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FRIENDS OF THE CLEARWATER

Protecting Wild Clearwater Country Since 1987

LOCHSA–LOLO

Recovery Area and Wildlife Corridor

BIG WILD INITIATIVE II – WILDLIFE CORRIDORS AND CONNECTIVITY

August 10, 2026

A bridge crossing the upper Lochsa River, 2015 · Photo by Brett Haverstick

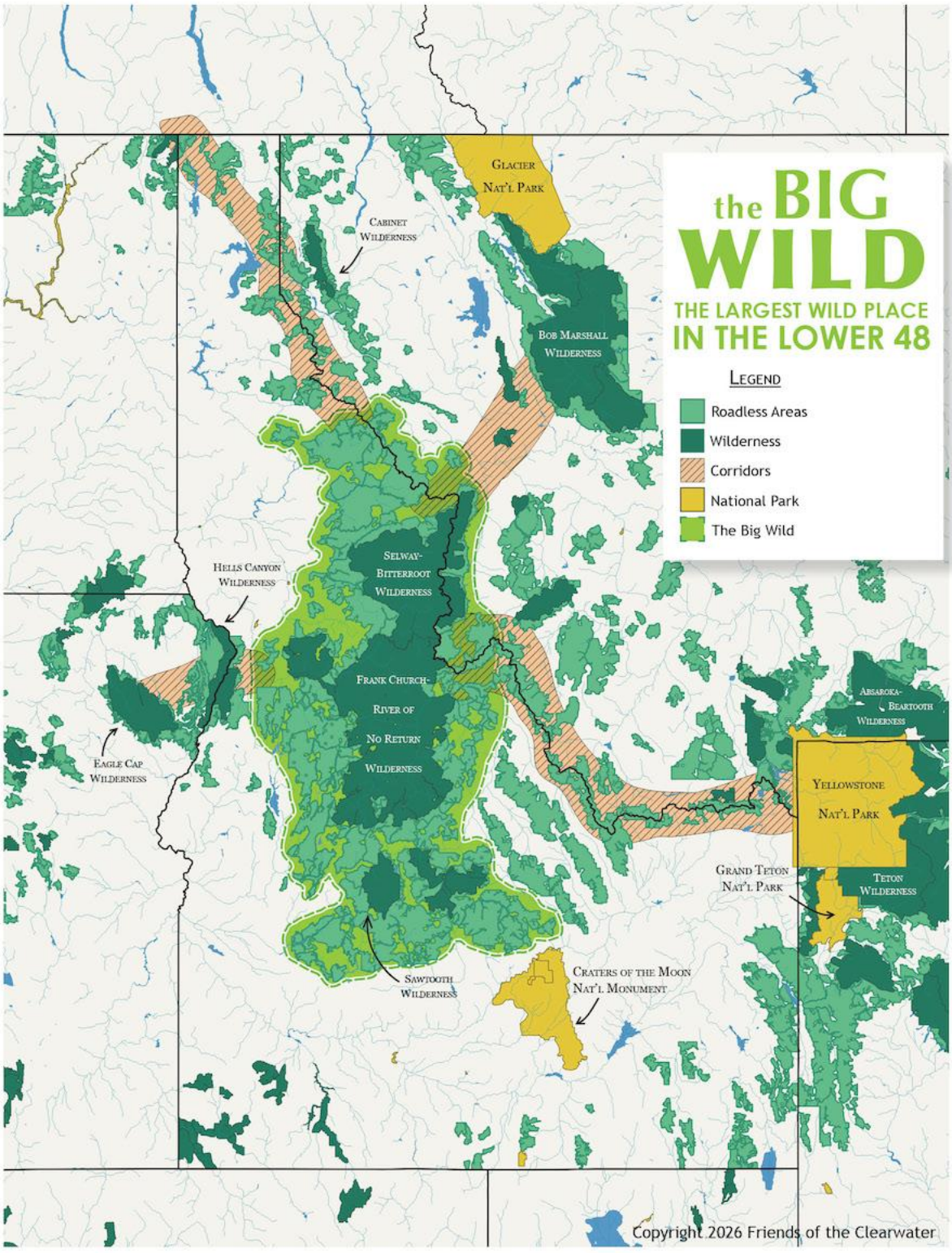
Friends of the Clearwater

THE BIG WILD

THE LARGEST WILD PLACE IN THE LOWER 48

CARNIVORE CORRIDORS

FRIENDS OF THE CLEARWATER



The Big Wild, as well as its connections to other wildland areas, is essential for wild-ranging wildlife and long-term biodiversity resilience in the Northern Rockies. FOC map.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This proposal advances the creation of a nationally significant wildlife corridor in the Nez Perce–Lochsa–Lolo region. The initiative aims to conserve and reconnect one of the largest intact ecosystems in North America, supporting imperiled species, restoring ecological function, and honoring Indigenous and historical use of the landscape.

