

From Conservation Diplomacy to Transborder Landscapes: The Protection of Biodiversity Across North America's Borders

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Two special borders

EACH OF NORTH AMERICA'S TWO MAJOR BORDERS HAS ITS RESPECTIVE CLAIM TO FAME. To the north, the Canada–U.S. border is commonly described as the longest undefended border in the world. To the south, it is often said that the U.S.–Mexico border separates a discrepancy in average income levels greater than any other border on the planet. Yet in contrast to their differences, both borders can claim war, diplomacy, and surficial hydrology as their common origins. And while these hardly constitute original facets in the world history of territorial demarcation, the two borders also share another common characteristic—one that might come as a surprise even to many experienced North American conservationists. This commonality is that both borders are chock full of transborder conservation initiatives.

Run your finger back and forth along the two borders; you have touched on no less than 35 transborder conservation initiatives. Just look at the four “ends” of the two borders: to the northeast, there is Gulf of Maine Council for the Marine Environment; the southeast is home to the Laguna Madre Binational Initiative on the Gulf of Mexico; to the southwest lies the Tijuana River Watershed Project; and the northwest has the International Porcupine Caribou Board working across the Yukon–Alaska border. None of them are big-name initiatives located in the familiar contentious geographies of, for example, British Columbia's Clayoquot Sound, Florida's Everglades, or Michoacán's Oyamel fir trees (wintering home of the Monarch butterflies)—and yet all are working toward the similar goal of biodiversity conservation.

Why are a growing number of North American conservationists spending their working lives thinking “across borders”? It is a fair question. Within their borders, many governments and conservation organizations have in many instances made significant headway in responding to the threat of biodiversity loss through the implementation of conservation initiatives—all this despite increasing consumption, human population growth, and the rapidly evolving face of technology. Yet biodiversity protection in the domestic realm has repeatedly proven to be contentious, strife-ridden, and in countless cases, seemingly unresolvable. Given such difficulties surrounding biodiversity protection on a *domestic* front, it is eminently reasonable to wonder why one would choose to focus on the more difficult problem of *transborder* biodiversity protec-

tion. As Westing (1998, 91) asked in a comprehensive summary of transborder conservation, trying to bring about conservation “with two (or occasionally even three) sovereign states involved would seem to add a gratuitous layer of complexity that spells almost certain failure. So why try?”

The principal response is obvious: biodiversity knows no political boundaries. Transborder conservation cannot await the Holy Grail of “problem resolution” at the domestic level for the simple reason that biodiversity has evolved *not* in conformance to the dictates of political geography—but rather in accordance with natural selection, chance, and the resultant biogeographic patterns. If Westing (1993, 5; 1998, 91) is correct that “approximately one-third of all terrestrial high-biodiversity sites straddle national borders,”¹ then effective conservation must take into account this inherent apolitical nature of biodiversity. Ultimately, waiting for conservation issues to be fully resolved in a purely national context would mean *never* addressing them in a bilateral or international context.

A much-abbreviated history of transborder conservation in North America

North American governments have widely responded to the need for regional and transborder approaches to the problem of biodiversity loss. Even across the chasm of the “real, hard, and physical fence” of the Mexico–U.S. border (Laird 1994), the two countries have entered into “at least 15 different resource conservation agreements” (Hogan 1999). But it is the northern border of the U.S. where lies the historical “dawn of conservation diplomacy” (Dorsey 1998). As Tabor (1996) has noted, cooperation over conservation has been a “cornerstone” of the relationship between the U.S. and

Canada. Yet unprecedented as this relative absence of strife may be, it is equally fair to argue that the history of bilateral cooperation lies rooted in a rich history of diplomatic conflict over natural resource issues, most of which took place during the two decades before and after 1900.

