

Missoulian

Swiss philanthropist buys \$35M in Plum Creek Timber land in western Montana

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Philanthropist Hansjorg Wyss grew up in Switzerland and now spends the bulk of his time outside Philadelphia, but it is the wild landscapes of the Rocky Mountains where he could leave his most lasting mark.

In recent years, the publicity-shy billionaire has quietly donated tens of millions of dollars to the preservation of pristine areas of Idaho, Nevada, Utah and other states.

Now, what appears to be his most ambitious project to date has come to fruition as conservation groups this month closed a deal to purchase vast tracts of Plum Creek Timber Co. land in western Montana. Backers say the deal - which included \$35 million in donations from Wyss - could shield an estimated one million acres from future development.

In an exclusive interview with the Associated Press, Wyss, 75, said he first became enamored of the Rockies as a college student who toured the region in 1958. And he defended his actions against those who chafe at the prospect of an outsider buying up land that in some cases has been logged, ranched or farmed for generations.

"Look, these are beautiful landscapes," Wyss said. "There was controversy when Yellowstone (National Park) was created and when they declared the Grand Canyon as a National Monument. But there are areas in the United States that must be protected."

Wyss's fortune - estimated by Forbes magazine at \$6.1 billion - came largely from Synthes, the medical devices company he ran for three decades and still oversees as chairman.

He has donated to a range of causes, with the largest single gift apparently a \$125 million donation two years ago to create a bioengineering institute at Harvard University.

But Wyss said the Rocky Mountains have offered a particular allure since he took a summer job with the Colorado highway department during a break from college.

He went on to Harvard Business School and founded Synthes USA in 1974, returning to the Rockies frequently over the last several decades to hike and climb.

"I know the West like my back pocket," he said.

Lots of billionaires and megamillionaires have come to Montana and decided to claim a piece of it as their own - from media mogul Ted Turner and software entrepreneur Tom Siebel, to former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, who all bought ranches in the state.

While Wyss has a daughter in neighboring Wyoming, he has never lived in the region. And the land he helped buy in the recent western Montana transaction will not become a private estate.

Instead, most of the 310,000 acres of former Plum Creek land are being transferred to the U.S. Forest Service and Montana's Fish, Wildlife and Parks Department. Because the land ownership was "checkerboard" - meaning the private property was interspersed with public parcels - its preservation will keep intact a much larger swath of the so-called Crown of the Continent, a region anchored by Glacier National Park.

The deal is one of the largest private conservation purchases in the nation's history. It was arranged by the Nature Conservancy and the Trust for Public Land and also involved \$65 million from the state of Montana and \$250 million from the U.S. Department of Agriculture lined up by Montana Democrat Sen. Max Baucus.

Nature Conservancy president Mark Tercek said it might not have happened without Wyss, whose initial \$25 million contribution spurred participation from other donors. When extra closing cash was needed, Wyss chipped in \$10 million more.

Montana Gov. Brian Schweitzer said he met Wyss several years ago, when the Plum Creek purchase was first suggested by conservation groups.

At a lodge in Condon, Schweitzer said he told Wyss and other potential donors that their names might not be remembered by future generations, but their work would be.

"Near as I can tell, he (Wyss) is a citizen of the planet that was interested in protecting some of its last best places," Schweitzer said.

Such praise is not universal.

Wyss's foundation has given \$1.5 million to the American Prairie Foundation to build a grasslands reserve in eastern Montana where bison can roam free. The project has stirred deep resentment in surrounding agricultural communities, where it is seen as a move to boot ranchers from land they've stewarded for generations.

"The fact that they're coming from all over with these big bucks - who do they think feeds them?" asked Vicki Olson, a rancher south of Malta. "Their feeling toward us is they don't care that they are ruining our economy and our area."

Wyss said he is not opposed to cattle grazing on public lands, but said it must be limited to protect the land from destruction. He said the biggest threat is when ranches are bought by developers, opening the door to residential "ranchettes" and golf courses in environmentally sensitive stream valleys.

As for why he's targeting his money in the American West, Wyss said it was too late to do much good for his native landscape in the Swiss Alps: "Too many ski lifts, too many resorts, too many hotels."

In Montana, he added, there is still room for grizzlies, wolves and other iconic species to thrive.

"In the United States, we have a chance to protect some of them, not only for Americans but for people all around the world to benefit," he said.