BACKGROUND: THE BIG WILD

The area known as the Big Wild is actually two adjacent wild regions. Clearwater Country is a land of moist cedar-fir forests and lower elevation mountains. This is where Friends of the Clearwater has focused its efforts. Salmon River Country is a higher, drier region of ponderosa break lands and glacier-carved peaks. They are joined by the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness. Our core region, Wild Clearwater Country, contains 3 million acres of wilderness and roadless forest. Altogether, the entire region covers more than 10 million contiguous acres of wild, undeveloped country, making it larger than Yellowstone and Glacier National Parks combined. This unique and irreplaceable region, jointly owned by all of us, is rich in biodiversity. **Friends of the Clearwater will secure the largest intact wildland preserve in the contiguous United States for biodiversity and climate health with 3 Initiatives:**

I. Wild Salmon Sanctuary

II. Carnivore Corridors

III. Forest and Climate.

The Big Wild has been central to Friends of the Clearwater's mission since 1987, and a core focus of the proposed legislation, Northern Rockies Ecosystem Protection Act (NREPA). https://allianceforthewildrockies.org/nrepa/

The Big Wild connects to major wildland complexes, including:

- Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem (east)
- Glacier Park and Bob Marshall ecosystems (northeast)
- Hells Canyon and Wallowa Mountains (west)
- Selkirk, Cabinet-Yaak, (north)

We will secure the largest, most intact, most abundant and most diverse carnivore preserve in the nation, thereby ensuring the greatest diversity of other species as well.

To create and maintain carnivore connectivity across The Big Wild, FOC will work to:

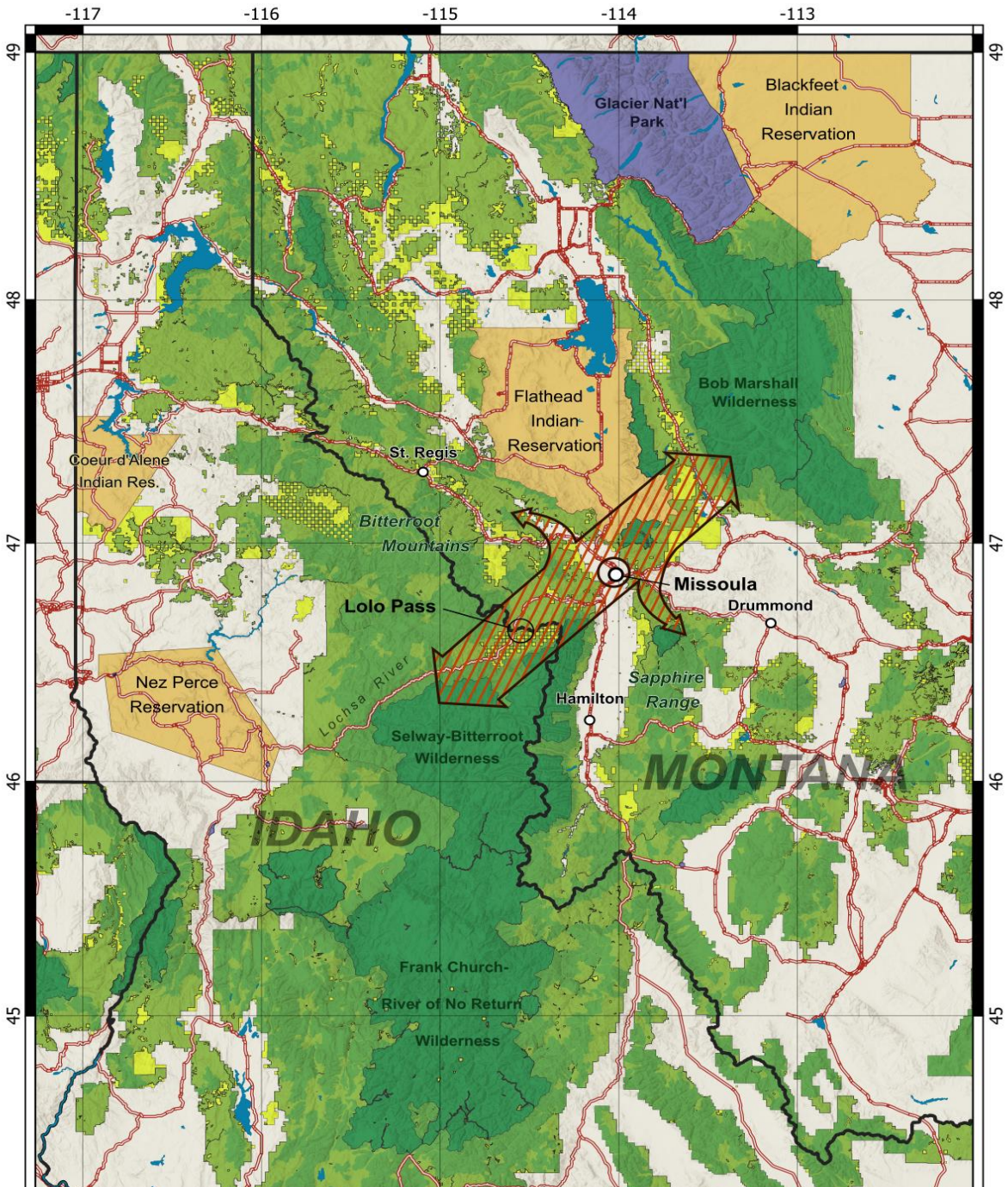
- Protect all Identified Roadless Areas;
- Expand and enhance protections and systems to create protected north/south and east/west travel corridors for threatened and endangered carnivores;
- Enhance carnivore survival by increasing coexistence
- Inventory and map threatened and endangered carnivores to help prioritize our efforts;
- Partner with other organizations across both the Clearwater and Salmon Country to advocate for any or all ESA-listed mammals that (will) use these corridors.

