

# Why Y2Y? Understanding the Role of Large Landscape Corridor Initiatives in Regional Conservatoin Planning, Using the Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative as a Case Study

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## Abstract

*Increasing realisation that protected areas are limited in their capacity to fulfil conservation goals has given rise to planning for conservation in a regional context, which encompasses protected and unprotected lands. A number of regional-scale, multi-species habitat conservation efforts have developed, one prominent example being the Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative (Y2Y) in western North America. This research examines some of the strengths and limitations of Y2Y in terms of its contribution to regional conservation planning. This was considered in light of some successes and obstacles encountered to regional approaches. The preliminary findings discussed are based on interviews conducted with a broad range of actors in conservation planning in two communities in Y2Y in Alberta-Canmore and Crownsnest Pass. The Y2Y initiative was believed to have made considerable progress in establishing the concept and introducing the notion of planning for conservation in a regional context. However, interviewee comments suggest the organisation needs to devote more effort to building public and more widespread support, maintaining a high profile, and developing a niche for the initiative, in terms of what it can offer to communities and groups involved in conservation planning.*

## Introduction

The traditional approach to nature conservation has been to preserve extensive tracts of wild lands in the form of parks and protected areas, maintained by management, legislation and regulation (McNeely, 1995). However, these areas have been proven to be limited in their capacity to fulfil conservation goals, as they are usually too small to maintain wildlife populations, are too few in number and unevenly distributed, and do not adequately represent the diversity of the world's ecosystems (Grumbine, 1990; Pressey, 1994). Furthermore, the effectiveness of existing

protected areas is limited by their management and legislation in isolation from surrounding lands (Slocombe and Dearden, 2002). Such management has contributed to a lack of local support for protected areas, which are viewed as limiting human usage and development, and opportunities for economic growth (Lusigi, 1981). This local support is now understood to be critical to the long-term effectiveness of protected areas (Batisse, 1982). Designating areas of remote wilderness is also a limited means to promote an appreciation of other more common natural environments, close to home (Orr, 1993; Cronon, 1995; Miller and Hobbs, 2002). An increasing recognition of such limitations of protected areas has given rise to planning for conservation in a regional context (Parks Canada Agency, 2000; Slocombe and Dearden, 2002).

