

CINNABAR FOUNDATION

Cinnabar Foundation Grantee Closes on Land Purchase

After more than a decade of community effort, The Vital Ground Foundation, a nonprofit Missoula-based land trust and Cinnabar Foundation conservation partner, recently closed on the purchase of a 142-acre forested and undeveloped parcel on the east shore of Alvord Lake, two miles north of Troy in Lincoln County. The purchase ensures the protection and continuation of public access to the only parcel of private land abutting Alvord Lake.

“This project is a great example of how on-the-ground collaboration increases public access to Montana’s treasured places,” said Senator Jon Tester, who helped secure funding for the project.

“The Land and Water Conservation Fund is one of the best conservation tools around and I’m pleased it’s helping outdoorsmen and women enjoy the beauty of Alvord Lake.”

Public access was temporarily denied after this unique property, which contains one-third mile of shoreline, was purchased by a developer in 2002. Development of the parcel would have threatened nesting sites for common loons, compromised important winter range for moose, deer and elk, and likely would have permanently disconnected a trail circumnavigating the lake, which will now remain open to the public. The property also provides crucial habitat for grizzly bears, wolves, black bears, mountain lions, big game animals, Merriam’s turkey, and bobcat, and lies within known fisher habitat and potentially within wolverine habitat as well.

In 2003, the Friends of Alvord Lake, with significant community support, acquired the parcel and agreed to hold it temporarily until collaborators could provide for its permanent protection. During the next 12 years, the Friends of Alvord Lake, Kootenai National Forest and members of the Troy community pressed on to find a permanent solution. Then, in 2013, Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks and the Libby Chapter of the Society of American

Foresters (SAF) contacted The Vital Ground Foundation about the U.S. Forest Service Community Forest and Open Space Conservation Program.

“An outpouring of community support spurred us to tackle our efforts to make this a public parcel, to protect the land for wildlife, protect water quality, and to allow for public access around the entire lake,” said Gary Jones, managing partner of the Friends of Alvord Lake. “It’s been a tremendously long process to reach a conservation outcome – and we’re ecstatic that we identified one that will benefit the public via educational and recreational opportunities, wildlife habitat protection, and the continuation of active forest management.”

The \$1.5 million project was anchored by a \$400,000 U.S. Forest Service Community Forest and Open Spaces Program grant and a substantial donation from the Friends of Alvord Lake in the form of a bargain sale to The Vital Ground Foundation. Additionally, \$100,000 was provided by the Montana Fish & Wildlife Conservation Trust, which supports the acquisition of

publicly accessible land in Montana to enhance public hunting, fishing and recreational opportunities and generally improve public access to public lands. Grant funding and donations from numerous other funding partners was also critical in bringing the project to fruition. These included: the Cinnabar Foundation, Donner Canadian Foundation, First Interstate Bank, First Security Bank, Flathead Audubon Society, Flathead Wildlife, Inc., Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, Montana Loon Society, Oberweiler Foundation, Society of American Foresters (Libby Chapter), Troy School District, The William H. Donner Foundation, Yellowstone to Yukon Initiative, and the Yaak Valley Forest Council.

"Alvord Lake is one of the District's recreational gems, in part because it is readily accessible to folks with diverse abilities," said Kirsten Kaiser, Three Rivers District Ranger for the U.S. Forest Service. "We are thrilled that the project partners and community have been able to pull together a permanent solution to complement the Forest Service's existing public infrastructure by extending protection around the entire lake and onto adjacent lands."

The federal Community Forest and Open Space Program is administered in Montana through the Department of Natural Resources and Conservation and requires involvement by either a local or tribal governmental entity or a qualified land trust in order to secure grant funding.

A Community Forest ensures the public has access and that planning for the land's future is done locally. Angela Mallon, Stewardship Program Manager for the Montana DNRC, sees the opportunity for the Community Forest to be a model for land stewardship. "We have the ability to showcase management activities and conservation objectives in a way which demonstrates that the two aren't mutually exclusive," says Mallon. "It's a wonderful example of how diverse amenities which are derived from the land can be optimized through great stewardship."

As the qualified nonprofit acquiring the property, The Vital Ground Foundation will manage the acreage in partnership with a local stakeholder's group that collaborated to produce a detailed Community Forest Management Plan to guide stewardship, public access, and protection of the property's conservation values.

Although Community Forest Program designation prohibits future subdivision and development of the parcel, active forest management will continue to be a sustaining element of the prescription for the holding, and the Libby Chapter of SAF, which contributed the preparation of the management plan, will continue to play a role in those activities. "This project will offer opportunities to showcase a number of adaptive forest management practices and illustrate how forest conditions change over time," says Russ Gautreaux, SAF member. "The Troy community will benefit through its continued recreational use, and by assisting with implementation of the management plan. The conservation education component is a cornerstone of this plan and is one of the primary areas of interest for SAF."

"This project has been the most collaborative effort that Vital Ground has ever participated in — every one of our projects are conducted only with willing landowners and rely on public support, but the enthusiasm and dedication of this diverse partnership made this acquisition truly enjoyable," says Vital Ground Executive Director Ryan Lutey. "As Vital Ground's largest single financial investment to date, it took assistance from so many supporters, and it is perfectly fitting that the project was earmarked as the organization's primary endeavor to commemorate our 25th Anniversary."

Information for this project brief was excerpted from a press release by The Vital Ground Foundation.

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