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Heart of the Continent Partnership Seeks to Foster Collaboration

The Heart of the Continent Partnership (HOCP) is seeking other potential partners interested in northern Minnesota's and northwestern Ontario's public lands. Still undergoing formation, HOCP is a cross-border collaborative effort to bring together as many voices as possible to share ideas and learn about different perspectives affecting the border lakes region. HOCP has thus far attracted participants mostly from nonprofit organizations as well as land agencies and tourism boards.

“Our partnership wants to expand by including groups that are interested in sustaining and celebrating the health, beauty, diversity and productivity of the natural and cultural resources of the Border Lakes Region,” according to Cory MacNulty, chair of the fledgling partnership's steering committee. “The original and ongoing goal has always been to make the initiative as inclusive and collaborative as possible,” she said. “This is not a group that will advocate any policies. HOCP is fundamentally a forum, a place to meet and share ideas. That forum will get stronger as the range of voices gets wider. HOCP is looking for prospective partners who have an interest in promoting the area and sharing research,” MacNulty said.

Similar efforts—on a more local scale—to build relationships and find common ground among stakeholders have met with success in recent years. In the International Falls region, a collaboration between Voyageurs National Park, political leaders in International Falls and Koochiching County, tourism groups and Voyageurs National Park Association, has made great progress, resulting in both positive relationships and groups working together on a common project, Destination Voyageurs National Park.

“This is a perfect example of the type of positive work that the Heart of the Continent Partnership seeks to expand on and recreate in other communities and public lands on both sides of the border,” said newly hired HOCP coordinator Bret Hesla.

The origins of the partnership can be traced back to informal sharing of research and resource management information between the Voyageurs National Park, the U.S. Forest Service, Quetico Provincial Park, The Nature Conservancy and others. The momentum toward a structured forum of some kind was further spurred by the desire for collaboration between the Superior National Forest and Quetico Provincial Park to celebrate the centennial of their respective creation, both of which fall during 2009. Partnering to take full advantage of such educational and promotional opportunities has been a top priority for HOCP. Already the new relationships that have formed in HOCP across agencies and boundaries are yielding results: a new cross-border map of the region is soon to come out, and plans are underway for region-wide celebration events for 2009. Involving a broader range of people and organizations in HOCP will expand such opportunities as new relationships continue to form.

“The time is right to invite broader participation,” says steering committee member Rich Kelley of the Quetico Foundation. “HOCP has established the necessary infrastructure, including hiring a coordinator. We’re now actively seeking to involve more organizations. We will soon have a Web site offering additional information and contacts.” The group’s next meeting is July 17 and 18th in Thunder Bay, Ontario.

Those interested should contact coordinator Bret Hesla at Heart of the Continent Partnership, 126 N. Third St, Suite 400, Minneapolis, MN 55401 - Telephone: 612-333-1858.

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The mission of the Heart of the Continent Partnership is to sustain and celebrate the health, beauty, diversity and productivity of the natural and cultural resources of the Border Lakes Region through collaboration to meet the needs of present and future generations.