means when you donate to Vital Ground, Brian makes sure your donation is entered and that you are properly thanked for your support. He also helps out in a variety of ways, from filing lands documents, to updating the website, to penning articles for Vital e-News! When he's not at the office, Brian enjoys biking Missoula, playing music with friends, camping, hiking, and watching way too much NBA basketball. Brian is thrilled to start his career in wildlife conservation with Vital Ground!

PRAIRIE THUNDER RED WINE

by Ten Spoon Vineyard + Winery

In tribute to Montana's magnificent grizzly, we've crafted a rich, Syrah from organic grapes grown at Harold Pleasant's Vineyard in Prosser, Wash. Full-bodied with notes of chocolate, tobacco and spice, Prairie Thunder rolls across the palate to a deep, bear-satisfying finish. 2014 Silver Medal Winner at the New York Finger Lakes Competition.

Prairie Thunder is available in retail shops across Montana, and can be shipped to other states where allowed.

Vital Ground receives $1.00 for each bottle of Prairie Thunder purchased.

TO ORDER, VISIT *WWW.TENSPOONVINEYARD.COM.*

A Bear Named Irene

By Ben Goldfarb

On July 14, 1993, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service crew trapped a 2-year-old female grizzly bear in British Columbia's Flathead Valley, a wild river-carved lowland northwest of Glacier National Park. Officially, the 80-pound grizzly was designated Bear 286. Unofficially, the crew named her Irene.

The team fitted Irene with a radio-collar, packed her onto a truck and drove 150 miles through the night to the Cabinet Mountains, a rugged swath of snow-covered peaks and conifer forests tucked in Montana's northwest corner. The next morning, biologist Wayne Kasworm turned Irene loose near Lost Girl Creek.

Photo courtesy Wayne Kasworm, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

In 2009 a trail camera captured this image of Irene with two yearlings at a corral sampling station, which attracts bears. When animals pass through a strand of barbed wire (visible in foreground) they often leave hair samples, which are later collected for DNA analysis.

Rarely had such great expectations been pinned on a single animal. Irene had been designated one of the involuntary saviors of the Cabinet-Yaak Ecosystem, a 2,600-square-mile region on the Montana-Idaho border abutting Canada. It's one of six designated recovery zones in the Lower 48 where the federal government aims to protect or boost threatened grizzlies. While some recovery zones, like the lands around Glacier and Yellowstone national parks, supported growing populations, bears in the Cabinet-Yaak were spiraling toward extinction. Kasworm estimated that only 15 bears roamed the Cabinets.

Kasworm believed the only way to save the population was to supplement it with more grizzlies. The strategy, called augmentation, made biological sense, but it was politically contentious. The same year Irene moved to the Cabinet Mountains, a biologist who hoped to transplant bears to Washington's North Cascades was spat on at a public meeting. "Nobody had ever moved bears to bolster a population before the Cabinet-Yaak program," Kasworm recalls. "Obviously, it was a controversial idea."

Today, though, the strategy appears to have paid off: According to a recent DNA study, around 45 grizzlies now reside in the Cabinet-Yaak. Once on the verge of vanishing, the population is nearly halfway to 100 – the threshold at which it would be deemed no longer at risk.

The bears' persistence gives scientists hope that the Cabinet-Yaak could someday serve as a node of connection for isolated pockets of grizzlies throughout the Rockies. Yet that optimism is tempered by serious challenges, none greater than keeping bears alive in a landscape shared with humans.

In 1987, when Kasworm first floated the idea of transplanting bears to the Cabinet Mountains, locals responded with suspicion. Previous recovery efforts had been blamed for the region's floundering timber economy and the closure of backcountry roads. "When I was a kid, people would drive up to our house excited because they'd seen a bear," says Bruce Vincent, a logger whose family has lived around Libby, a town of 2,700 that's the Cabinet-Yaak's largest population center, since 1904. "But attitudes changed. The bears became 'goddamned grizzly bears.' "

Vincent wasn't opposed to augmentation, but he and the USFWS agreed that locals deserved a voice in how it was implemented. He and other community leaders, including elected officials and timber and mining industry representatives, created a committee to guide the plan. Kasworm agreed to delay relocation to hold meetings and modify the program.