THE LOCHSA–LOLO WILDLIFE CORRIDOR

We are proposing the first national wildlife corridor, the Lochsa–Lolo Wildlife Corridor.

Ecological science recognizes corridors as one of the most robust concepts when tied to large core protected areas. The Big Wild and NREPA secure vast core areas and safeguard against habitat fragmentation by establishing a system of Biological Linkage Corridors to connect the region's core wildlands into a functioning ecological whole.

We define this corridor as a generalized zone of connectivity between the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem (NCDE) and the Bitterroot Ecosystem (BE). At its core is the Road to the Buffalo (Lolo and Lewis and Clark and Nez Perce National Historic Trails) and the connection of occupied zone for grizzly bears in the NCDE that currently adjoins the BE. It follows the highest likelihood paths of for grizzlies (Sells et al, 2023) and serves as a corridor for other imperiled species. It includes the Lochsa private checkerboard region and substantial surrounding roadless areas. Within that corridor we will promote and conduct numerous conservation activities and actions to enhance its functionality as a core region of connectivity.



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NEZ PERCE HOMELAND AND STEWARDSHIP

The Nimiipuu (Nez Perce) and other Tribes had been fishing, gathering, and hunting in the upper Lochsa for centuries before Lewis and Clark came through in the early 1800s. By the end of that century, the Nez Perce Reservation had been greatly diminished and the die was cast for future watershed problems.

The Tribe has built a robust watershed recovery program and done extensive work in the upper watershed, such as road removal/recontouring and culvert replacements in a place they have known for ages.

THE RISKS FACING CONNECTIVITY

The upper Lochsa and Lolo Pass region faces significant ecological degradation due to:

- Road construction and motorized access
- Intensive logging and habitat fragmentation
- Private "checkerboard" land ownership patterns
- Declining protections, including potential policy rollbacks (Roadless rule, ESA delisting)
- This area is also designated critical habitat for several species yet remains highly compromised.

At-risk species include:

- ESA-listed: grizzly bear, lynx, wolverine, whitebark pine, chinook salmon, steelhead trout, bull trout
- Species of concern: fisher, wolf

OPPORTUNITY

The Lochsa–Lolo region represents a rare and urgent conservation opportunity:

- Key corridor linking major carnivore populations (including grizzly bear recovery zones)
- Core habitat for wolverine, lynx, and fisher
- Essential watershed for imperiled fish species
- Historically significant Indigenous travel route and National Historic Trail at the 150th anniversary of the Flight of the Nez Perce 2027!

With private lands currently available for acquisition, immediate action could secure and restore this landscape as both a wildlife corridor and cultural resource.