As Dorsey (1998) extensively demonstrates, early diplomatic efforts at conservation revealed significant disagreement between the two countries over how to share and protect transborder resources. For example, in the early 1890s, the U.S. and Canada began a combined diplomatic and scientific effort to protect a broad spectrum of inland fisheries ranging from the saltwater fisheries of Puget Sound to the freshwater fisheries of the Great Lakes. Although both countries approved a procedural treaty in 1908, development and implementation of regulations proved impossible. Dorsey argues that the treaty failed largely due to its broad geographic application: had the diplomats and scientists focused on Lake Erie and the Fraser River salmon fisheries—the two areas that were suffering from true international competition as opposed to simple national overexploitation—the treaty might have successfully laid the groundwork for further international cooperation (Dorsey 1998, 101).

Yet even as the U.S. and Canada could not come to agreement over shared fisheries resources, they were able to come to effective agreements to protect the north Pacific fur seal and birds migrating between the U.S. and Canada. The former treaty addressed a significant binational conflict by bringing seal fisheries back to a sustainable rate of exploitation. And to the degree that the U.S.–Canada Migratory Bird Treaty is still in force and enforced, public opinion appeared to be a powerful impetus

for the application of domestic forces on international affairs.

Dorsey is making a powerful point here. He ascribes the failure of the Inland Fisheries Treaty to the still inchoate conservation movement—a movement that actively neglected the “uncharismatic minifauna” of fish (Dorsey 1998, 16; Cronon 1998, xiii). Dorsey emphasizes that in contrast, civil society actors played a critical role as advocates and educators in the Pacific fur seal negotiations and the passage of the Migratory Bird Treaty, and furthermore that “conservationists in the two countries were in close contact with each other” (Dorsey 1998, 11). The broader lesson is that civil society actors—meaning, in this context, conservationists—can be highly influential in international diplomacy. Interestingly enough, it took decades for mainstream scholars of international affairs to recognize it. Yet even as the significant role of civil society has become widely accepted, what is only beginning to become clear is that civil society is now acting not only as an influential actor in transborder activities, but in some cases as the central one.

Inspiration from a landscapes across the border

Some of the better-recognized transborder initiatives in North America occur just above the familiar geographic scale of large governmental land management units. The Glacier–Waterton International Peace Park is one such example, as is the initiative reaching across the border from Texas’s Big Bend National Park. Other initiatives are taking a much different approach by looking at a larger landscape scale—and here none stand out more than the Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative (Y2Y).

Widely described as the “brainchild”

of Canadian conservationist Harvey Locke, Y2Y descends from a long history of efforts to protect wildlife in the “Northern Rockies”² dating to the last quarter of the 19th century. These efforts have resulted in hunting laws and the restoration of endangered species, for example “the first successful effort to save a jeopardized species—the bison” (Wuerthner 2001, 14). Most importantly, the establishment of protected areas—mostly consisting of parks, wildlife refuges, wilderness areas, and forest reserves—has played the most visible role in protecting the region’s wildlife. Famous national parks in the region include Yellowstone in the United States (the world’s first national park, established 1872), Banff in Canada (established 1885), and the world’s first international “peace park” between Canada’s Waterton National Park and Glacier National Park in the U.S. (1932).³ The region was also home to the 1891 Yellowstone Park Timber Land Reserve, now considered to be the earliest predecessor of the U.S. Forest System (Haines 1977, 95; Reiger 1997, 42-44), and today claims four of the six largest U.S. wilderness areas outside of Alaska (Figure 1).

The Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative stands on top of—and indeed, because of—these deep historical foundations. Indeed, it is the very cachet of the terms “Yellowstone” and “Yukon” that have helped to propel Y2Y into the conservation limelight (Chester 2003b). “Given its place in environmental history,” as conservationist George Wuerthner (2001, 14) noted of Y2Y, “it’s not surprising that the Rockies would be one of the first areas in the country where a bold new vision for large-scale conservation would be born.”

