

Land trusts provide open space for everyone

A new collaborative effort by local land trust organizations is encouraging tourists to support the very assets they travel from afar to enjoy: Montana's open space. Travelers for Open Lands is a partnership between land trust groups, Travel Montana, and the hospitality industry to raise funds for the protection of open space, wildlife habitat, and recreation access. In these difficult economic times, this creative initiative could prove to be crucial for the preservation of these valuable natural resources that not only benefit tourists but residents as well.

There is little doubt or debate as to what attracts people to visit Montana: mountains, rivers, forests, national and state parks. Uncrowded, intact open space is Montana's primary tourism draw, and it pays off in spades. According to the Institute for Tourism and Recreation Research, nonresident travelers to Montana generate over \$4.3 billion each and every year. Subsequently, tourism is responsible for 45,000 jobs and over \$1 billion in personal income. In large part, this considerable economic windfall can be attributed to Montana's preserved open space.

What the tourists seek out a few months of the year, residents appreciate each and every day. Most Montanans place a high value on open spaces and access to public land as a key component to overall quality of life. A 2006 study conducted by the University of Montana Bureau of Business and Economic Research revealed that eight in 10 Montanans rank the environment and natural beauty as primary reasons for choosing to live in the state. The study also documents that the vast majority of residents consider access to public land for hunting, fishing, hiking and other recreation as "very important." Open space, whether public land or private easements, provides and enhances the attributes that make Montana special to residents and visitors alike.

To this end, Travelers for Open Lands has a simple, yet profound, mission: "to conserve scenic vistas, wildlife habitat, working ranches and recreational lands, which comprise Montana's irreplaceable landscape." The initiative also has a simple fund raising strategy, contract with a variety of hospitality businesses to place collection boxes at their registration desks soliciting donations from visitors. To date, the group has 80 partners with the goal of reaching 250 within the year. The fund-raising potential could top \$1 million within the next two to three years.

Of the 12 Montana land trust groups supporting Travelers for Open Lands, two are located in Bozeman and a third is very well known: Gallatin Valley Land Trust (GVLТ), Trust for Public Lands (TPL), and the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation (RMEF). These organizations coordinate and execute a variety of open space initiatives by building trail systems, establishing conservation easements, reverting private land to public ownership, and securing critical wildlife habitat. The Montana land trust organizations have collectively preserved over one million acres of open space, an area roughly the size of Delaware.

Local hospitality businesses should seriously consider participating in the Travelers for Open Lands program. By encouraging visitors to play an active role in preserving Montana's unique ranchlands, sweeping vistas, and world-class river valleys, Travelers of Open Lands will not only perpetuate an important piece of Montana's tourism-based economy, but also perpetuate our quality of life. Ray Rasker of Headwater Economics recently observed, "our free-flowing rivers, national parks and wilderness areas, our wide-open ranchlands and friendly communities — these are the qualities that are rapidly disappearing throughout the West. Montana is doing well because we've worked hard to protect them."

In order to preserve our sense of place, we must continue to protect our open lands. In order to preserve our sense of self, we must continue to value our farmlands, rivers and forests. In order to preserve our well-deserved state identity as the "Last Best Place," we must continue to safeguard the intact natural resources that not only attract those who visit but that also sustains those of us who call Montana home.

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