

# History of the Region

The following is a descriptive journey through the history of the Crown of the Continent.

Humans have wandered through the Crown of the Continent since the last great ice sheets retreated about 11,500 years ago. Ancestors of the Blackfeet, Kainaiwa, Ktunaxa, Salish, and Kootenai peoples were among the first to hunt, fish, and gather food here, making their homes on the plains, in the forests, and along the rivers. Clovis-era spear points and arrowheads, along with other evidence, show that the first people explored the Crown more than 10,000 years ago. This diverse, spectacular landscape was sacred to native peoples, and remains so today, as First Nations continue to rely on "the Backbone of the World" for its wildlife, plants, rivers and lakes, and spirit.

These first inhabitants interacted with the landscape in many ways - using fire to replenish grasslands, funnelling bison over cliffs, wearing trails and roads into the earth, and establishing camps and villages in favorable sites. By the early 1800s, when the first white explorers and trappers arrived, much of the Crown region was already settled, with tribal territories, hunting grounds, and travel routes well established.

The Kainaiwa lived across the prairie of today's southern Alberta, wintering near the mountains along the Belly and Highwood rivers. The Blackfeet ranged over some of this same territory, along the Rocky Mountain Front from the North Saskatchewan River in Alberta and south as far as the Yellowstone River in Montana. The Salish and Kootenai peoples shared parts of southern British Columbia, northern Idaho, and northwestern Montana, ranging into Alberta to hunt bison. The territory of the Ktunaxa included the Kootenay region of southeastern British Columbia and parts of Alberta, Montana, Washington, and Idaho. Not bounded by lines on a map, these territories overlapped and blended, enabling people to hunt and trade throughout the region. But changes were already on the horizon.

The Kootenai were among the first to get horses, early in the 1700s. Soon, neighboring tribes also had horses, enabling them to range farther to hunt bison. This led to more frequent clashes over territories. By the late 1700s, the Blackfeet had also acquired muskets from the fur companies, and by 1810 the Blackfeet had closed all the mountain passes, cutting off western tribes from the buffalo hunting grounds.

The promise of beaver and other furs brought French, English, and Spanish trappers upriver to the Crown region. Other explorers were looking for a trade route to the Pacific. In July 1806, returning to St. Louis, Meriwether Lewis and a handful of the Corps of Discovery followed the Nez Perce trail along the Blackfoot River east, crossing onto the plains at today's Lewis and Clark Pass in Montana. They soon turned north, following the Marias River deeper into Blackfeet country to within 20 miles of the area that is today's Glacier National Park.

As ever more trappers, traders, and miners came to the region, they depleted the once innumerable bison herds and other game that native peoples depended on for survival. The newcomers also began parceling up the land - the Oregon Treaty of 1846 established the 49th parallel as the boundary between the United States and Canada. By 1855, treaties in both Canada and the United States drew boundaries around tribal lands throughout the Crown region. In coming years, those boundaries would grow ever tighter as more people competed for land and resources.

In 1858, British military lieutenant Thomas Blakiston broke off from the Palliser expedition in Alberta to look for a low mountain pass suitable for railroad passage over the continental divide. Credited as the first European to travel through what is now Waterton Valley, Blakiston named the lakes here in honor of Sir Charles Waterton, a British naturalist. He mapped the area and reported on its scenic beauty and abundant resources.

In 1883, Fredrick Godsal took a leased 20,000 acres for grazing cattle between the north and south forks of the Oldman River. An avid outdoorsman, Godsal recognized the recreational and scenic values of the nearby mountains. In September that year, Godsal drafted a letter to his good friend, William Pearce, Canada's Superintendent of Mines, urging the government to protect these public values. "The Crows Nest Pass and Waterton Lakes have been for years a common resort for the surrounding neighbourhood for camping and holiday making," Godsal wrote, "and there being but few such places in the country, I think they should be reserved forever for the use of the public, otherwise a comparatively small number of settlers can control and spoil these public resorts." Pearce forwarded the letter, with an enthusiastic letter of his own, to the Department of the Interior in Ottawa. On May 30, 1895, Canada's Governor General T. Mayne Daly created a "Forest Park" around today's Waterton Lakes.

