

A Legacy of Clean Water, Habitat and Farm Land Along the Flathead River

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Flathead family conserves prime riverfront properties.

Dr. Glenn Johnston remembers clearing rocks from the grain field his father farmed, and then using those rocks to build a strikingly visible rock monument on top of a nearby glacial drumlin. That was 1947, and the rock monument still stands, often causing new neighbors to wonder if it's an American Indian monument or something of that nature.

It is a monument to Johnston's long attachment to the land, nearly 700 acres of which recently was protected from development for perpetuity under a donated conservation easement that was brokered by the Flathead Land Trust. "It is the largest single-ownership easement ever executed on the Flathead Valley floor," said Marilyn Wood, executive director of the trust. Johnston and his wife, Hazel, donated the development rights as opposed to selling them. They retain ownership of the land, which can have traditional uses such as farming and recreation, but can never be subdivided or developed.

Critical habitat protected.

Just off Columbia Falls Stage Road is a sprawling, snow-covered stubble field that has been leased for farming since the 1960s. The field transitions into a vast stand of ancient ponderosa pines, easily one of the largest of its kind remaining in the Flathead Valley. Below the ponderosas is a mixed conifer forest leading to ponds and marshland.

The Johnstons' home is located high on a bluff overlooking the most easterly channel in a braided section of the Flathead River. The Johnston property includes forested islands and more than a mile of river frontage.

Back in 1961, when there was still plenty of undeveloped land in the valley; Hungry Horse News Editor Mel Ruder wrote an article that characterized the Johnston property as "one last bit of remaining wilderness" in the Flathead Valley.

The land is teeming with wildlife, including turkeys and deer and waterfowl and even grizzly and black bears that occasionally wander through. Hazel Johnston said she

mostly enjoys the wildlife, but for Glenn Johnston, it's the land as a whole. "Having grown up here, I am steeped in the family history, and I had so many marvelous experiences with my father here as a boy."

It started with Johnston's grandfather Leroy in the 1880s and was pieced together with additional acquisitions over decades to form the single, 700-acre parcel — a rarity in a valley where rural areas have been gradually subdivided.

The decision to protect it through an easement wasn't difficult, the Johnstons say. But it did require the support of their son, Mark, his wife, Joan, and their daughter, Katie. "Even as land values have skyrocketed ... I would rather own what we have intact rather than having the money," says Glenn Johnston, who retired 10 years ago and returned to the property with Hazel after a career as a psychiatrist in Utah. "My son, his wife and my granddaughter feel the same way."

Johnston recalls being advised differently years ago by a real estate consultant. "I remember so clearly he said, 'Don't ever fall in love with the land. It will interfere with your business decisions,'" he said. "Over the years I have thought about that." And Johnston eventually came to a different conclusion: "What better thing is there to fall in love with?" he said.

Hazel also was advised differently by an unwitting real estate agent who recently stopped to talk with her at the mailbox on Columbia Falls Stage Road. The man said he represented a California client and asked her if she knew who owned the property. Hazel replied that she happened to know that the property would soon be protected through a conservation easement. "Stupid, stupid, stupid," the man said, according to Hazel. "Do they know how much money they are throwing away?" "He didn't even know who I was," she says with a chuckle. Glenn Johnston said there have been several offers for the property



Source: Harley Mumma, 2009

River to Lake Initiative partners and friends appreciate the healthy riparian areas along the Flathead River at the Johnston farm while celebrating the family's conservation easement donation

over time, but he has never been inclined to consider them.

The decision to go with a conservation easement is also grounded in estate planning. An enhanced federal tax incentive that expired at the end of 2007 prodded the Johnstons to seal the deal before the end of the year. The Johnstons now will be able to apply a charitable federal tax deduction over the next 15 years. The tax benefits will help the Johnston family lessen the pain of federal estate taxes that will likely be steep when the land is passed on. Many people end up having to sell off part of the land they inherit just to pay the estate tax, and that might have been the case for the Johnston family. “We probably couldn’t keep this intact without an easement,” he said.

***River to Lake Initiative project
provides connectivity.***

Another major consideration in the decision to pursue a conservation easement was the “River-to-Lake Initiative,” a collaborative conservation effort to protect and restore ecologically significant properties along the Flathead River. By 2008, there were 20 easements along the river providing protection for nearly 5,000 acres. Combined with about 1,500 acres of public lands, a veritable greenbelt to protect water quality and fish and wildlife is gradually being pieced together.

Down river from the Johnstons, below the Old Steel Bridge and across the river from the state’s 442-acre Owen Sowerwine Natural Area, are 700 acres of prime agricultural land owned and farmed by Dan, Chuck and Tom Siderius. Their grandfather acquired the land back in the 1940s. The Sideriuses previously placed conservation easements on their riverfront properties which will allow them

to continue farming the land, while adding to the conservation network along the river.

Further down the river near Church Slough, the Loudens—another multigenerational farming family—are working with River to Lake partners to place conservation easements on several properties along the river. Among other lands, the easement protects Church Slough, a magnificent 300-acre oxbow slough along the Flathead River teeming with swans and numerous other bird species.

Church Slough, like several other wetlands and sloughs along the Flathead River, provides winter habitat for bull and westslope cutthroat trout. That’s what Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks discovered when they radio collared these native fish. Large woody debris falling in the river from forests and wetlands on its banks creates pools and riffles that are ideal for fish spawning. The large trees also help keep the water cool and support aquatic insects, which are an important food for fish.

***The benefits of these conservation
projects are many.***

Landowners keep their large multigenerational farms in the family. Native fish and wildlife keep their habitat corridors. The Flathead community benefits from the wetlands and vegetated stream banks that help maintain clean water, the excellent soils that produce hay and crops, the fish and wildlife the habitat sustains, and the beautiful scenery that characterizes the Flathead Valley.

For the Johnstons, being part of a broader conservation effort was an important incentive. “That helps us feel like we’re not the lone stranger,” Hazel said.

River to Lake Initiative
Constanza von der Pahlen
Critical Lands Project Director
Flathead Lakers

The River to Lake Initiative brings together landowners, land trusts, conservation organizations, tribes, and public agencies to conserve, and restore our Flathead River and Lake natural heritage – excellent water quality, outstanding scenic and recreation values, and abundant fish and wildlife.

River to Lake partners focus on conserving and restoring large parcels of critical habitat, including wetlands, riparian areas and associated prime farm lands along the mainstem of the Flathead River and at the north shore of Flathead Lake. These areas help protect water quality and encompass some of the valley’s best native fish and wildlife habitat and agricultural soils.

The river corridor and its associated wetlands have been identified as critical for conservation by the Flathead Lakers’ Critical Lands

Project, the Nature Conservancy’s Northern Rockies Ecoregional Plan, the Intermountain West Joint Venture Program’s bird conservation plan, and Montana Fish and Wildlife Parks’s native fish and wildlife conservation programs.

River to Lake partners provide incentives and options for interested landowners to conserve critical habitat, restore vegetated streambanks, and sustain farms. Over 5,000 acres of critical lands have been conserved and over 6,200 feet of river banks have been restored as of 2010, protecting this vital part of our natural heritage for future generations to enjoy.

For more information, contact the Flathead Lakers (406.883.1341) or the Flathead Land Trust (406.752.8293).