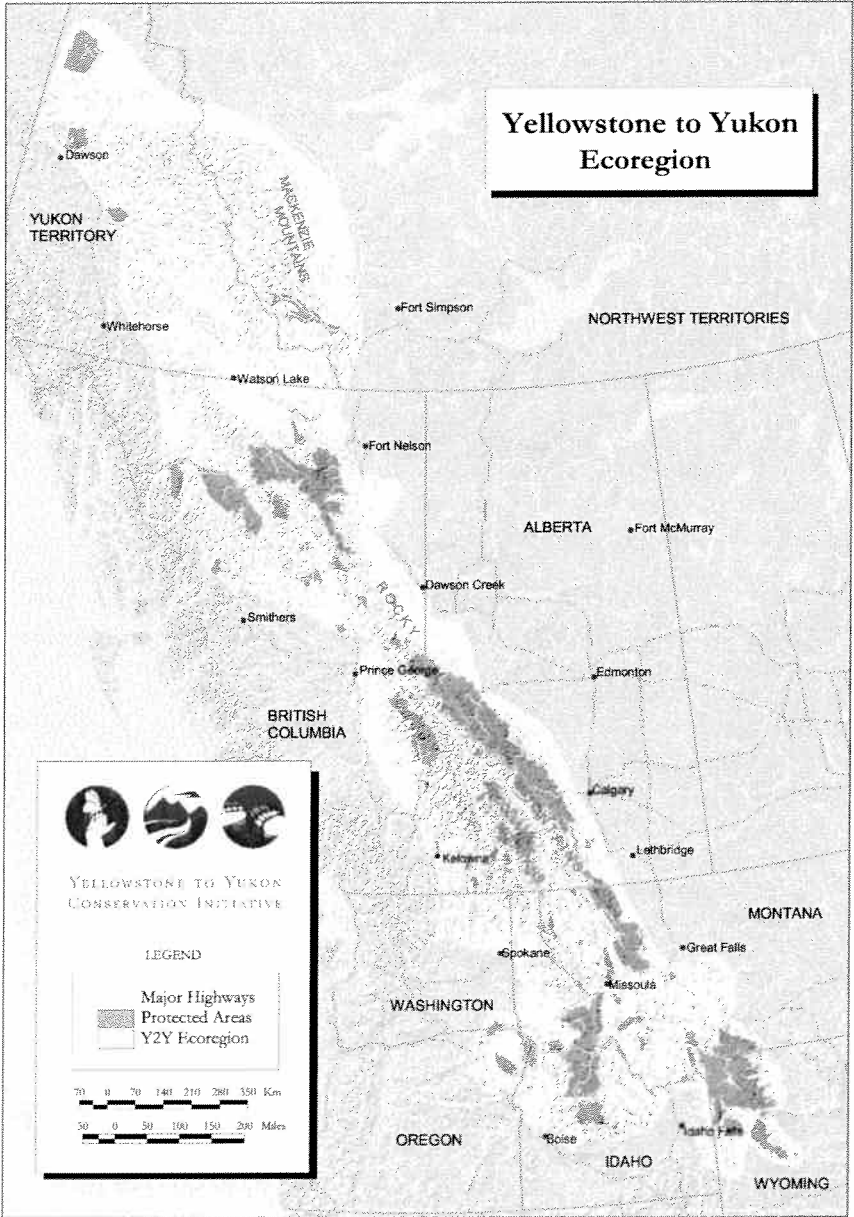
Regional approaches to conservation consider multiple perspectives, uses and boundaries, incorporating management of natural and semi-natural areas along with formally designated protected areas and their surrounding lands (Noss and Cooperrider, 1994). Regional scale planning incorporates related theory and practice of ecosystem approaches, bioregional planning, community conservation approaches and stewardship, among others. These concepts share similar characteristics which support regional planning:

- a basis on ecologically derived, rather than administrative boundaries;
- large scale, long-term perspectives;
- participatory, co-operative, adaptive and learning-based processes;
- an emphasis on integration across local to global scales and among disciplines; and,
- greater consideration of the complexity and interconnections between ecological and social systems.

(Slocombe, 1993; Meffe and Carroll, 1997; Yaffee, 1999; Brunckhorst, 2000; Slocombe and Dearden, 2002; WWF, 2002).

Regional approaches most commonly have been based on watershed and greater ecosystem concepts, rather than bioregions (Slocombe, 1993). More recently, a number of regional-scale, multi-species habitat conservation efforts have developed (Aengst *et al.*, 1997). Examples include the Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative (Y2Y), which extends over the Rocky, Columbia, and MacKenzie Mountains north of Yellowstone (Gailus, 2001) (Figure 1); Baja to Bering Sea (B2B) a marine conservation initiative along the Pacific coast (Jessen and Lerch, 1999); and the Algonquin to Adirondack Conservation Initiative (A2A), extending from Algonquin Provincial Park in Ontario to northern New York state (<http://www.atoa.org>).

**Figure 1.** The Yellowstone to Yukon Ecoregion. (Source: Jason Meyers, Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative, 2002).



The largest and perhaps most well-known example of this type of initiative is Y2Y. The Y2Y initiative operates as a joint U.S.-Canadian network of organisations, foundations and conservation-minded individuals, working together to support and maintain this region (Y2Y, 2002). The initiative is described as a marriage between science and advocacy (Pissot, 2001). The idea was initially conceived in 1993, by a group of scientists and conservationists (Y2Y, 2002). Yellowstone to Yukon spans five U.S. states, two Canadian provinces, two Canadian territories, and the traditional territories of 31 First Nations groups, across approximately 1.2 million km<sup>2</sup> of mountainous terrain from west-central Wyoming to the Yukon's MacKenzie Mountains (Gailus, 2001). The Y2Y vision proposes a series of connected core areas and wildlife corridors across the region. These would be supported by land use decisions and natural resource management based on ecological goals, and human communities that recognise the interconnections between, and function in partnership with, the natural environment (Y2Y, 2002). In 1996 Y2Y was declared an operating network, and since then has expanded into an organisation with an office in Canmore, Alberta and several staff in the U.S. Currently in its sixth year of operation the network consists of over 270 groups and individuals. It has been cited by the National Round Table on Environment and Economy as an example of the "new integrated systems of land management [that] are needed" to maintain conservation values (NRTEE, 2002).

