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'Continent's Crown' the next big draw

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Something big in tourism is coming to the East Kootenay and it could reinvigorate an already thriving industry.

"Geotourism" has been called the next "big thing" in tourism by the Travel Industry Association of America, which recently issued a ground-breaking report saying more than 55 million Americans consider themselves geotourists.

Such tourists are defined as travellers seeking unique and geographically authentic experiences in areas of outstanding natural beauty such as is found in the Rocky Mountain area straddling the British Columbia, Alberta and Montana borders in what has been called the Crown of the Continent.

Now, no less of an authority than the National Geographic Society is involved in a cross-border project to

produce a GeoTourism MapGuide and web page to promote the physical, cultural and natural attractions of the Continent's Crown, which takes in all of the East Kootenay south of Canal Flats including Cranbrook and Kimberley.

And Kootenay Rockies Tourism President Chris Dadson couldn't be happier.

"This is a major opportunity for us to differentiate our tourism product from the tourism products of the other centres in the region. It's a wholistic approach and an opportunity to say to the world here's what's so special about a ski experience in Fernie, a visit to the Railway Museum in Cranbrook or the Sullivan Mine Interpretive Centre opening in May which would be a perfect time to celebrate geotourism here."

Dadson says geotourism is the future for relatively unspoilt places

like southeastern B.C. and the adjoining areas of Alberta and Montana. "More than 55 million American travelers alone say they look for authenticity and a distinctive character to immerse themselves in when they travel and this will do nothing but grow."

A geotourism map differs from an ordinary map in that it's printed on thicker, high-quality paper and provides information on significant cultural, natural and heritage sites as well as events, activities, festivals and businesses nominated by the public.

Public involvement is key to the project because it will provide the bulk of the nominated special places, activities and events shown on the map. Deadline for nominations is May 11 and the MapGuide and associated web site are expected to be out by early 2008.

See GEOTOURISM, Page 5

Geotourism

From Page 1

"This is a very exciting hands-on project that will involve the public and local stakeholders every step of the way," says Chris Andrews, Community Programs Manager of Kootenay Rockies Tourism. "And, of course, it's an honour to be involved with such a prestigious organization as the National Geographic Society."

A Crown of the Continent Stewardship Council is being formed to oversee the public process for creating the MapGuide. Kootenay Rockies Tourism is contributing \$23,000 to the project to cover the B.C. section of the MapGuide and the College of the Rockies (COTR) Tourism Knowledge Cluster is acting in an advisory capacity.

Dadson says the money Kootenay Rockies Tourism has contributed makes it a full partner in the project along with the Montana Department of Commerce, the Alberta Geotourism MapGuide Consortium, the U.S. National Parks Conservation Association and the Chinook Institute for Community Stewardship. But there are other benefits as well, he says.

"We'll use the MapGuides to promote our area here. So when people land in the plane or arrive any other way here they'll want to expect in terms of the culture, character and physical amenities of the place they're visiting."

The community-based process to create the Geotourism MapGuide and web site got underway at a workshop in January in Montana where the Crown of the Continent Stewardship Council was established. The group will advise National Geographic on how to develop the map and will assist with the distribution plan once the map is completed.

Project coordinator Steve Thompson of the National Parks Conservation Association in Whitefish, Montana says the Crown of the Continent project poses a simple question that local people can best answer. "What's special about your place?"

If you have a place that's special to you, you might want to e-mail your answer to: www.crownofthecontinent.net and you may earn yourself the distinction of supplying one of the "special places" for the first geotourism MapGuide of the region.

Nominations can also be made at the Kootenay Rockies Tourism office in Kimberley or at special community workshops that will be arranged soon.