

Highway Reconstruction with Spirit of Place

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Source: CSKT, 2009



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Federal, Tribal, and State cooperation on US 93 through the Flathead Indian Reservation

The People's Way highway project was so named for the unique cooperation between state, tribal, and federal agencies, as well as input from public citizens; who collaborated on this amazing highway project. The concept of Spirit of Place was introduced during this process and premised on the idea that the road is a visitor and that it should respond to and be respectful of the land and the Spirit of the culture. Spirit of Place is the continuum of all that is seen, touched, felt, and traveled through; it includes more than just the road and adjacent areas. It consists of the surrounding mountains, plains, hills, forest, valley, and sky, and the paths of waters, glaciers, winds, plants, animals and native peoples. The journey from the need, through design, to construction, and completion is a story all its own.

The Flathead Indian Reservation history

The Flathead Indian Reservation (FIR) was created through the 1855 Treaty of the Hellgate. Salish, Pend d'Oreille, and Kootenai people relinquished many rights to their large aboriginal territory, an area that included most of Western Montana and portions of Northern Idaho and Eastern

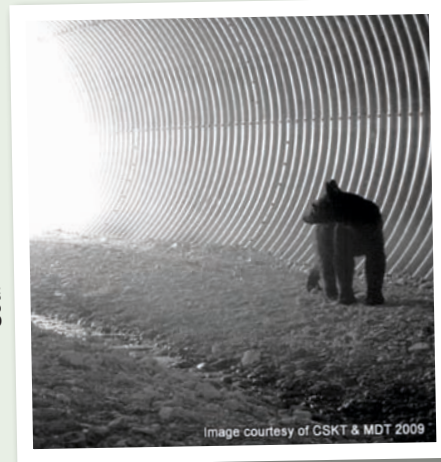
Washington, in exchange for exclusive rights to use lands within the 1.25 million acre reservation boundaries. The tribes possess and exercise the inherent authority to govern their people and land as a sovereign nation.

The daily existence of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribal (CSKT) people are tied to the natural resources of this area. The abundant wildlife resources provide for subsistence, cultural, and spiritual needs of the tribal membership. Individual tribal members hunt wild game to feed their families, collect berries and roots for cultural celebrations and subsistence, and travel the highway that bisects the reservation. As a result, their lives are intertwined with those of the animal's native to the area. Wildlife resources play dual roles, being considered as both natural and cultural resources.

US 93 accidents higher than state average

In the early 1990s, with US 93 accident percentages above national highway levels, the Montana Department of Transportation (MDT) initially proposed a 56-mile highway expansion to a four-lane undivided highway. The Tribes objected to the plan fearing increased traffic volume, adverse effects on wildlife and wetlands, increased fragmentation of the reservation's wildlife habitat, and damage to tribal cultural and spiritual sites.

Source: CSKT, 2009



Black bear in Wildlife Crossing

Source: CSKT, 2009



Deer using Wildlife Crossing

As a predominant feature on the landscape, US 93 was a narrow 2-lane highway bisecting the FIR from north to south. It is the main transportation route for numerous types of traffic between Interstate 90, Montana's major east-west thoroughfare, and all points north including Flathead Lake, Glacier National Park, and Canada. There are daily local commuters, freight trucks moving goods, and seasonally high recreational traffic. Crash levels were not only above statewide rates, but

the crashes themselves were more severe than usual; including head-on, rear-end, and sideswipe collisions.

Tribal and state governments disagreed for nearly a decade on the new lane configuration, while the hazards to driver safety, as well as to wildlife, continued. In 2000, the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) intervened to facilitate the negotiations, and in December 2000, a compromise was reached and a memorandum of agreement (MOA) signed. The MOA enabled the construction of sections of partial two-lane highway and partial four-lane divided highway. The MOA also accounted for wildlife mitigation including wildlife underpasses, an overpass, wildlife proof fencing, jumpouts, and wildlife crossing guards.

Source: CSKT, 2009



Mountain lion pair in Wildlife Crossing

Thirty-nine fish and wildlife-crossing structures have been constructed. Crossing structures were placed along the highway corridor in areas that would mimic natural wildlife movement; such as drainages and along creeks and rivers. Also, known areas of high animal vehicle collision density were targeted. The CSKT, MDT, and Western Transportation Institute (WTI) have been monitoring wildlife use of the crossing structures for the past two years. The initial results show that numerous wildlife species and individuals are using these structures daily. We expect use to increase as time passes and wildlife become more familiar and trusting of these new structures on the landscape.