The goal of this research was to gain an understanding of what this landscape-scale conservation approach incorporates, and how it may contribute to regional conservation planning. Potential contributions can be considered in terms of fundamental requirements for regional conservation planning, defined in light of successes and obstacles encountered in practice. Lessons derived from 77 ecosystem management efforts in the U.S. identified effective public involvement as critical, along with education to reduce public opposition (Yaffee, 1996). This study identified more effective networks to facilitate shared use of knowledge as a means to address scientific uncertainty, and recommended agencies to promote interactions among disciplines, departments, and with other organisations (Yaffee, 1996). Related fundamental challenges for community-based watershed management include increasing communication and collaboration; raising awareness and understanding; developing collective will and commitment; and building capacity (Litke and Day, 1998). Clear goals and objectives are also seen as necessary for ecosystem-based management, to guide activities at every level, and to assist in reducing value conflicts (Slocombe, 1998).

As noted earlier, regional-scale planning efforts are relatively new, and much can be learned from deriving lessons from diverse examples of conservation approaches. Thus, this research attempted to assess the successes, challenges and opportunities for the Y2Y initiative in regards to regional planning for conservation.

Research objectives of this study included:

- identifying characteristics that define effective regional conservation planning;
- assessing whether or to what extent initiatives such as Y2Y address these characteristics; and,
- identifying the strengths and limitations of Y2Y in terms of its contribution to regional conservation planning.

This paper focuses on some key strengths and limitations of Y2Y in relation to regional conservation planning, and provides a discussion of the formative stages of the Y2Y initiative. Its purpose is to encourage and inform further more extensive evaluations of such conservation efforts as they develop over time. While periodic review and evaluation is widely agreed to be critical to improved program performance, conservation programs suffer from a lack of in-depth, comprehensive, external, peer-reviewed evaluations (Kleiman *et al.*, 2000). Due to the recent development of these large scale conservation approaches, there is little analytical information available (Nelson and Sportza, 2000).

## Methods

Because there is relatively little information that assesses landscape-scale planning approaches, this research employed an exploratory approach to develop a well-grounded view of what is occurring in the case of Y2Y (Neuman, 1997). This approach lends itself well to using qualitative data, which is more open to using a range of information and uncovering new issues (Neuman, 1997). A case study research strategy was also used to gain an understanding of the context of large scale conservation planning, rather than focussing on a specific variable (Merriam, 1991).

Methods of inquiry included a review of conservation planning literature, interviews in two communities in Alberta—Canmore and Crowsnest Pass, and a review of Y2Y documentation. Interviews and document analysis were employed as they are commonly used qualitative tools in assessments (Datta, 1997). Communities were selected as a focus for inquiry to provide a perspective on linkages between local and regional levels of conservation planning activity. Research was focussed on the communities of Canmore and Crowsnest Pass due to their critical ecological significance as “pinch points” within the Y2Y corridor, threatened by increasing development pressures (Figure 2). Canmore is an important area in the development of Y2Y, as the location of the headquarters of the Y2Y organisation, and as a rapidly growing community adjacent to Banff National Park that has undertaken a number of environmental initiatives. Crowsnest Pass is a community with a resource-based economy, located in southern Alberta near the B.C. border. It is

believed to be currently facing the same development pressures as Canmore experienced about 20 years earlier.