Finally, the committee consented to a conservative experiment: Starting in 1990, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service would relocate four young females over a five-year period. If the bears stuck around and reproduced, the augmentation would proceed. If not, it would be years before the scientists got another shot. "That citizens committee was how we were able to pull this off," Kasworm says.

Initially, though, the bears didn't cooperate: The first shed her radio-collar and disappeared, and the second was found dead a year after being released. Irene, however, survived and stayed out of trouble. Kasworm gave biweekly updates on her whereabouts on a local radio show.

Then, in 1995, Irene slipped her collar. She was gone, the augmentation in jeopardy. For several years, scientists tried to recapture Irene and two other introduced bears. Were they still alive? Had they wandered away, or stayed to reproduce? Nobody knew – until 2004, when a barbed-wire snare snagged a clump of hair that DNA analysis identified as Irene's. She

was alive, and as later hair-snares revealed, had borne nine cubs. Her cubs in turn gave birth to eight more. By 2012, Kasworm had identified 35 individual bears; 20 were Irene's descendants or mates. Almost singlehandedly, she'd rescued the Cabinet population.

Encouraged by Irene's success, and with the community's cautious blessing, Kasworm and Montana's Fish, Wildlife and Parks Department began relocating more bears, about one a year. They've now introduced 17 grizzlies altogether, most recently two sibling females in 2014.

Augmentation only works, however, if the bears survive. The Cabinet-Yaak is just a fraction the size of the recovery zones centered around Yellowstone and Glacier, and though its human inhabitants are few in number, the ecosystem has been fractured by nearly 4,000 miles of open roads and scattered pockets of logging and mining. That fragmentation makes fatal conflicts with wide-ranging bears almost inevitable. Grizzlies have been slaughtered by poachers, hit by trains, and shot legally by people who felt threatened. Still more have been mistakenly slain by black bear hunters, or euthanized after developing a taste for human food. Altogether, at least 48 Cabinet-Yaak grizzlies have been killed by humans since 1982, about three times as many as have died from natural causes.

In other words, the Cabinet-Yaak is losing bears as fast as it's gaining them. "The main reason our population hasn't grown much in the last 10 years is human-caused mortality," says Kim Annis, bear management specialist at Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks.

That mortality, combined with the population's narrow gene pool – granddaughters have bred with their own grandfathers – means augmentation won't cease anytime soon. Though Kasworm predicts that "there will come a point when we can let this population go its own way," he adds, "Right now, I can't tell you when that point will be."

The vague timetable frustrates some locals, who are ready for the recovery process, and resulting road restrictions, to be over. "We need to have a frank discussion about what success looks like," Vincent says. "Living with bears is part of the romance of calling this place home. But it's hard for people to accept the management regime." In a 2008 survey, over 70 percent of locals believed bears should be conserved, but less than half supported the federal goal of 100 grizzlies.

The bears are hardly the sole point at issue: Volatile lumber markets have shuttered sawmills, and road closures have as much to do with maintenance costs as bears. Environmental advocacy groups also frustrate locals, which often comment on and challenges timber sales that threaten grizzly habitat. Kasworm, who fears lawsuits are eroding local support for grizzlies, has supported timber projects that he thinks wouldn't harm bears. Some, he says, could even benefit the animals by clearing space for huckleberries, a primary food source.

Photo courtesy Wayne Kasworm, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Irene makes a hasty exit from a culvert trap in this 1993 photo. Later, her nine cubs did wonders to help re-populate grizzly bears into the Cabinet-Yaak Ecosystem.

Ultimately, the most serious problem might be isolation. The Cabinets' bears are cut off from populations that could grow their numbers and diversify their genetic pool. Although bears occasionally wander over from the Selkirk Mountains, the Whitefish Range and Canada, those nomads haven't reproduced. Increasing the exchange of bears between ecosystems, says Chris Servheen, grizzly recovery coordinator for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, will help restore the health and resilience of bears throughout the Rockies. "This was all part of their continuous range," he says. "Grizzlies shrank into these small units because of human impacts."

The Cabinet-Yaak population might be small, but its central location between Glacier, the Selkirks, and Canada makes it an important piece in the bigger bear puzzle. Ryan Lutey, director of lands at Vital Ground, seeks to connect grizzly populations through strategic land acquisitions and dreams of a day when the region is capable of supplying bears to other ecosystems – especially the Bitterroot, a 5,600 square-mile recovery zone 120 miles south. Although the designated wilderness at its core makes it prime habitat, the Bitterroot has no grizzlies, in part because a planned relocation program fell victim to anti-bear politics in 2001.

