A trickle of the Flathead River starts high
in the mountains of Glacier National
Park, gathering force into a spring-melt
freshet that becomes Pacific Creek, then
Nyack Creek, the Middle Fork of the Flat-
head River and, eventually the Columbia
River to the Pacific.

On the other side of the peak, the melting
snows gather into Hudson Bay Creek en
route to Red Eagle Creek, the St. Mary
River, Oldman River and Saskatchewan
before finally emptying into Canada's enor-
mous Hudson Bay and, beyond, the Arctic
and North Atlantic oceans.

This same mountain dribbles its pristine
alpine waters in yet another direction, this
time via Atlantic Creek and Cutbank River
to the Missouri, Mississippi and Gulf of
Mexico.

This is Triple Divide Peak, the geographic
apex that inspired George Bird Grinnell to
dub this great transboundary landscape
the “Crown of the Continent.” Grinnell, the
original proponent of Glacier National Park
in the late 1860s, became a passionate
champion for the preservation of these
continental headwaters, their tremendous
wildlife populations, the spectacular scen-
ery, and the living heritage of the native
tribes that he befriended and defended.

Today we know the Crown of the Conti-
nett as a sprawling landscape of nearly
25,000 square miles, include the entire
Flathead and Blackfoot watersheds, Monta-
na’s Rocky Mountain Front, southwestern Alberta’s Front Range
and foothills prairie, and the mountain
valleys and Rocky Mountain Trench of
southeastern British Columbia.

Think of each of these sub-regions as
large pieces of a grand puzzle. Just like
the Flathead Watershed, each of these
watersheds and mountain landscapes
is special. But in its great diversity,
intact and connected with each other,
this great region rises to international
distinction.

Each of the parts is outstanding, yet the
whole of the Crown of the Continent is
greater than the sum of its parts.

In 2008, National Geographic Society
and 50 partner groups in Alberta, Brit-
ish Columbia and Montana produced an
unusual, community-built “MapGuide” of
the Crown of the Continent depicting the
region’s splendid heritage of history, culture
and nature. More than a dozen lakes and
rivers cross the international border along
this narrow waistband of the Rocky Moun-
tain. So, too, does the wildlife and mountain
ranges transcend the 49th Parallel. And
the native people, historically and today,
maintain their cultural ties in both countries:
The Ktunaxa/Kootenai, the Interior Salish,
and the Blackfoot Confederacy.

Few places on earth match the wild nature
and living heritage of the Crown of the Con-
tinent, says Jonathan Tourtellot, National
Geographic’s senior editor for the Crown
of the Continent MapGuide:

“The Crown of the Continent is one of
the most intact natural ecosystems in the
temperate zones of the world. It is a place
of plunging valleys, sweet water, ancient
cedar forests, native prairie and diverse
wildlife. It’s also a place with a rich cultural
heritage: Sovereign First Nations still oc-
cupy the same territory after thousands of
years, alongside loggers, ranchers, miners
and more recently an influx of new resi-
dents who have brought far-flung business
ventures and incomes. This map tells the
stories tied to this very special landscape.”

Today, educators, conservation and busi-
ness groups, government agencies, tribes
and First Nations are joining together to
understand, celebrate and preserve the
special values of the Crown of the Con-
tinent.

Order a free copy of the National Geo-
graphic map and learn more about the
region at www.crownofthecontinent.net