So what exactly is Y2Y? By far its most important characteristic is its multifarious-

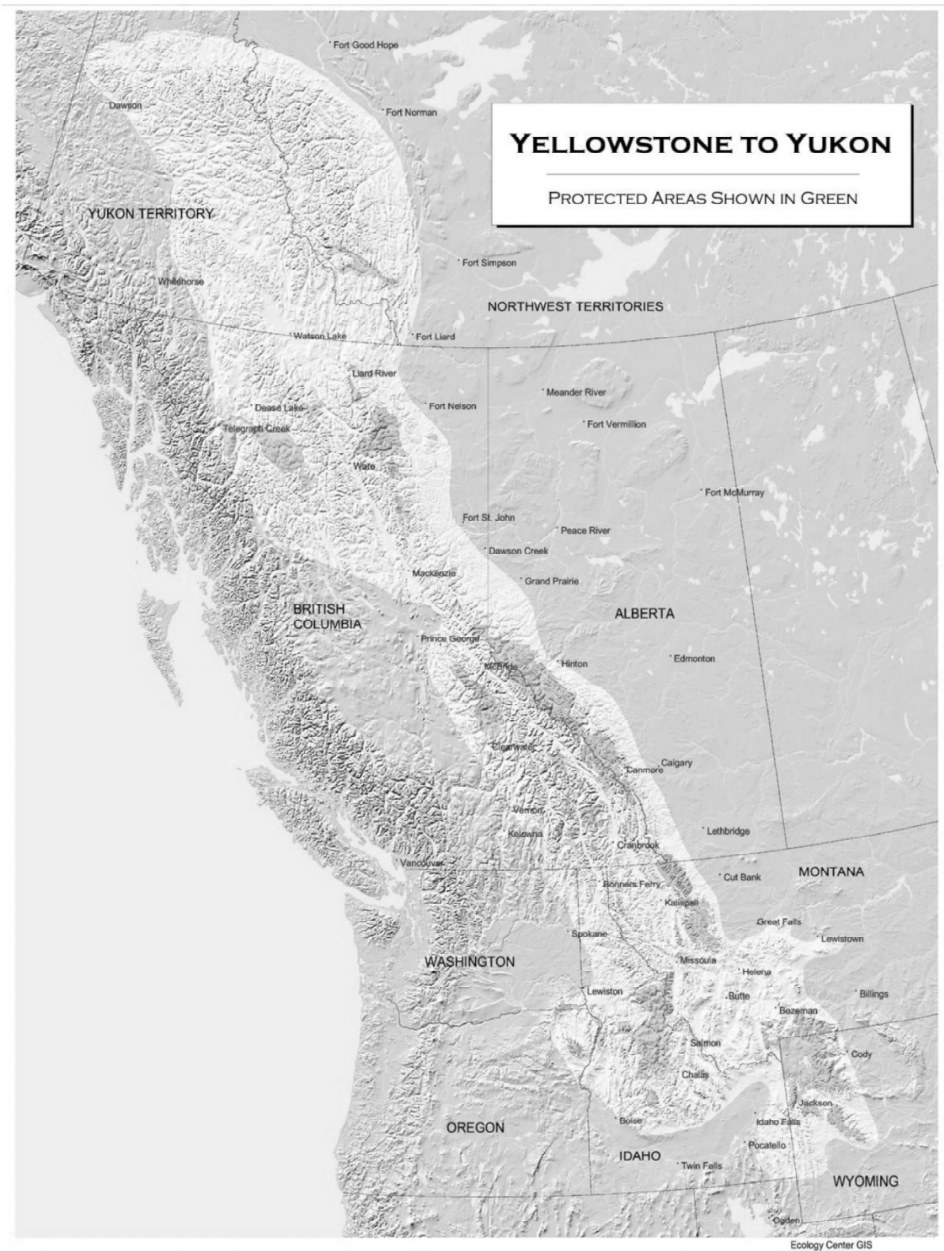


Figure 1. The Y2Y region. In this rendering, the boundary of the region is shown in light gray, with protected areas shown as medium gray within. Photo courtesy of Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative

ness—the fact that Y2Y has many parallel lives. For Y2Y is a *region* of biogeographic and cultural similarities extending over an area greater than the size of Texas and

