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**NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC AND PARTNERS LAUNCH
GEOTOURISM PROGRAM IN 'CROWN OF THE CONTINENT'
*MapGuide to Highlight Environmental and Cultural Heritage in Transboundary Rockies***

WASHINGTON (Feb. 14, 2007)—National Geographic Society's Center for Sustainable Destinations has joined in a project to celebrate and sustain the world-class environmental and cultural heritage of the Rocky Mountain region known as the Crown of the Continent. A community-based process will create a National Geographic "Geotourism MapGuide" and associated Web site that will serve as a portal, or clearinghouse, for all matters of interest in the transboundary region that includes the Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park.

Partnering with National Geographic on the project are the Montana Department of Commerce, the Alberta Geotourism MapGuide Consortium, Kootenay Rockies Tourism of British Columbia, the National Parks Conservation Association, and the Chinook Institute for Community Stewardship.

The process got underway at a workshop held last month in Montana, where regional and local participants established a Crown of the Continent Stewardship Council, whose first task is to oversee the public process for creating the MapGuide. Local residents are invited to participate and nominate for inclusion in the MapGuide the sites, events, businesses or experiences that help define the region's special character. The local partnership group will advise National Geographic to develop the map and also will design the distribution plan for the map once completed. Log on to www.crownofthecontinent.net to get involved.

A recent National Geographic survey of World Heritage Sites found that Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park and the surrounding region is one of North America's best-kept destinations. It rated high for the integrity of its natural and cultural resources. "This region has maintained its distinctive character when many other places haven't," says Jonathan Tourtellot, Director of National Geographic's Center for Sustainable Destinations. "We'd like to help local communities and visitors sustain these values well into the future."

Project coordinator Steve Thompson of the National Parks Conservation Association in Whitefish says the Crown of the Continent project poses a simple question that local residents are best able to answer. "What's special about your place?" he asked.

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The Crown of the Continent features more than 10 million acres of plunging valleys, sparkling waters, dramatic mountains, native prairie and distinctive small towns in southeastern British Columbia, southwestern Alberta and northern Montana. The geotourism program is intended to foster stronger communications between residents in both countries, help residents discover their region's special places, and work together to protect and maintain these places. It also will create valuable information resources for visitors to the region who seek to experience and maintain the distinctive sense of place and environmental integrity of their destinations.

"Public involvement is key to the project's success," notes Carole Stark of the Chinook Institute. "Through their nominations local residents help to tell the stories of this magnificent area."

The map serves as a unifying launching pad for geotourism, defined as "tourism that sustains or enhances the geographical character of a place — its environment, culture, aesthetics, heritage and the well-being of its residents." A major 2002 Geotourism Study by National Geographic Traveler magazine and the Travel Industry Association of America found that at least 55 million American adults can be classified as "geotourists," a strong incentive for regions to protect and enhance natural and cultural assets for future visitors.

The Rocky Mountain region straddling the U.S.-Canada border was first dubbed the Crown of the Continent in 1895 by George Bird Grinnell, the "father of Glacier National Park." The region is home to two designated World Heritage Sites: Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park, and Alberta's Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump. These sites reflect the region's rich natural and cultural heritage.

An ecological and climatic mixing zone, the Crown of the Continent packs enormous ecological diversity into a relatively small area. Similarly, the Crown of the Continent region offers a wealth of cultural diversity. Sovereign First Nations have a strong presence and heritage, and longtime industries — logging, ranching, railroads, mining — remain a foundation of the region's economy. In the last 20 years, regional and global economic changes have resulted in an influx of new residents searching for unique experiences and often locating at the gateways to parks and other protected lands with natural and recreational appeal.

The Geotourism MapGuide initiative will provide tools for longtime residents and newcomers, as well as travelers, to better understand the distinctive and diverse heritage of the Crown of the Continent, and protect it. A long-term goal is to assist gateway communities with strategies to manage growth in ways that protect their character of place. In the spirit of international cooperation, the project will help commemorate the 75th anniversary of Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park in 2007.

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The NGS Center for Sustainable Destinations is providing overall project direction under Jonathan Tourtellot and James Dion; National Geographic Maps, led by Allen Carroll, will handle cartography. NPCA's Glacier Field Office, led by Steve Thompson, is providing field-based coordination of public involvement. Carole Stark of the Chinook Institute will facilitate public involvement in Canadian communities. Significant funding and regional leadership are being provided by Kootenay Rockies Tourism, the Montana Department of Commerce, and the Alberta Geotourism MapGuide Consortium. Partners also include the Glacier, Russell and Gold West Country tourism commissions in Montana, the Whitefish Convention and Visitors Bureau, the Waterton Chamber of Commerce, the Alberta Ministry of Tourism, Parks, Recreation and Culture, Alberta Provincial Historic Sites, Trail of the Great Bear, Waterton Lakes National Park, the Sustainability Fund, and the University of Montana Public Policy Research Institute. The U.S. Forest Service, National Park Service, and the Bureau of Land Management are contributing additional monetary support for the community-involvement process.

The National Geographic Society is one of the world's largest nonprofit scientific and educational organizations. Founded in 1888 to "increase and diffuse geographic knowledge," the Society today works to inspire people to care about the planet. It reaches more than 350 million people worldwide each month through its official journal, National Geographic, and four other magazines including National Geographic Traveler; National Geographic Channel; television documentaries; radio programs; films; books; videos and DVDs; maps; and interactive media. National Geographic has funded more than 8,000 scientific research projects and supports an education program combating geographic illiteracy. For more information, visit nationalgeographic.com.

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