For now, simply surviving is challenge enough for the Cabinet-Yaak's bears. One casualty occurred in November 2009, when an elk hunter shot an old female he claimed was threatening him. When Kasworm examined the corpse, he noticed small holes in its ears, where tags had once hung. This was one of his bears, and though he hadn't seen her in 16 years, he suspected he knew which one. DNA analysis confirmed it: Irene was dead.

Rather than mourn her death, though, Kasworm chose to celebrate Irene's extraordinary life. "She contributed so much," he says. "I don't know where this population would be without her."

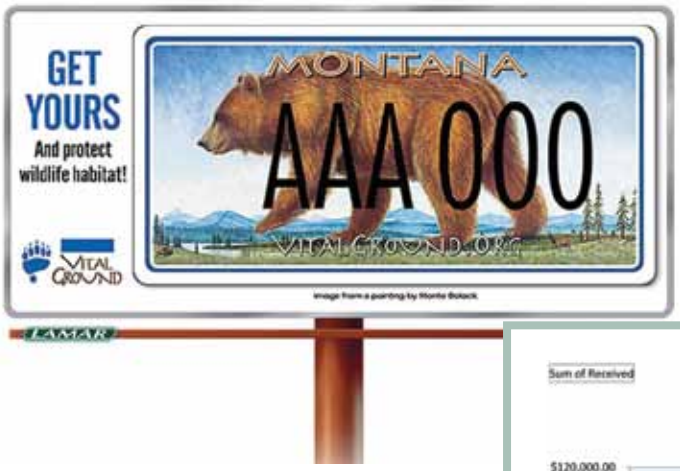
— This article was first published in High Country News

Evolving Business Partnership Helping to Protect Grizzly Country

There is a common joke regarding the anticipation of a certain monthly check.

There is one in particular we look forward to every month. We don't wait by the mailbox, but we do welcome the funds that come from Vital Ground's participation in Montana's Charity License Plate Program.

The amount we received the first year in the program, 2008, barely totaled four figures, but today we see plates everywhere in Montana (and some faraway places, too), and the resulting revenue greatly supports our work. The plate seems popular for a number of reasons – not least of which is Monte Dolack's (*www.dolack.com*) extraordinary painting of Bart – and I hope that, for more people, Vital Ground becomes one of those reasons.



The license plate program is part of our Business Partners in Conservation program – in itself a fantastic source of revenue to benefit wild grizzly recovery.

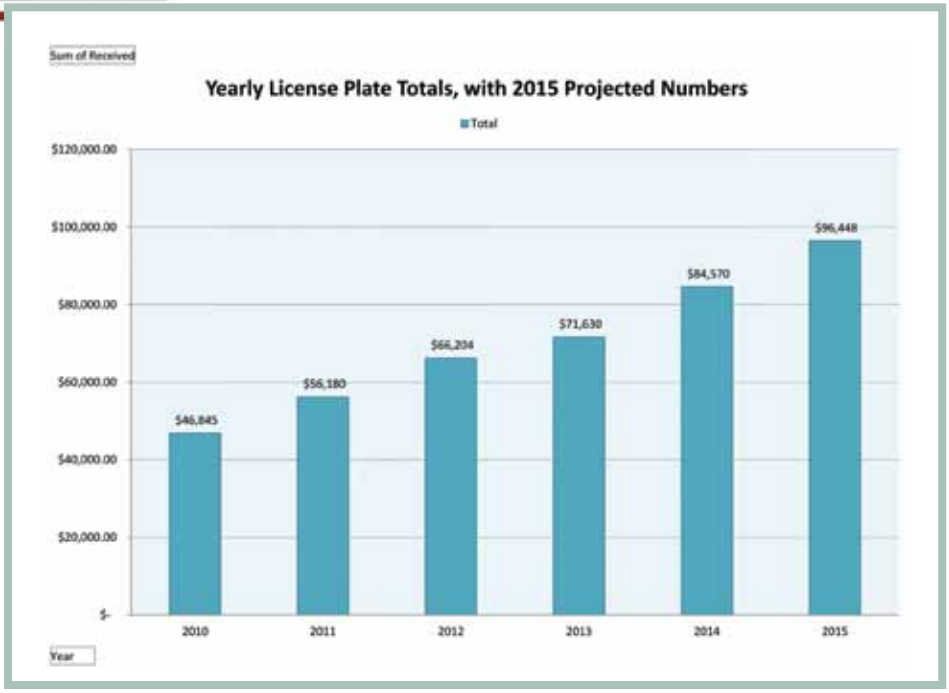
We have been blessed with partners that are growing businesses with popular products, and we are proud to be a contributor to their success. In the last decade, there have been few revenue categories in the nonprofit world that have trended upward, but this has been one for Vital Ground. With this being the case, we can look at taking on new projects with great optimism.