California combined. It is a *network* of over 300 conservation groups, constituting an organized movement to protect the land, its character, and its wildlife. It is a *conserva* -

tion organization with a fully functioning staff and board located in Canmore, Alberta. It is a *meta-icon*, composed of the geographical bedrock of U.S. conservationist philosophy and the proving ground of Canadian grit and national identity. And most importantly, Y2Y is a broad *reconceptualization* of how to protect a relatively unaltered landscape, as revealed in this “vision statement”:

Combining science and stewardship, we seek to ensure that the world-renowned wilderness, wildlife, native plants, and natural processes of the Yellowstone to Yukon region continue to function as an interconnected web of life, capable of supporting all of the natural and human communities that reside within it, for now and for future generations (Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative 2001).

This all adds up to the fact that there’s a lot to say about Y2Y. Indeed, I spent a good deal of time simply trying to track down and organize how conservationists, the media, and skeptics have reacted to Y2Y (and while the recent review I finally churned out is useful for historic purposes, it is already quite dated; see Chester 2003b). I have also given a lot of thought to what lessons Y2Y holds for other transborder initiatives in North America. One of these was the tremendous success of Y2Y in networking conservationists together throughout the region. Y2Y’s “coming out party” in 1997 occurred just as the average conservationist in the Y2Y region was figuring out how to use email—and for many of them, the Y2Y listserv was their first sub-

stantive introduction to the on-line world. But as I have noted elsewhere (Chester 2003a), Y2Y’s initial success at building an on-line community now sounds almost quaint, or at least not very helpful ever since the novelty of Internet communications devolved into an info-glut of listserv and website backlogs that can mire down even the most ardent of conservation know-it-alls. This is not to say that Y2Y’s networking role has disappeared, but that it has become a standard operational facet—the importance of which will unlikely come as divine revelation to other conservationists working across borders in North America.

Are there other lessons emanating out of Y2Y? The answer is a loud “yes,” and two of the most important have been the fostering of transborder learning and inspiration.⁴ In terms of the former, the Bozeman-based conservationist Ed Lewis pointed out that Y2Y had “begun the process of getting Canadians and U.S. folks to think and work across the border.” Locke echoed this point, arguing that before Y2Y “people weren’t thinking across the border—they just weren’t. [At] Waterton and Glacier a little bit, but not in a way where they felt that their ideas and interests were legitimate and accepted as legitimate in a transboundary sense.”

For many participants, Y2Y had subsequently opened that intellectual border, providing a critical international learning forum for U.S. conservationists to learn about Canada, and vice-versa—although the latter to a lesser degree, since Canadians generally have a comparatively stronger understanding of their southerly neighbor. For example, Michael Scott of the Greater Yellowstone Coalition recalled that Y2Y had taught him “a lot about Canada and about how folks operate, and about how the

Canadians work,” while Louisa Willcox of the Natural Resources Defense Council said that Y2Y has made it easier for her to understand “what’s happening on the Canadian side” and to “navigate my way around some of the information and the knowledgeable experts.” Canadian Wendy Francis, a former interim executive director of Y2Y, noted that Y2Y had enabled “acceptance of the different political realities” between U.S. and Canadian participants. “We weren’t even talking to each other across the 49th parallel before Y2Y,” she said, “and now we sit down and meet two or three times a year, we know what each other is doing, and we know the different political realities of each country.”

Several participants described Y2Y as a complementary north–south arrangement, a theme I had heard often repeated at several meetings. As Willcox put it, “we [in the U.S.] need the inspiration from the stories of the north. And they in turn need to learn the lessons of how we lost so much wild country to development, so they don’t repeat that path. So it seemed obvious that there were some reciprocal relationships which if developed, would result in mutual benefit.” But at the same time, she emphasized, Y2Y has taught U.S. conservationists that, contrary to widespread belief, “all is not secure” for wildlife in Canada—that Canada cannot be seen as an endless source population for the U.S. As conservationist Rob Ament of the nongovernmental organization American Wildlands has similarly noted, Y2Y has helped to dispel the “myth of abundance in Canada” and has helped alert U.S. conservationists “that they’ve got serious problems in southern Alberta and southern British Columbia.”