Negotiations for transfer of lands back to USFS appear nearing completion. Even so, time is of essence. Until completed, we are proposing important additive solutions including:

1. Working with Nez Perce to assess restoration success to date and priorities for completion.
2. Discussing with landowners ongoing restoration
3. Discussing with landowners voluntary conservation actions that include monitoring and protection of imperiled species habitat until land deal is complete.
4. Discussing with landowner cost share of protection and restoration projects.

5. Developing Nez Perce co management proposal

A LANDSCAPE-SCALE SOLUTION

We propose protection of the Lochsa–Lolo area as:

- A **national wildlife corridor**
- A **native fish sanctuary**
- A **secure conservation landscape** in partnership with the Nez Perce Tribe

Key actions include:

- Permanent protection of all roadless areas
- Habitat restoration on degraded lands
- Improved connectivity across north–south and east–west corridors
- Reduction of wildlife conflict through coexistence strategies
- Monitoring and mapping of focal species
- Expansion of the National Historic Trail
- Exploring and implementing ways to facilitate wildlife passage across Highway 12

THEORY OF CHANGE

- Establishing a bold, large-scale vision builds public support
- Demonstrating success encourages broader adoption
- Collaborative partnerships strengthen outcomes
- Public engagement drives lasting policy change

There is a significant ongoing shift in how we live with wildlife moving from control to coexistence. The public increasingly speaks out to support public lands and wildlife. US polls show that a majority support grizzlies and wolves on the landscape.

The Nez Perce have led fishery and forest restoration in the Lochsa for decades. They have restored hundreds of acres of forest and removed dozens of miles of roads and restored dozens of miles of streams. They have significantly helped to ensure native fish remain viable and prevented extinction of threatened fish.

We advocate for continued restoration and new conservation measures for environmental justice for the Nez Perce and to restore and protect this critical area for imperiled fish and wildlife including lynx, wolverine, grizzlies, steelhead, salmon, and bull trout,

Friends of the Clearwater has been actively engaged and effective in the Lochsa checkerboard conservation and proposals for exchanges and sales for over a decade. We led a successful campaign to stop a bad land exchange and more. We are excited to lead with Nez Perce on a new way forward.

IMPLEMENTATION ACTIONS AND BUDGET (ESTIMATED)

- Support land acquisition and conservation funding mechanisms

- Protect and monitor roadless areas including over-snow vehicle access (FOC time– 20k)
- Pursue critical habitat designations for key species (FOC time, legal costs – 100k?)
- Restore high priority logged and roaded lands (partners? $1 million?)
- Establish a “bear-smart” coexistence program along corridor (travel, outreach, supplies-30k – 100k match)
- Monitor focal species (camera traps, genetic sampling, etc.- 30k) We will proactively search for reports of species occurrence and follow up with direct monitoring. We will work with partners doing current monitoring and partners in the field (FCSB, GB). We will develop citizen science.
- Highlight the corridor at Lolo Pass and at centers in Lolo, Kooskia, Missoula, Hamilton, Lewiston, Orofino- with outreach campaign (outreach materials 10k)
- Build partnerships, outreach, and citizen engagement (outreach, travel - 20k)
- Develop partnership framework with the Nez Perce Tribe (Nez Perce time 40k)
- Expanded designations, nominate as UNESCO world heritage site?

Total Budget (Estimated)

- Core project: ~$250,000
- Additional restoration and endowment funding: ~$1M+

Expected Outcomes

- Establishment of the first U.S. national wildlife corridor
- Improved connectivity for carnivores and other species
- Stable or increasing populations of wolverine, lynx, fisher, and grizzly bears
- No net habitat loss for native fish species
- Enhanced recognition of the Nez Perce Tribe (Nimiipuu) cultural history and recent extensive ecosystem recovery efforts
- A replicable model for future corridor conservation efforts

Friends of the Clearwater History of Success

Friends of the Clearwater has protected and defended Wild Clearwater Country for almost 40 years, and we aim to keep it wild forever! We have prevented any significant losses of the 1.5 million roadless acres or of the critical fish and wildlife habitat across Wild Clearwater Country of Idaho. Our work has expanded wildlife populations including aiding in the recovery of wolves and arrival of grizzly bears and adding big protections for lynx and wolverines. We know of no small or medium sized group with such a successful record over such a large expanse of critical fish and wildlife habitat over such a long time.

