Birch Creek Valley Alliance

A project of the Birch Creek Collaborative

Independent by Nature; United by Purpose



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The Idea: A New Way Forward

The American West is under stress. Competing land uses, struggling economies, drought, invasive species, and state and federal policy are all contributing factors. Yet, in areas of the most seemingly intractable problems, it is possible to find groups of people - ranchers, conservationists, rural community leaders, scientists and tribal leaders - joining together to chart the future of their region.



In the Birch Creek Valley of Central Idaho, a small network of cattle ranchers, farmers, horse lovers, and conservationists have started a conversation about the future of their region. Setting aside differences for the moment, they are asking, *on what do we agree?* Discussions have been built slowly, out of personal relationships and friendships, and have created shared trust.

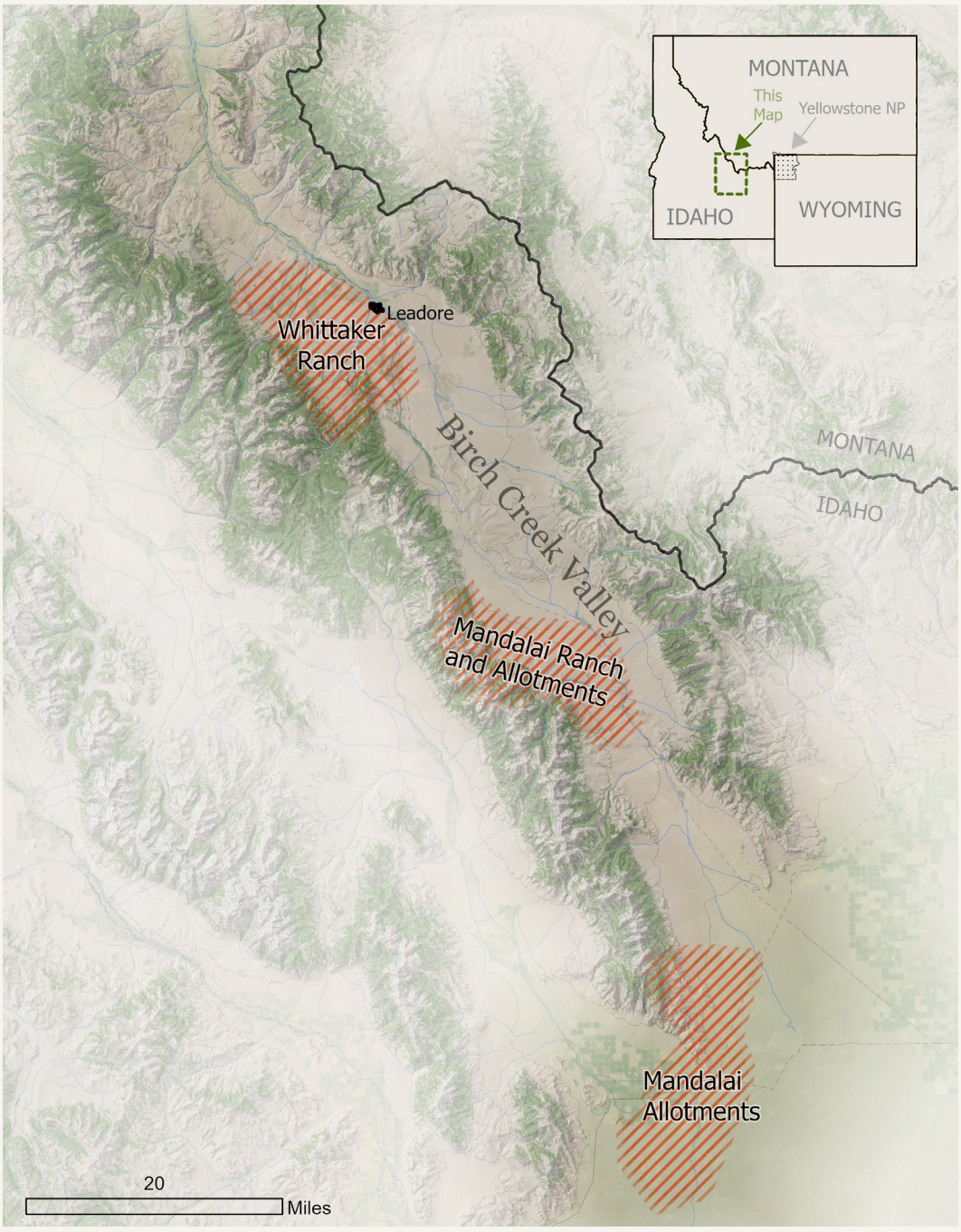
Earning the respect and attention of the independent, self-reliant, Idaho rancher takes time. New approaches to land management – such as running horses with the cattle to improve pasture or bringing back beavers as a means of water conservation – must be introduced incrementally, results studied, and methods scientifically proven. In the Birch Creek Valley, two ranchers in particular, Manda Kalimian, owner of Mandalai Ranch, and Jordan Whittaker of Two Dot Ranch -- have been willing to open parts of their properties to monitored experiments. For the past two years, Kalimian and Whittaker have co-grazed horses with cattle as a solution to noxious weeds, and engaged a research scientist to study the ecology of the area to better understand how to restore watercourses. Word spreads about the results of efforts like these, heightening interest in what might be done to protect the health and shape the future of Birch Creek Valley.

