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Why Y2Y? More than the Grizzly.

James Hall, Cornelius Hughley, Matt Johnson, Laura Lewis, and Lauren Ridenour
Students and Teacher, HSU (alphabetical order)

A bold conservation initiative seeks to protect ecosystems in the Northern Rocky Mountains from Yellowstone National Park to the Yukon's Mackenzie Mountains – the Y2Y initiative. The region is 1,990 miles long and 125 to 500 miles wide, about 456,000 square miles in all. Rather than turning the entire region into a single large protected area, the initiative proposes to define and designate a network of wildlife core-areas, connecting movement corridors, and transition areas *within* the overall area.

The initiative is garnering increasing support largely from concern over the protection of its poster child, the grizzly bear – the region's largest carnivore. But the most compelling arguments for preserving Y2Y stem from ideals larger than the grizzly.

Grizzlies probably need more land than we currently have set aside as nature reserves in North America. Probably. Studying an elusive carnivore is difficult; data suggest that even Canada's Jasper National Park, largest in the Rockies at 4,200 square miles, is too small to harbor a "minimum viable population" of grizzlies.

While our current reserves may be inadequate, do grizzlies really need *all* of the proposed area by the Y2Y initiative? Probably not. Conservative estimates suggest a viable grizzly population (about 400 bears) needs 32,000 square miles with little human interaction. Thus, an adequate grizzly conservation plan may entail setting aside large, roadless, well-connected blocks of land along the spine of the Rockies. Such a plan could be realized with a fraction of the area proposed by the Y2Y initiative.

Yet the argument over Y2Y should not rest on any single species. As conservationists, the Y2Y initiative compels us because it proposes to protect something profoundly beautiful and rare – the last intact great mountain ecosystem of the world. It proposes to protect *wildness*.

Conservationists have increasingly focused on maintaining the Earth's biodiversity, but we must *also* work to preserve wildness – large, strictly protected, intact ecosystems. Large, intact, wild areas have value beyond that which their biodiversity value may suggest. Intrinsically, wild areas are the fundamental units of survival, they are valuable in themselves as part of life. Scientifically, arguments suggest that wild and intact areas like the Y2Y area are important for restoring self-regulating land communities upon which human livelihoods ultimately depend. Aesthetically and morally, large wild areas can be the wellsprings for emotional bonds between humans and their environment. They can be, in Wallace Stegner's words, "part of the geography of hope."

The Y2Y initiative has merit because it proposes to protect something larger than the grizzly, it proposes to protect the wildness of the Rockies. As with many other conservation initiatives, we may be tempted to promote the Y2Y initiative with reasons we believe will best stir the public, but bigger reasons are ultimately more compelling. Though more difficult initially, it will be better in the end to promote the merits of large conservation initiatives for exactly what they propose to do: maintain wildness.