Corridor Partnerships

We will work with conservation partners in the corridor including Nimiipuu Protecting the Environment, Nez Perce Tribe, Friends of the Bitterroot Wild Earth Guardians, and more

CALL TO ACTION

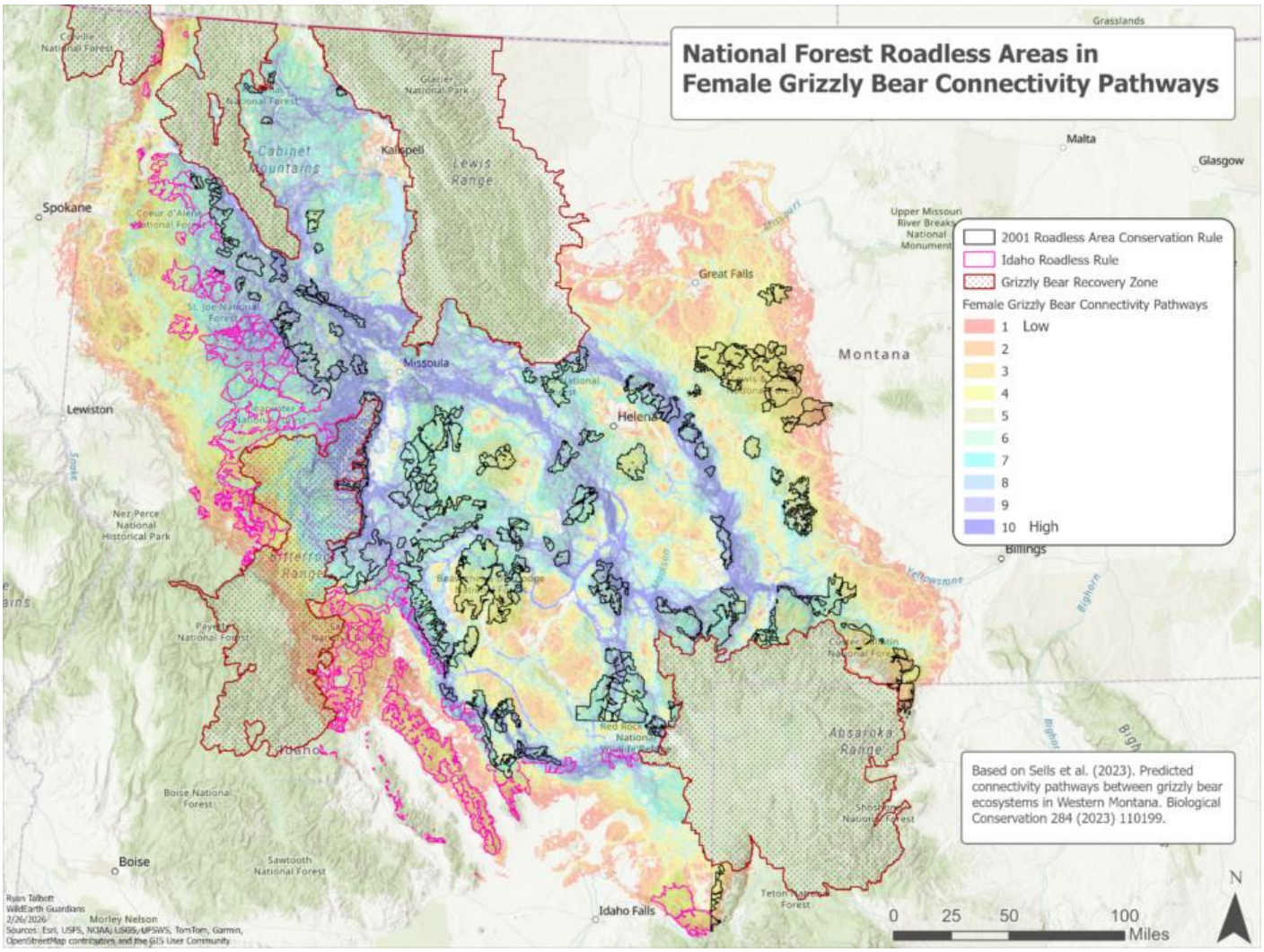
The Big Wild is a landscape of ecological, cultural, and national significance. Immediate action is needed to secure its future. We invite partners, funders, and the public to join in protecting this vital corridor—ensuring healthy ecosystems, clean water, and thriving wildlife for generations to come.

