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BIODIVERSITY: "Wildways" Would Bridge a Fractured Continent

By **Brian D. Pellot***

NEW YORK, Jul 25, 2007 (IPS/IFEJ) - Before deforestation and sprawl fragmented North America's wilderness into isolated islands of bio-homogeneity, the largest of carnivores and smallest of rodents roamed the expansive continent at will.

Today, eight-lane asphalt highways and scattered metropolitan hubs have caged formerly free wildlife and destroyed ecological unity. Truck drivers and city planners have inadvertently become hit men, ramping up extinction rates as biodiversity dwindles.

In the form of four ambitious initiatives, one conservation coalition hopes to reverse these destabilising trends that have eroded the North American landscape for generations.

The Wildlands Project plans to reconnect, restore and "rewild" the continent by encouraging the creation of four conservation corridors linking public and private land along the Rockies, the Pacific, the Atlantic and through Canada from Alaska to the Labrador Sea.

"If we don't reconnect these previously linked protected areas, we are not going to be able to slow the extinction rate," Kim Vacariu, Western director of the Wildlands Project, told IPS.

These "continental wildways" would restore uninterrupted conservational continuity between national parks and other protected areas on a scaleprecedented only by the continent's original state.

The first initiative, tentatively slated for launch at the end of 2008 pending adequate funding, will be the Spine of the Continent corridor running over 6,400 kilometres along the Rocky Mountains from Northern Alaska through Northern Mexico.

"Things were just in place to do the spine of the continent first because so much had already been done toward it," Dave Foreman, co-founder of the Wildlands Project and executive director of the Rewilding Institute, told IPS, referring to already-established linkages between several protected land plots in the area.

Foreman drafted the rough concept of these four mega-linkages on the back of an envelope 15 years ago, not realising at the time that his sketch would soon become the progressive cornerstone of conservation and rewilding efforts in North America and around the world.

Michael Soulé, the Wildlands Project's other primary co-founder, has taken the idea of continental corridors to Australia, where he co-chairs the WildCountry Science Council, an Australian spin-off of the Wildlands Project that is working with conservation groups and governments to establish continent-wide corridors down under.

"Isolated national parks, regardless of their size, won't protect nature in the long run, not only because of climate change, but also because of island effects that will gradually lead to degradation," Soulé told IPS. "For things to survive, there has to be the potential for plants and animals to move long distances."

To facilitate free roaming along the spine of the continent, primary obstacles, most notably U.S. highways, must be circumvented.

One possible solution that proponents of the continental corridor initiative are exploring is the construction of massive wildlife overpasses at least 40 metres wide that would serve as safe bridges for animals and vegetation.

The U.S. Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) has funded several such overpasses, known generally as "critter crossings", across the nation to protect wildlife.

"When wildlife crossings funded by the FHWA are designed properly and protect wildlife access to both sides of the road, they are highly effective in reducing road kill, linking habitats and increasing the safety of motorists," Gloria Shepherd, FHWA associate administrator for environment and planning, told IPS.

While wildlife overpasses along the spine of the continent would be ideal from a conservationist's standpoint, the estimated 5- to 10-million-dollar price tag for each limits the feasibility of their widespread construction.

"You have to be sure that they are going to work, so they're kind of a last resort," Kurt Menke, co-chair of the Tijeras Canyon Safe Passage Coalition, told IPS.

His all-volunteer organisation in New Mexico has cleared debris from pre-existing underpasses such as culverts and riverbeds rather than creating new overpasses to allow animals the freedom to pass safely below



Artist's digital rendering of a proposed wildlife overpass.

Credit: David Sparks/Southern Rockies Ecosystem Project



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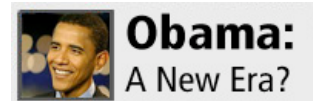
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highways.

"This connection issue is vital to maintaining biodiversity, especially with climate change where it's at now," Menke added.

A desire to protect wildlife from the looming impacts of climate change has been a driving force behind the continental corridors initiative since its inception when the Wildlands Project formed in 1991.

"Even though years ago we were talking about climate change and how species would need the ability to move in response to its effects, now that the big national fervor is occurring about climate change, it's helping us describe the kind of work we are doing," Vacariu said. "These corridors could be viewed as animal escape routes from the effects of climate change."

Soulé warns that overemphasis on this issue could actually work against conservation efforts, stating, "There is a real danger in everyone jumping on the climate bandwagon and forgetting about habitat destruction and exploitation. Unless we continue to work hard on these other problems, we're going to lose nature anyways."

Support for the spine of the continent initiative has grown stronger in recent years as the idea of mega-linkages becomes more widely accepted in conservation circles, but it still faces significant opposition.

"It's had surprising support," Foreman said. "It's also been really interesting how some see it as some kind of evil takeover of the United States."

The latter reaction may be derived from the initiative's commitment to creating shared borders between the United States and its neighbours, Canada and Mexico.

"I think that the key international problem is the idiotic border wall [proposed between the U.S. and Mexico], and I say that as a population stabilisation activist," Foreman said.

Under a bill signed by President George W. Bush in 2006, 1,126 kilometres of fencing is slated to cover portions of the roughly 3,380 kilometre-long U.S.-Mexico border to deter Mexican citizens from illegally immigrating northward.

Many conservationists who oppose illegal immigration still advocate open borders that promote biodiversity by allowing jaguars, the most prevalent large carnivores near this border, the freedom to roam internationally.

Whether state and national governments will support this level of international freedom for wildlife remains uncertain. Vacariu noted that, because the Wildlands Project is still in the strategic planning process, most government entities know little to nothing about the proposal.

"It's in our best interest not to talk to these important future partners until we get all of our ducks in a row," he added.

Along with the initiatives currently being developed in North America and Australia, notable conservation linkage efforts are ongoing in Africa and Europe.

"The idea of [wildlife linkages] is catching on because ecologists have realised that you can't protect nature in islands," Soulé said.

The international Peace Parks being established in Botswana, Mozambique and South Africa will marginalise the environmentally destabilising effects associated with most political borders by creating cross-border reserves.

In Romania, linkage efforts are being employed to protect the Carpathian Mountains.

"The time is prime for us to start doing on-the-ground work and making on-the-ground progress toward protecting these key wildlife linkages. We're losing species every day. This really is an urgent situation," Vacariu said.

(*This story is part of a series of features on sustainable development by IPS and IFEJ - International Federation of Environmental Journalists.)

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