

Swan Ecosystem Center

Anne Dahl, President/Secretary
Swan Ecosystem Center

In the Swan River Valley, residents are taking an active role in the stewardship of their forested landscape, led by Swan Ecosystem Center (SEC), a nonprofit community-based group. SEC organizes partnerships and works collaboratively for the sustainable use and care of the Valley's heavily forested public and private lands.

The Swan River flows north from its headwaters near Grey Wolf Lake in the Mission Mountains Wilderness to Swan Lake, eventually emptying into Flathead Lake. This narrow, glacier-carved valley is framed on the east by the Swan Range and the Bob Marshall Wilderness, and to the west by the Mission Mountains Wilderness. Hundreds of lakes and wetlands are scattered throughout the valley, providing exceptional habitat for a full complement of native plant and animal species indigenous to the Flathead Watershed, including grizzly bears, bull trout and more rare plants than anywhere else in Montana.

Most of the land is managed by the Flathead National Forest and to a lesser extent by the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation. Private residences and a scattering of commercial enterprises are found near the river and along Montana Highway 83, which connects the small communities of Condon

and Salmon Prairie with the Flathead Valley. About 900 people live here, many as seasonal residents.

Traditionally a forest-dependent economy, people in the Swan Valley are employed as loggers, log truck drivers, school teachers, building contractors, and in the lodging and outfitting businesses. Increasingly, the economy has become dependent on retirees who earned their income elsewhere but moved here because of the wild and scenic beauty. Longtime residents and newcomers alike are invested in the land and are willing to work cooperatively with the public agencies that manage land, wildlife and water quality in the Valley.

People volunteer to work alongside foresters and biologists to protect forests, wildlife, water quality, a timber-based economy, and a rural way of life. Recently Swan Ecosystem Center joined forces with other nonprofits to protect 66,000 acres of Plum Creek Timber Co. land in the Swan Valley. As part of the Montana Legacy Project, these lands will be added to the Flathead National Forest and Swan River State Forest, where they will continue providing rich habitat for wildlife, forest jobs and public opportunities for hunting, fishing, hiking, and horseback riding.

Swan Ecosystem Center has an office and visitor center in the U.S. Forest Service Condon Work Center, where community members meet with agency representatives to share knowledge and develop innovative conservation programs. As a result, SEC employs the backcountry rangers who work in the Mission Mountains Wilderness and the Swan Range each summer. SEC offers workshops and provides grants for landowners to reduce forest fuels, treat tree insects and disease, protect wetlands, and control noxious weeds on their property. SEC also helps to restore forest roads to reduce sedimentation to lakes and streams. SEC does all of this work with the Forest Service and other federal and state agencies.

Swan Ecosystem Center's education programs for children and adults are aimed at preparing people to be good land stewards and to effectively interact with public land managers. Students in the weekly After School Club learn about wildlife, native plants, noxious weeds and forestry. Students volunteer to monitor water quality. At Fish Camp, they learn about fish habitat and have fun catching fish. An annual "Living in the Swan" workshop is designed to help landowners maintain their property's natural amenities, while reducing the risk

of wildfire and realizing some economic gains. People in the Swan Valley have found ways to care for the land by elevating their knowledge and combining resources through partnerships.

Source: Swan Ecosystem Center, 2009



Residents working with the U.S. Forest Service to design a salvage timber sale to remove beetle killed trees in the Swan Valley. The bear grass was at its peak.