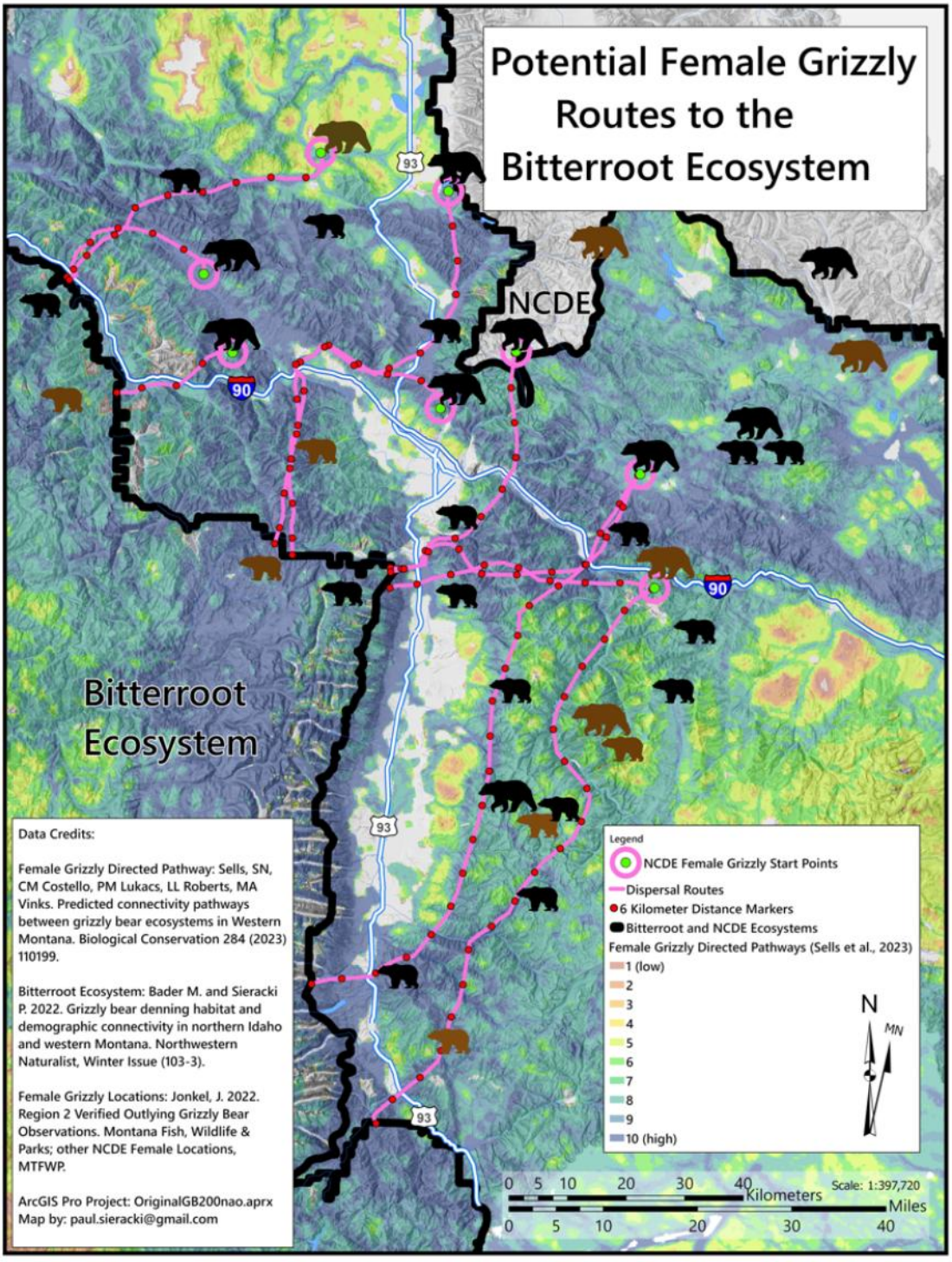
For more information or to get involved, contact:
Friends of the Clearwater – foc@friendsoftheclearwater.org