Since we are looking for additional puzzle pieces of grizzly habitat all the time, there is plenty of room for more partnerships! Do you have ideas or referrals?

Businesses can sell more products and help a worthy nonprofit organization at the same time. For a number of businesses, their image benefits from values associated with keeping wild land wild forever.

There are several ways to structure a partnership with Vital Ground, but the most common is with a product royalty agreement. This arrangement involves a contractual relationship where the use of Vital Ground's name and images are a factor in selling the product and, as a part of the bargain, each sale results in a portion of the revenue going to Vital Ground.

In other cases, we might grant approval to use our name or images in a defined way in return for a contribution to Vital Ground in the form of goods, services or expertise.



In all cases, though, it is critical that businesses and products are aligned with the image and mission of Vital Ground. It is encouraging to know that many successful businesses recognize that sound environmental stewardship and good business are a powerful combination.

We have two essential beverages covered: wine with Ten Spoon Winery (*www.tenspoon.com*) and coffee with Montana Coffee Traders (*www.coffeetraders.com*), but wouldn't a "Grizzly Bear Beer" fit well?

Our "fashion buyer" (Shannon) finds ways to make cool clothing cooler by adding the Vital Ground logo, but there is potential for much more.

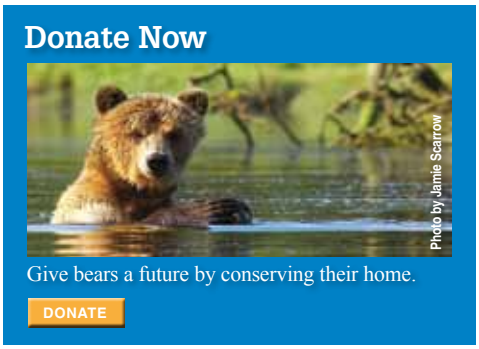
When these relationships work, we have the added benefit and fun associated with having lots of contact with our friends.

Thank you to our existing partners. You contribute in a very meaningful way to the work that we do. If you would care to join us as a partner or if you have any ideas – please call.

— Mark Brennan, 406-549-8650
mbrennan@vitalground.org

Happy Birthday!

Join Vital Ground and friends for anniversary events in Missoula, Mont., on August 26, and in Park City, Utah, on October 2. Stay tuned to Vital e-News and www.VitalGround.org for additional events!



Recurring Donations Easy, Effective Way to Contribute

While business partners are instrumental in helping Vital Ground protect and restore wildlife habitat, we don't overlook the absolute importance of individuals in helping to conserve grizzly country. When many people donate regularly, even as little as $5 per month, it adds up to significant amounts!

Automatic donors are dedicated, passionate individuals like you who provide a steady, reliable income stream, allowing Vital Ground to effectively address the issue of habitat fragmentation head-on.

For a small monthly investment, your automatic monthly contribution allows Vital Ground to secure key small parcels and make a huge impact for grizzlies, other wildlife, the landscape, and people.

Monthly giving benefits both Vital Ground and our supporters:

- Lower administrative costs mean that more of your donation goes to protect critical habitat.
- Easy to increase, decrease, or discontinue your monthly payment at any time.
- Receive less mail asking for donations, keeping our costs low and saving paper.
- Get periodic updates on how your gift is being used to preserve land for grizzlies.

You can create a recurring donation in minutes by going to *www.VitalGround.org* and clicking the big, blue DONATE button, then select "Monthly Donation."

We thank our auto-donors in providing effective, key pieces in solving the puzzle of landscape connectivity and giving grizzlies the vital ground they need to survive.