The transborder learning fostered by Y2Y also exposed participating conserva-

tionists to an expanded universe of conservation strategies and tactics. “The most important thing about Y2Y,” said Wayne Sawchuk of northern British Columbia’s Chetwynd Environmental Society, is the ability “to see people up and down the Rockies and how they’re doing their work.” Many others expressed a similar point of view. In addition to the informal learning that takes place at Y2Y meetings, Y2Y has continually sponsored numerous training workshops on practical skills, such as media and messaging, fundraising, organizational effectiveness, board management, and negotiations. Y2Y has also sponsored several more issue-oriented workshops, including one on “Managing Roads for Wildlife” and another on “Understanding Western Canada’s Changing Economy.”

In addition to transborder learning, Y2Y—or more specifically, the Y2Y vision—has constituted a wellspring of inspiration to conservationists. Several Y2Y participants noted that to no small degree the inspiration came from the strong sense of camaraderie Y2Y had engendered between conservationists. But most Y2Y participants pointed directly to the inspirational effect of the Y2Y vision. “It’s captured people’s imagination that there is still one place that is so wild,” said economist Ray Rasker of the Sonoran Institute, “that you can think of this scale and dream of it as a possibility. It’s huge, it’s enormous—nobody has come up with anything of this scale ever.” Paraphrasing Wallace Stegner, conservationist Stephen Legault said that the power of the Y2Y vision was to provide a “landscape of hope” where conservationists could see where they wanted to go. Y2Y has given people a reason to “wake up in the morning to sit down and get on the phone for 11 or 12 hours a day and be on the com-

puters for 11, 12 hours a day, fighting what can be at times a very boring, mundane, and routine battle. Y2Y has contributed significantly to that landscape of hope by giving a lot of us something to hold on to; it's given us a vision beyond the boundaries of the valley that we live in or the campaign that we're currently working on."

Similarly, Willcox pointed to the role of Y2Y in keeping her inspired:

It's the right scale to work on, it's the right thing to do, and that's what drives me. I'm personally inspired—which is sometimes hard to feel in some of the day-to-day work, which is much more trench warfare. We're entangled in a long slog, a siege mentality, trying to protect grizzly bear and other wildlife habitat in a place where every acre is fought over.

The quotidian effect of Y2Y, noted Ament tongue-in-cheek, was that it had kept people coming to Y2Y meetings foreengaged for "seven years of meetings—that's a lot to ask of anybody."

Transborder lessons

Y2Y is about protecting a vast transborder region, and the way it goes about doing that is by empowering the individual. Yes, in addition to the intangibles of transborder learning and inspiration, Y2Y has benefited biodiversity in the region by bringing in new conservation funding, fostering innovative scientific research, and implementing other on-the-ground tactics. But it is likely to be its intangible services to individual conservationists working in the region that will have the most lasting effects. For even if we fully accept the notion of biodiversity's intrinsic value, conservation is ultimately about people doing what they can to save what they think is important. "Doing what they can" will be difficult in any context, but almost always more difficult when there's an international border involved. Fortunately, even beyond its focal region of the Northern Rockies, conservationists working on the borders of North America can look to Y2Y for an innovative approach to surmounting these challenges.

Endnotes

1. And these are often on highly contested borders; for example, nearly one-third of the existing or proposed 76 bilateral parks in continental Europe lie across the former iron curtain (Sochaczewski 1999, 36).
2. In the United States, the "Northern Rockies" generally refers to the portion of the Rocky Mountains situated in Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming, whereas Canadians use the term to refer to the mountainous stretch of the Canadian Rockies in northern British Columbia. Many, including myself, have come to use the term synonymously with the Y2Y region.
3. Not to be confused with Canada's Glacier National Park, which is also located in the Y2Y region west of Banff and Yoho National Parks.
4. There are many more, which will be discussed in my forthcoming book on transborder conservation, to be published by Island Press.

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