Recognizing that when it comes to the values of the Birch Creek Valley, people have much more in common than they thought, the original small group of landowners, ranchers, community leaders and conservationists is poised to expand. By working together where they can, they believe they can find their way to solutions or perhaps find compromises on issues they thought were insoluble. This is where Birch Creek Valley Alliance comes in, ready to set the table for more and larger discussion, and to usher it into action.



The Place

There are places in the American West where the stakes are unmistakably high - where wildlife still moves in ancient rhythms, where ranching families still steward the land, and where the future of entire ecosystems depends on decisions made in the next few years. Birch Creek Valley is one of those rare places.



In the heart of Lemhi County, Idaho, the Birch Creek Valley comprises 400,000 acres of land that form a living bridge between the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem and the Central Idaho Wilderness. These are two of the largest protected wildlands in the United States, and their magnificence and importance cannot be overstated. For millennia, elk, grizzly bear, antelope, bison and more have moved freely out of Yellowstone, across the east-west benches of the Centennial Range, through Birch Creek Valley and the Lemhi Mountains, and west into the Wilderness.

Unlike many Western habitats fragmented by amenity-driven development, Birch Creek remains largely in the hands of multigenerational ranchers and ranching families. This creates a rare opportunity: a landscape still intact enough to restore, yet vulnerable enough to need protection. It is beautiful country, superb for fishing, hiking, and wildlife viewing. Yet, Birch Creek Valley is not without challenges. The economics of agriculture and ranching are tough. Water is increasingly scarce. Wildlife migratory routes are at risk of disruption from development. Population is dwindling in rural communities, including the community of Leadore, “Home of the Mustang,” as are economic opportunities, and health and social services. Now is the time for Birch Creek Valley to determine its future, through the leadership and vision of the people who work, live, and recreate there.



The Initiative

Visitors to Birch Creek Valley are often overtaken by a sense of awe. The grandeur of the landscape, the silence of the mountains, the vastness of the rangeland – all contribute to the feeling that one is insignificant in comparison. Yet the future of the valley rests in the hands of a few who must act boldly. In a landscape where ranchers, conservationists, tribal nations, and scientists have historically stood on different sides of difficult issues, there is a way forward.

Birch Creek Valley Alliance (BCVA) is the brainchild of Manda Kalimian, rancher and horsewoman, who owns 1,300 acres plus 70,000 acres of grazing allotments in the Birch Creek Valley. A serious conservationist, Ms. Kalimian has observed life in Lemhi County, formed deep relationships with many of her ranching neighbors, and spoken to scientists and policy makers about what is happening in Central Idaho. She is joined in the undertaking by Jordan Whittaker, a prominent rancher in the Birch Creek Valley, who has been consistently recognized for rangeland excellence by the Bureau of Land Management. Their vision for Birch Creek Valley Alliance is founded on the importance of Birch Creek Valley to the future of the American





West, including conserving and/or restoring working ranchland, farmland, and migratory wildlife corridors; encouraging appropriate economic development; preventing destructive land fragmentation; and focusing on the wild horse to improve landscape health. Together Kalimian and Whittaker have served as the “soft leaders” of the BCVA; they and others now believe that scaling is necessary and possible.

