

Y2Y Partner Profiles

Working with organizations like the Southern Alberta Land Trust Society and Vital Ground helps Y2Y leverage the important work being done in both Canada and the United States.

CANADA

When the Dominion Lands Act of 1872 brought farmers to the new West, they scattered across the eastern flanks of the Rocky Mountains, eager to break those uplands with the plough. However, they soon realized the foothills were too high and had too harsh a climate for farming. Taking another look, settlers recognized that the fescue-covered hills and forests were an important watershed and a great place to raise cattle - and the southern Alberta ranching industry was born.

Skip forward to the early 1990s, and the native fescue grassland was a shrunken remnant of what had nourished bison for millennia, and fed cattle through generations. Concerned about this loss, a group of local ranchers - staunch stewards of the land upon which they rely for their livelihood and family legacy - formed a land trust they called the Southern Alberta Land Trust Society (SALTS). The objective was to explore the use of conservation easements, then a relatively new conservation tool, to protect what remained of the native grass.

A conservation easement is a voluntary contract that permanently defines the type and intensity of future land use, while allowing landowners to retain ownership and control of their property. This suited SALTS' belief that the most effective and lasting conservation solutions originate and are maintained at the community level when individuals have the right tools and are empowered with a long-term vision. SALTS went to work to introduce the concept to local ranchers and has already brought more than 8,000 acres under easement. In addition to its work on conservation easements, SALTS coordinated the Southern Foothills Study (SFS), a local initiative focused on providing background data for informed land-use planning. The SFS has recently been selected as a finalist for an Emerald Award.

SALTS itself received an Emerald Award in 2001, for environmental excellence as a not-for-profit group preserving the ecological, productive, scenic, and cultural values of Alberta's prairie and foothill regions.

"We need to understand the potential effect of all types of land use development in this ecosystem, which provides significant value to Alberta," said Alan Gardner, SALTS Executive Director. "The Southern Foothills Study is based on the work of Dr. Brad Stelfox and will help us understand what we must do to protect the valuable assets this landscape represents."

SALTS continues to work with the ranching community, other ENGOs, and local government to protect an ecosystem that is an important part of the Y2Y corridor. For more information visit www.salts-landtrust.org.

UNITED STATES

Founded in 1990, Vital Ground is dedicated to reconnecting isolated fragments of wildlands important for grizzly recovery and biodiversity. As a small (but thriving!) land trust with a unique mission, the Missoula, Montana-based organization is selective and strategic in the way it uses its financial resources and real-estate expertise to identify and protect parcels of private land crucial to grizzly bear survival.

As its name suggests, Vital Ground places special emphasis on protecting specific key landscapes. One is private lands where grizzly bears currently live or into which they could extend their range, especially in spring and fall when habitat requirements expand due to reproductive and pre-hibernation activities. A second is private lands located near public lands or already-protected private lands, and a third is lands connecting grizzly bear ecosystems. Vital Ground's programs include three initiatives to protect crucial habitat in the Swan Valley and Cabinet-Yaak areas of Montana, and Selkirk Mountains of northern Idaho.

Because of the mounting threat rural development poses to essential habitat for grizzly bears and other wildlife in northern Idaho and northwestern Montana, Vital Ground is augmenting its private lands conservation efforts in 2007. The goal is to protect habitats in a way that will allow grizzly populations living in the Lower 48 states to connect with more robust populations in southern portions of Alberta and British Columbia. This would ultimately give grizzlies access to the northern end of the Selway-Bitterroot ecosystem, the largest wildland complex south of Canada, which is currently unoccupied by grizzlies.

"That, without a doubt," says Gary Wolfe, Vital Ground's Executive Director, "is the sort of landscape-level conservation success that Vital Ground originally set out to achieve on behalf of the Great Bear. The hope for it and all wild creatures lies in big, connected landscapes made up of both public and private lands."

To date, Vital Ground has helped protect and enhance over 415,000 acres of crucial wildlife habitat in Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, Alaska, and British Columbia. The organization's dedication to conserving grizzly bear range goes beyond saving a single species. When there is enough "vital ground" to sustain an umbrella species like the grizzly, a multitude of other animals, plants, and fragile ecosystems benefit as well. For more information, visit www.vitalground.org.