MAPS AND REFERENCE IMAGES

Female Grizzly Bear Connectivity Pathways in the Northern Rockies

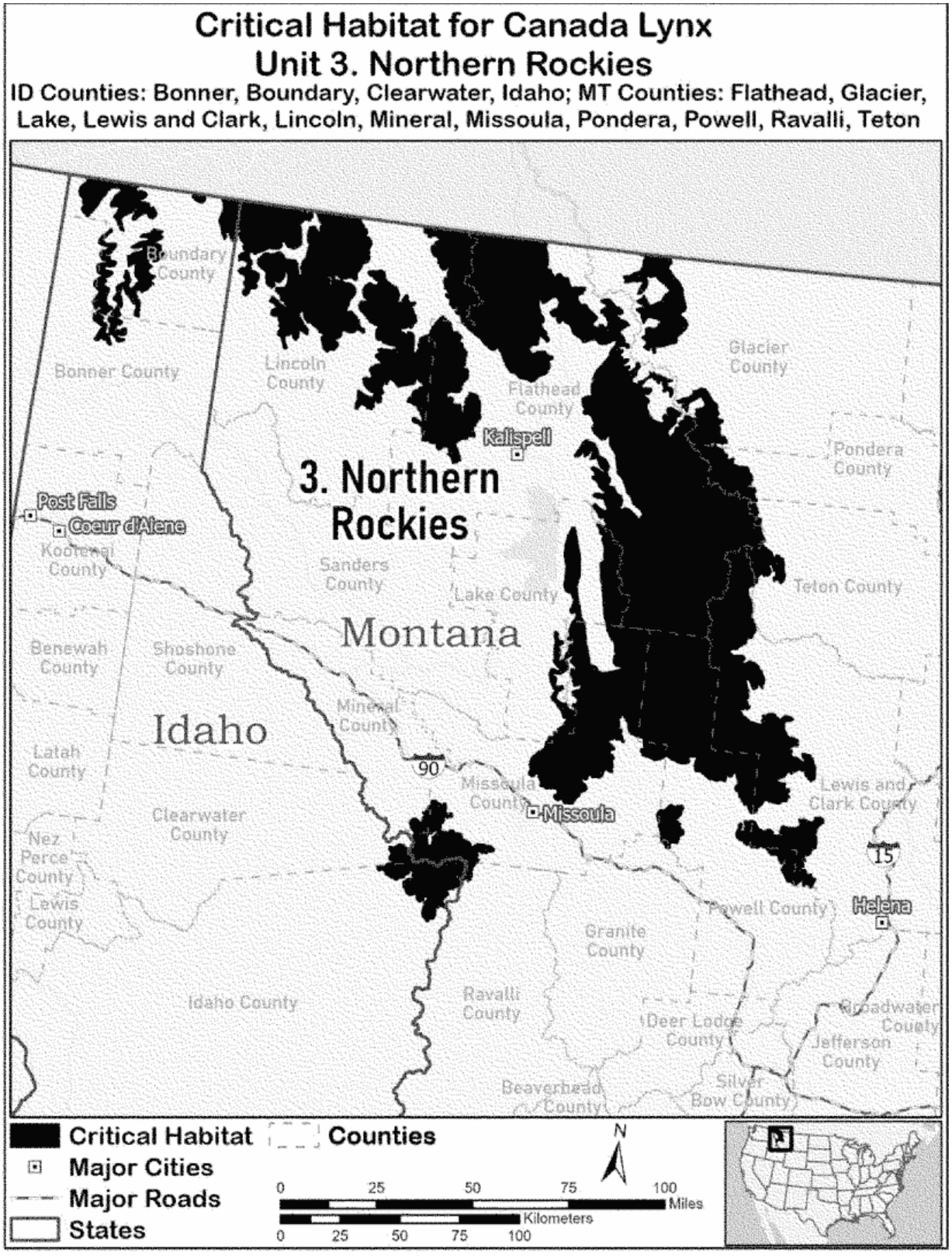
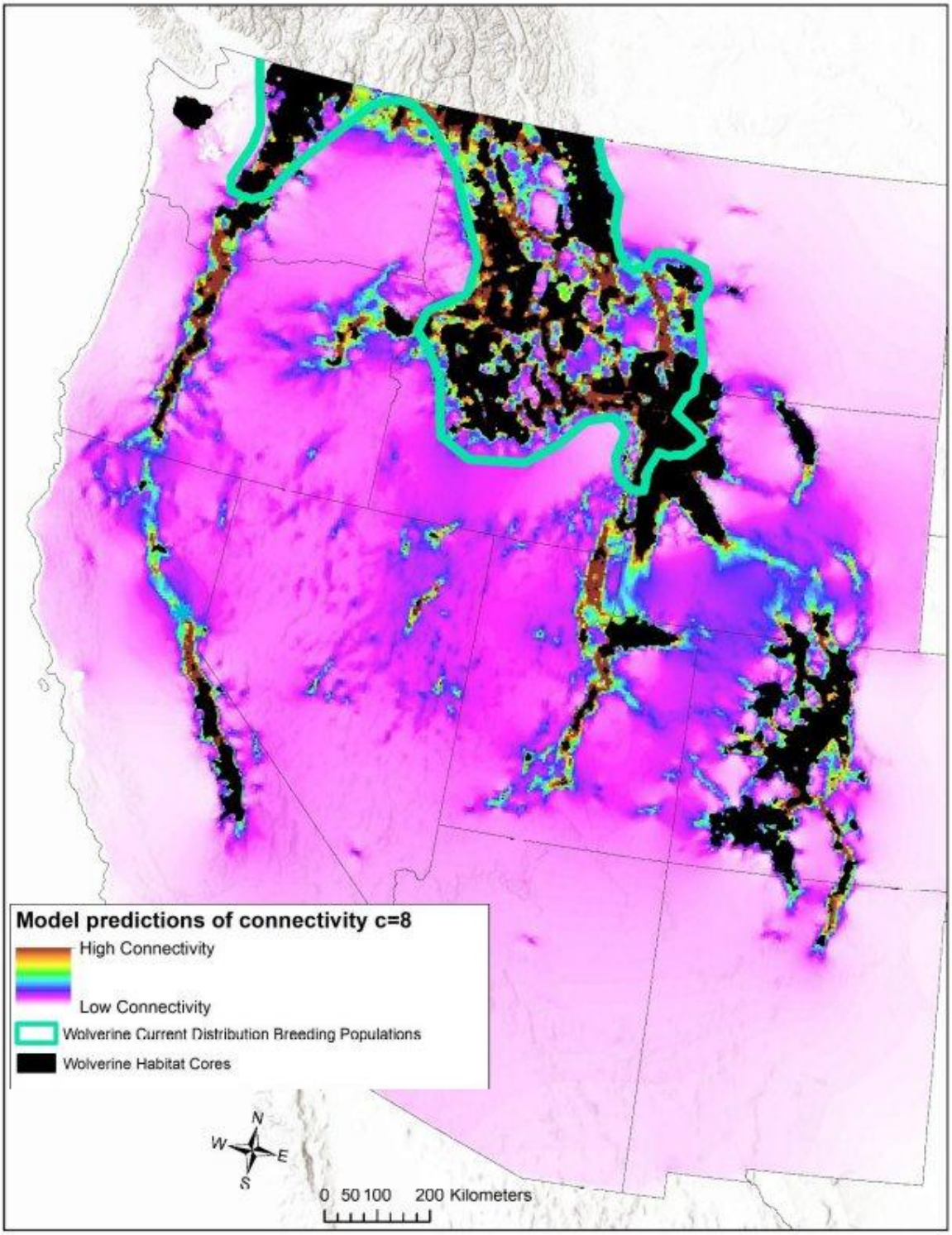
Grizzly Bear Recovery Depends on Roadless Area Protections – Sells et al 2023