**Figure 2.** Canmore and Crowsnest Pass, Alberta.



In total, 53 semi-structured interviews ranging from a half-hour to over two hours in length, were conducted with 57 individuals directly and indirectly involved in conservation planning efforts in the two communities. Interviewees were drawn from all three levels of government, wilderness-advocacy, land conservation, naturalist, and community stewardship groups, academia, local tourism, media representatives, business and economic development agencies, outdoor recreation groups, informed community members, and from the Y2Y organisation. Interviewees were identified through “snowball sampling” (Palys, 1997) – communication with respondents, who recommended additional respondents. Interviews were conducted in two time periods, the first 16 in Canmore and Calgary June 25- July 9, 2001, and the remainder of the interviews from November 18- December 21, 2001 in Crowsnest Pass, Canmore and Calgary. Questions included what interviewees understood the purpose and goals of Y2Y to be, their involvement in Y2Y, its successes and challenges, and what factors contribute to and detract from successful planning efforts.

The data presented in this paper are derived from preliminary interview results, focussing on factors that influence development of a regional-scale approach to conservation, in reference to some of the needs and challenges earlier presented. These factors primarily include the level of understanding of the concept (degree of

awareness, knowledge and involvement in the initiative), as a basis for collaboration. Further discussed are means of communicating the initiative to groups and the public.

## Some Preliminary Findings –Interviewee Perspectives

A dominant theme in interviews across communities and respondents was the importance of awareness of the concept, specifically awareness of the public and communities. Several respondents stated the extent of public awareness, engagement, and the visibility of the concept to be measures of success of the initiative. When asked about the successes of Y2Y, ‘the establishment of the concept’, ‘raised profile and awareness of the idea’, and ‘attraction of people to vision’ were talked about more than any other topic. Similarly, elements regarded as necessary for successful conservation planning for Y2Y most consistently were stated as the ‘awareness and support of the public and communities’, ‘connections with stakeholders’, and a ‘high-profile of the concept’. Respondents in the Crowsnest Pass more frequently cited the ‘importance of education’, ‘getting the message out’, and ‘public consultation’. Correspondingly, predominant obstacles were seen to be ‘public perception’, ‘lack of awareness’, and ‘being portrayed as a radical movement.’

Acknowledging the attention that has been directed to the area and the concept, there is still considerable room to develop awareness and understanding of Y2Y. Respondents in Canmore and surrounding area emphasised the awareness of the concept as a success more so than those in Crowsnest Pass. This distinction is most likely due to the pronounced sentiment among the majority of respondents in the Crowsnest Pass area, that the general public was not aware of or well-informed about the concept of Y2Y. In Canmore, this opinion was expressed mainly by respondents operating at the local level who were not directly involved in conservation efforts-local representatives of tourism, recreational, economic development and business sectors. Among respondents in both communities knowledge of Y2Y was varied, but in many cases was limited to a general understanding of the concept, maintaining connectivity of wildlife habitat, corridors and protected areas across the landscape. Representatives of the provincial and municipal governments in the Pass did not consider themselves to have a very strong understanding of Y2Y, nor did some representatives of a land conservation group operating in the region. Government officials from all levels in the Canmore area were more informed of the concept, but their involvement in the initiative was limited to contributing through doing their job well.

A limited sphere of understanding and involvement has implications for the development of the initiative. Representatives from provincial government, municipal government, and economic development among others, noted the need to sell a balanced approach, which is broader in base, and avoids being represented as a

radical movement. This is critical to overcoming one of the largest acknowledged obstacles to Y2Y, specifically its perception as an elitist environmental movement seeking to exclude people from the region. Parks Canada and the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, neither actively involved in Y2Y, have received complaints from the public and members regarding their support for this perceived radical effort.

Addressing these concerns involves reflecting on some of the elements necessary for successful conservation planning, which were put forward by interviewees. Along with public support and education, several respondents mentioned clarity of the purpose and goals of Y2Y. They stated that Y2Y needs to clarify what its goals are, identifying more tangible roles – both how communities and groups can take part, and what the initiative can offer those groups. A representative of a local environmental organisation in Crowsnest Pass made the point that while education is important, a lot of people do understand the issues, and there is a need for examples of success stories that can be presented to councils, and be promoted as options for the community. Convergent factors such as the introduction of conservation easement legislation into Alberta at the same time as the initiation of Y2Y, and a growing awareness of environmental concerns would suggest that people are generally more aware of conservation issues in Crowsnest Pass and elsewhere. What are needed are examples of how things can work, so that the argument may become less abstract and entrenched in values.