Join Today!

— Brian Wright, 406-549-8650
bwright@vitalground.org

Photo by Lance Schelvan

Update: Restoring Grizzlies to the North Cascades

In the Fall 2014 issue of *Vital News*, Krista Langlois wrote an article titled "Grizzlies Gain Ground in Washington State," which shed light on efforts being made to restore grizzly populations to the North Cascades. Efforts to re-establish grizzlies, now nicknamed the ghost-bear due to severe dwindling or outright disappearance, have been stalled for years... until now!

In August 2014, the federal government said they are moving forward with a three-year study that will evaluate a 10,000-square-mile portion of Washington and British Columbia that was once rich with healthy grizzly populations. This study will determine whether grizzly bears need to be transplanted into the area, a controversial idea for some, or develop new approaches for helping the few bears that might live there recover. Public meetings were held in communities surrounding the North Cascades and Seattle. In addition to meetings, comments were accepted through a variety of venues including online through March 26.

Vital Ground fully supports all efforts to actively restore and recover grizzly bears in the North Cascades, and an Environmental Impact Statement should include alternatives providing for relocation, reintroduction and active management of the species. Actively managing and restoring grizzlies has proven successful in other recovery ecosystems, and based on studies that document the high quality habitat that exists in the North Cascades, there is every reason to believe it is the key to successfully recovering grizzlies here.

See Vital Ground's North Cascades Ecosystem grizzly bear recovery scoping comment under the "News & Media" tab at *www.VitalGround.org*.

Montana Salutes Open Land Month

The importance of open land to Montana is hard to overestimate. The Montana experience is invariably an outdoor experience, and what open land represents – an agricultural heritage, vast outdoor recreational opportunities, diverse wildlife habitat, and scenic splendor, freedom to roam and so much more – is a way of life that

Montanans treasure. So it is indeed appropriate to formally salute the importance of open land with Montana Open Land Month, a month-long celebration in July 2015 officially recognized by Governor Steve Bullock.

The purpose of Montana Open Land Month is simple: Celebrate the value of open land to Montana's economy and quality of life, and honor the places and experiences we all love. While open land has been a vital and consistent benefit to Montanans for generations, 2015 is the first time Montanans and visitors will cooperatively honor the significant contributions that private and public open land means to our way of life. A complete current list of Montana Open Land Month events, partners and sponsors can be found at *www.openlandmt.org*. You are encouraged to visit the website and share your ideas, enthusiasm and recommendations. For more information, Kate Wright, Travelers for Open Land, 406-581-0550 or kbwmontana@gmail.com.

Support Vital Ground by shopping at Amazon!

Amazon will donate to Vital Ground 0.5% of the price of your eligible AmazonSmile purchases to Vital Ground when you shop at AmazonSmile.*https://smile.amazon.com/ch/87-0483446*

Help Vital Ground Protect the Right Places

Spring-time, particularly May, is when grizzly bears leave their dens of the snow-filled high country to forage on valley bottoms, places where people inhabit. It's also the time of year when Vital Ground initiates its annual Right Place Campaign. Information is in the mail, which will illustrate how Vital Ground is working to provide pathways for grizzly bears to travel between ecosystems, including the Ninemile area just west of Missoula, Mont. (See "Bears on the Move," page 14). The good news is that we don't need to save tens of thousands of acres of land to protect the grizzlies of the Northern Rockies. The size of the parcels we save is not the most important factor in our land purchases. Rather, our conservation efforts are based on science that shows the land we do protect – the "right places" – is crucial to grizzly bears' survival. With your help, we can extend our efforts and restore grizzly bear range. This may seem like an insurmountable task. But the right acres in the right places can make a life or death difference to grizzly populations. No matter the size of your gift, every dollar counts.

GRIZZLY BLEND COFFEE

by Montana Coffee Traders

Grizzly Blend is a full-bodied, medium-roasted coffee. Vital Ground receives $1.00 for each pound of Grizzly Blend purchased.

Order directly at www.coffeetraders.com.