Potential Female Grizzly Routes to the Bitterroot Ecosystem
NCDE
Bitterroot Ecosystem
93
90
Data Credits:
Female Grizzly Directed Pathway: Sells, SN, CM Costello, PM Lukacs, LL Roberts, MA Vinks. Predicted connectivity pathways between grizzly bear ecosystems in Western Montana. Biological Conservation 284 (2023) 110199.
Bitterroot Ecosystem: Bader M. and Sieracki P. 2022. Grizzly bear denning habitat and demographic connectivity in northern Idaho and western Montana. Northwestern Naturalist, Winter Issue (103-3).
Female Grizzly Locations: Jonkel, J. 2022. Region 2 Verified Outlying Grizzly Bear Observations. Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks; other NCDE Female Locations, MTFWP.
ArcGIS Pro Project: OriginalGB200nao.aprx
Map by: paul.sieracki@gmail.com
Legend
NCDE Female Grizzly Start Points
Dispersal Routes
6 Kilometer Distance Markers
Bitterroot and NCDE Ecosystems
Female Grizzly Directed Pathways (Sells et al., 2023)
1 (low)
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10 (high)
N
MN
0 5 10 20 30 40 Kilometers
0 5 10 20 30 40 Miles
Scale: 1:397,720

Critical Habitat for Canada Lynx in the Northern Rockies

[US Federal Register]



Current Wolverine Habitat and Connectivity (need hot link)