The Y2Y organisation is engaged in developing and publishing success stories across the Y2Y region through their website. In terms of promoting the issue to the public and at the community level, provincial and municipal government officials in Crowsnest Pass and Canmore stated the need for local champions – local individuals who are respected in the community and who can promote the concept. They provide a means to build connections between communities and the initiative, and allow for more community involvement and representation in decision-making and efforts that are undertaken. The most commonly reported source of information about the Y2Y initiative, and also one of the stated successes of the initiative was the hike that was conducted by Karsten Heuer (a former Banff Park Warden) across the Y2Y region, where presentations were made about Y2Y in communities along the way. This direct communication with communities and the publicity that surrounded it was considered to be the most effective form of outreach to date by the Y2Y organisation. This provides some direction for the orientation and delivery of future local level outreach efforts by Y2Y.

## Conclusions

The predominant successes and obstacles described above relate in large part to public awareness, knowledge and communication of the initiative, similar to findings reported in Yaffee (1996) on lessons from numerous ecosystem management



efforts in the U.S. Despite the successes in promotion of the Y2Y vision at a large scale to an international audience of funders and conservationists (i.e., achieving significant funding from private foundations in the U.S., and being cited by numerous high profile organisations, such as the National Round Table on Environment and Economy) there is need for further awareness-raising and promotion on-the-ground at the local community level. This is particularly true in the community of Crowsnest Pass, which has experienced less interaction and involvement in Y2Y than the community of Canmore. In Crowsnest Pass the main conversation regarding conservation planning deals with conservation easements by the Nature Conservancy of Canada (NCC) and the Southern Alberta Land Trust Society (SALTS). While SALTS has had some interaction with the Y2Y organisation, representatives of the NCC have to date had little involvement in the Y2Y initiative, and have in some cases emphasized this lack of direct connection, in response from concerns from the public. One respondent (an independent observer) in Crowsnest Pass stated that there is a growing opposition to conservation planning represented by Y2Y in this area.

The majority of respondents viewed public awareness, education and support to be critical factors to the success of the Y2Y initiative. This emphasizes the need for a broader base of participants in the organisation, and also a greater concentration on social science questions related to conservation planning. Several respondents (primarily representatives of research organisations) stated this latter consideration as important for Y2Y. An emphasis on social concerns suggests a somewhat different orientation for Y2Y than has previously been the case. In discussion with members of the Y2Y organisation, awareness was acknowledged to be important, but at the time that interviews were being conducted, effort was being put into the development of the science and conservation area design for Y2Y, and communities were stated not to be a priority. The organisation is now undertaking a communications research program to develop some baseline information on views of various constituencies, and to build organisational and individual capacities to deliver more effective messages. Y2Y has also partnered with the Sonoran Institute, an American organisation establishing roots in Canada, which is focused on community stewardship (<http://www.sonoran.org/si>).

The implications of Y2Y not being well-known, or even being a focus of opposition in Crowsnest Pass, are that future efforts to achieve conservation goals in this area may face some stronger opposition if relationship building does not occur. As suggested by respondents, public awareness building, education and consultation need to take place. This can be augmented through the development and promotion of success stories to be employed as models, and communication directly with communities, by local champions. The important point here is that these and related activities are time and energy intensive, and may not provide immediate desired results. This needs to be kept in mind so that those involved in the Y2Y initiative do not become discouraged by opposition to conservation efforts. The Y2Y initiative has made large inroads into establishing the concept and introducing

the notion of planning for conservation across this region. However, interviewee comments suggest that the organisation needs to devote more effort to building public and more widespread support, maintaining a high profile, and developing a niche for the initiative, in terms of what it can offer to communities and groups involved in conservation planning.

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