Bears on the Move

By Robb Krehbiel

After decades of conservation work from countless individuals, grizzly bear populations are growing in and around Yellowstone and Glacier National Parks. As populations grow, though, bears require more space. And when an animal weighs over 400 pounds, it's hard to tell it where to go. Grizzly bears will wander wherever they can find suitable habitat, regardless of what humans are already doing there. Figuring out where this habitat is can not only help better prepare people to live in harmony with bears, but it can also help prioritize conservation efforts to restore bears throughout their former range. While these two bear populations grow, conservationists are still concerned with small bear populations in the northwest Montana's Cabinet Mountains and the Selkirk Mountains of north Idaho. An even bigger goal is to return bears to the Bitterroot Mountains in central Idaho, a place where grizzlies vanished decades ago. If we can figure out where these bears might go, we can protect the right places and make sure bears and people can share the land safely.

Photo by Chuck Bartlebaugh

High-traffic highways are dangerous barriers for grizzly bears and other wildlife.

Figuring that out is easier said than done, and it's what I spent last summer trying to do. Working as an intern with Defenders of Wildlife, I mapped out places where grizzly bears might roam. What I found were several linkage zones, stretches of land with some of the best remaining habitat for grizzly bears and other wildlife as they move across the landscape. Looking at these linkage zones, there were several possible pathways that bears could use to move from their current range and into the Bitterroots. One of the most important of these linkage areas was the Ninemile area just west of Missoula, Mont.

The Ninemile mountain range provides lots of habitat for bears. My research suggests that there is suitable habitat for bears to move out of the Mission Mountains, north of Missoula, into the Ninemile Mountains, and then south to reach the Bitterroots. Other researchers have suggested this same trip might be possible, but many challenges remain, not the least of which is Interstate 90. All along the southern border of the Ninemile is I-90. This high-traffic motorway, lined with development, acts like a wall for grizzly bears and other wildlife. Establishing a clear pathway into the Bitterroots requires making I-90 an easier road to cross.

Highways and interstates cause obvious problems for wildlife. Habitat is lost when people build houses and communities along the road; the constant traffic can be enough to scare wildlife from trying to cross four or more lanes of traffic; and for the few animals that try, there's the potential that a collision with a car will injure or kill them (not to mention people driving). Vehicle-wildlife collisions, especially with carnivores, are common along I-90. When looking at the number of carnivore carcasses picked up by Montana's Department of Transportation, the vast majority are found along I-90.

Creating safe passage across I-90 is imperative, but challenging. Other projects in Montana have aimed to reduce vehicle-wildlife collisions by installing wildlife crossing structures and fences. These projects can keep bears off the road and funnel them safely through under and overpasses. On the Flathead Reservation, crossings structures along U.S. 93 North has substantially decreased the number of car-wildlife collisions. Researchers have even captured photos of grizzly bears using underpasses. Unfortunately, these projects are expensive, and many private landowners aren't too keen about tall fences lining their property.

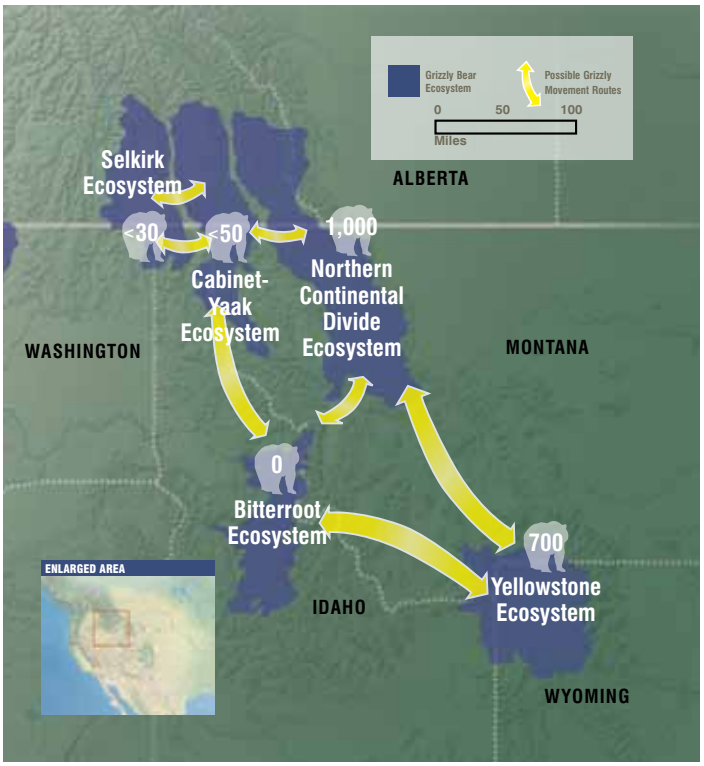
Even with fences and crossing structures, projects still need to ensure that there is plenty of good habitat on both sides of the highway. Subdivisions, exurban homes, and suburban sprawl along I-90 continue to decrease available habitat. To safely cross interstates and highways, wildlife needs secure habitat leading to safe crossing locations. While not many of these places exist, I found a few narrow strips of land that may be able to facilitate some movement across I-90.