To date, Ms. Kalimian has personally and generously financed conservation experiments, refurbished a significant ranch as a base of operations in the Birch Creek Valley, maintained and built key personal relationships, supported a sister program (Birch Creek Dialogues), and engaged a part-time skeleton staff. To realize its purpose on a much larger scale, the Birch Creek Valley Alliance, and its parent organization, the Birch Creek Collaborative (see next paragraph), must attract more collaborators of all kinds, to develop plans (including for strategic land acquisition, when necessary); and to identify funding. While continuing to rely on the original leadership group for key guidance, the BCVA needs a board of trustees, a strategic plan and supporting documentation, a comprehensive conservation program, and financing partners.

One of the most exciting aspects of the Birch Creek model is its potential for replication where similar conditions prevail, in other parts of the West beyond Central Idaho. In the Crown of the Continent (northwestern Rocky Mountains bordering Canada) and the High Divide (Washington State) and elsewhere, there are similar challenges to those in the Birch Creek Valley. Looking to the future, even while focusing hard on Birch Creek Valley now, wildlife is imperiled and land use competitive across the West, and action is needed. In order to allow itself room for growth, the Birch Creek Collaborative is being established as a governing organization.

What We're Seeking

We need strong strategic partners — local leaders, philanthropists, and conservationists — who are sympathetic to our purpose and willing to envision with us a future that will work for all in the Birch Creek Valley and potentially elsewhere. The initiatives below outline the immediate needs of the next year and, in some cases, beyond.

1. Formalize the local Leadership Group and hold Strategic Vision Discussions

As soon as possible, continuing through 2027

This is an essential step for setting short- and long-term priorities. We will start the next leg of our journey with respected local people who have their ear to the ground, recognizing the needs, sensitivities, and history of the Valley. A formal series of conversations will help determine the overall strategic vision for the next set of BCVA activities. By literally placing issues into either "agreement" or "to be discussed further" buckets, it is possible to find areas where progress can be made right away. As people deepen their appreciation of the stresses, needs and desires of others, working together on difficult problems can become easier over time. The outcome is a high-level vision plan for the Birch Creek Valley that has local buy-in and can be readily implemented.

2. Institutional Development and Board-Building

Near term and ongoing

To establish governance for the Birch Creek Collaborative, with the Birch Creek Valley Alliance as its primary program obligation; to attract serious, committed board members, hire key staff, raise funds for operations and programs, and oversee the creation and implementation of a Long-Range Plan.

3. Creation of a Long-Range Plan for the Birch Creek Valley

2027-2028

Following the vision discussions, the Board, advised by the Leadership Group and other collaborators TBD, will work to create a strategic long-range plan for the next five years, with the goal of completion and adoption by July 2028. This document will include key aspects of the BCVA's three goals: land health (including working lands) and conservation; supporting wildlife; and local economic development. It will also include organizational operating principles and a fundraising plan. Finally, it will include an initial valley-wide land ownership and market analysis to identify any properties that represent opportunities to minimize fragmentation of land.

4. Working Lands and Conservation Program (WLCP)

2027-2031

Long-term study and monitoring on several fronts will yield important data for prioritizing and directing initiatives undertaken in Birch Creek Valley. The WLCP includes ongoing study of conditions suitable for beavers; geospatial analysis of wildlife movement; continuing the study of co-grazing cattle and horses; mapping lands crucial to the wildlife corridor; and more (please see the WLCP addendum). The proposed program includes a Science Advisor, a Conservation Project Scientist, and a small grants program for PhD students and postdocs.

> *Our vision, and our progress to date stand as a testimony to what is possible on a landscape scale. Birch Creek Valley Alliance represents the opportunity to restore a large part of the magnificent Rocky Mountain West, for people, wildlife, and the land. Please join us.*



Birch Creek Valley Alliance

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