

ARCHIVED EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR REPORTS

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How effective is the conservation community in Montana and the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem (GYE)?

Like any prudent investor, the Cinnabar Foundation seeks to maximize our return on investment. As Montana's homegrown conservation fund, Cinnabar offered 90 grants to non-profit conservation and environmental groups and schools in 2011. Think of each of those grantees as a metaphorical tree in the forest. When Cinnabar evaluates where to invest our funds, we look for vigor, growth, and the future potential of each tree. But we're also vitally interested in the overall health of the forest and its impact on our conservation constituency as a whole.

I'm happy to report that Cinnabar grantees are doing a great job. They are building coalitions to expand public access, protect working farms and ranches, develop innovative solutions to thorny public land issues, and pioneer new climate-friendly solutions for energy, food, and sustainable communities. In fact, it's not an exaggeration to say that Montana is home to some of the most innovative and successful place-based conservation in the world.

The picture is more clouded at the forest level as we try to evaluate the overall effectiveness of the conservation community. Several indicators suggest that the conservation community faces a challenge in translating place-based success to state-wide impact and credibility. While individual groups are on the cutting edge of conservation, so too are they often on the defensive in the arenas of public opinion, public policy and political clout.

At the risk of overgeneralization, I'll quote an astute observer of Montana's political culture. "To many Montanans, environmentalists are seen as green locusts who have descended on this state from an alien place to devour our way of life." While it's true that Montana and the GYE sometimes serve as a national battleground for hot-button issues, such as wolf recovery, the reality is that the vast majority of conservationists and

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environmental groups in this region are closely aligned with values and solutions held dear by Montanans and people in the rural West.

In April 2011, the Bozeman Chronicle ran a series of articles about Montana's conservation movement at a critical crossroads. The public is weary of conflict and alarm, and conservationists face an erosion of effectiveness and credibility, suggested Liz Shanahan, a political scientist at Montana State University. "The environmental narrative has to change if they want to be successful," she said.

To Shanahan's summation, I would add this: We in Montana and the GYE conservation community need to tell our own story, rather than allow ourselves to be caricatured as outsiders by the political rhetoric of our opponents or by the fundraising strategy of an out-of-state group. In the absence of a clear voice articulating Montana conservation values, we yield the field to opportunists who are happy to brand us.

In an attempt to bridge the gulf between the cutting-edge work of our grantees and the public's gut-level perception of the conservation community as a whole, the Cinnabar Foundation has accepted Shanahan's challenge. We are launching ConserveMontana.org as a story-telling hub for conservation groups, businesses, volunteers, families, and communities to share this common narrative: We are citizens of Montana and the region, proud of our conservation legacy, working with our neighbors to conserve Montana values for future generations!

— Steve Thompson
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