One place bears could use to safely cross I-90 is the area near the Ellis Mountain property, a conservation easement of 240 acres. Ellis Mountain has been protected thanks to a partnership between Vital Ground and father-daughter team Dave and Tina Petrig. (See the story on page 4.) The property is situated at the confluence of the Ninemile and Clark Fork Valleys. Here, the Clark Fork River passes underneath I-90, and the interstate's overpasses are large enough that wildlife can safely pass under the road on their way south to the Bitterroots.

The Ellis Mountain property can provide both secure grizzly bear habitat and guide the bears toward a safe crossing. This piece of property is currently Vital Ground's only conservation easement in the Ninemile area. Given that private land borders almost the entirety of I-90, conservation easements that restore habitat, limit development, and guide bears to critical crossing points will be an essential piece in encouraging movement across the interstate.

Conservation organizations need to increase their current efforts into key linkage areas that can protect grizzly bears as they expand back into their historic range. Further north of Ninemile, grizzly bears can move through the Salish linkage area. Following the Salish Mountains, bears can move through the linkage area from Glacier National Park to the Cabinet Mountains. This can help increase the size and diversity of 45-50 grizzlies that live in the Cabinet-Yaak. While highways also pose a challenge in the Salish linkage area, the biggest risk is an extremely high concentration of roads that still scar the land long after logging and mining operations have ended.

The Coeur d'Alene Mountains can also provide habitat for bears moving from the Cabinet-Yaak Ecosystem into the Bitterroots. This linkage area is southwest of the Cabinet-Yaak and stretches south to I-90, where grizzly bears will still face challenges crossing the road. Road density is also a problem here. Decommissioning unneeded U.S. Forest Service roads and enhancing habitat on private land near interstates can establish a safe pathway for grizzly populations across the northern Rockies.



Vital Ground works with scientists to identify strategically-located private lands—the right places—that, if permanently protected, will help provide connections between large blocks of public land.

As bear populations continue to grow, it is increasingly important that we secure and improve habitat where bears can safely roam. Multiple linkage areas exist throughout Montana and Idaho, each with its own set of challenges. Careful planning, innovative projects, collaborative management, and changing attitudes can enhance these linkage areas and restore grizzly bears throughout the West.

—Robb Krehbiel is an M.S. candidate in Sustainable Development and Conservation Biology at the University of Maryland. His connectivity research was conducted out of Defenders of Wildlife's Missoula office in the summer of 2015. Prior to graduate school, Robb lived and worked in Seattle with an environmental nonprofit on wildlife and federal lands protection.

THE MISSION OF VITAL GROUND IS TO PROTECT AND RESTORE NORTH AMERICA'S GRIZZLY BEAR POPULATIONS BY CONSERVING WILDLIFE HABITAT FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS.

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If a countryside can still support grizzlies, it will be good and whole and rich and wild and free enough to support all the other creatures struggling to hold on to a place in this world.

—Douglas H. Chadwick

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The Vital Ground Foundation's mission is to protect and restore North America's grizzly bear populations by conserving wildlife habitat for future generations. In support of this mission, we:

- Protect lands that grizzlies need to survive, not only for bears but for all other species that share their world;
- Work where private lands and human impacts meet some of the wildest places left on the continent;
- Target projects that conserve critical lands, sustain habitat connections, and reduce conflicts between bears and people;
- Ground our projects on current science and strong collaborative partnerships.

Please join us! As a 501(c)(3) charitable nonprofit, our success depends on you!

CONTACT US

The Vital Ground Foundation
20 Fort Missoula Road
Missoula, MT 59804

(406) 549-8650 • (406) 549-8787 (Fax)

info@vitalground.org • www.vitalground.org

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