The game guardian for the newly formed park was a local trapper and guide, John George "Kootenai" Brown. Originally from Ireland, Brown first visited the Waterton Lakes area in 1865. Four years later he returned with his family and lived as a trader, trapper, rancher, and guide. In 1911, Brown was appointed Waterton's first Superintendent.

The Great Northern Railway line over Marias Pass was completed in 1891. This brought homesteaders into the valleys west of the pass, and miners looking for gold and copper. In 1895, under pressure from miners, the U.S. government acquired the mountains east of the continental divide within today's Glacier National Park from the Blackfeet. The hoped-for mining boom never panned out (despite brief excitement over finding oil within Waterton in 1901), and by the turn of the century, people were filling the trains not to strike it rich, but to savor the spectacular scenery and wildlife viewing.

Further north, the Canadian Pacific Railway company completed its line over Crowsnest Pass in 1898, opening the pass and Elk River valley west of the divide to logging and coal mining. With two cross-continental rail lines, the region saw rapid growth in population and development. Towns grew around logging, mining, and agricultural operations, and farms and ranches dotted the valleys and prairie. Improved roads soon followed. The first automobile traversed Crowsnest Pass in 1907.

As the population grew, some saw development as a threat to the region's natural abundance and beauty. In the late 1890s, the editor of Forest and Stream magazine, George Bird Grinnell, and others lobbied Congress to establish a national park south of the Canadian border. In a series of articles, Grinnell referred to the region as the "Crown of the Continent." A forest preserve was set aside in 1897, but the area remained open to mining and logging. Grinnell and other conservationists continued lauding the area's unique features, and finally, in 1910, President Taft signed a bill creating Glacier National Park.

In 1901, as a youthful 53 year old, Albert Reynolds began his career as a forest ranger in what is now Glacier National Park. Ten years later, stationed year-round at remote Camp Creek just south of today's Goat Haunt Ranger Station, Reynolds patrolled 12 miles a day on foot in winter, ranging much farther in milder seasons. He regularly hiked 20 miles to pick up his mail and visit with "Kootenai" Brown up in Waterton. Both felt that the Waterton Valley and lake "could not and should not be divided." Their friendship sparked the notion of an "international peace park." Local Rotary clubs in Alberta and Montana took up the idea, and in 1932 the governments of both Canada and the United States voted to designate the parks as Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park, the world's first.

The United Nations Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organization gave Biosphere Reserve status to Glacier National Park in 1976 and to Waterton Lakes in 1979. Both parks were named a World Heritage Site in 1995, acknowledging the area's rich ecological and cultural values. Together they cover about 1.3 million acres or 13% percent of all lands in the Crown of the Continent.

In Montana, the Bob Marshall Wilderness expanded the Crown's inventory of protected lands under the Wilderness Act of 1964. The Scapegoat and Great Bear wilderness areas were joined to "the Bob" in 1972 and 1978 respectively. With the Mission Mountains Wilderness and the Rattle Snake Wilderness areas, these state-side wilderness areas encompass about 1.6 million acres. As early as 1917, the southeast corner of British Columbia was recommended for protected status. In 1986, more than 10,000 hectares were designated as recreation area adjacent to Waterton and Glacier National Parks. In 1995, Akamina-Kishinena was established as a class A provincial park. Today, a remarkable 83 percent of lands within the 10 million-acre Crown region are managed in the public trust. And, 29 percent of all lands in the Crown are located within Glacier National Park, Waterton Lakes, or designated Wilderness Areas.

In 1983, government officials recognized the need to work across their various jurisdictions on grizzly bear recovery and other issues and formed the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem Managers Subcommittee. In 2000, a broader group of agencies began to explore shared issues and the potential for collaboration in the Crown region. In February 2001, these agencies gathered in Cranbrook, B.C., forming the Crown Managers Partnership. Members include 21 federal, First Nation, provincial, and state agencies in both Canada and the United States.

Thanks to this remarkable history of stewardship, the Crown of the Continent endures today as an intact ecosystem, a natural oasis in an increasingly developed world. More than a hundred agencies and community-based organizations are working to conserve these natural resources and quality of life, and guide the Crown's future.