



State Population Profile

BIG SKY COUNTRY: THE ILLUSION OF OPEN SPACE

An NPG Commentary
by Karen I. Shragg, Ed. D.

At first blush, Montana is a state with wide open spaces and a relatively small population, perfect for a high-quality outdoor lifestyle. Its current population density is only 7.4 people per square mile. Compared to the state of New York, at nearly 429 people per square mile, Montana seems like paradise for those who wish to live without crowds and traffic jams. At the last census in 2020, the entire state had a population of 1,084,221 people. For reference, that means that the entire state has roughly the population of the city of Austin, Texas. The rest of its wide-open spaces seem ripe for those who wish to go there from overcrowded states like California.

SACRIFICING QUALITY OF LIFE TO ACCOMMODATE GROWTH

With the exceptions of snowstorms, construction, and bison crossings near Yellowstone National Park, there are generally no traffic jams in the entire state. But that will change with the predicted increase in population growth. To become popular is to lose the reasons your state, city, or country became popular in the first place. In Amsterdam, the capital of the Netherlands, citizens found that out when the city started their “I Amsterdam” campaign. It advertised how wonderful its city was to encourage visitors. It worked, but it worked too well. Very quickly, the

tourism of Amsterdam went from 1 million to over 20 million tourists per year and began to threaten the otherwise enviable lives of its residents.¹

Between 2000 and 2010, Montana’s population grew by 94,810 and the projections are for more growth by the time of the next census in 2030. Based on current rates of growth, Montana is projected to have a population of 1,163,353 within its 147,040 square miles. Residents are already feeling the pinch and protesting the ill effects of growth-inspired sprawl. Polling indicates that without exception, Montanans value their wildlife and lifestyle, which includes everything from hunting and fishing to hiking and open space. They want community members to be able to continue ranching and farmers to continue farming without growth driving up the cost of living. In addition, they expressed concern about how increases in development negatively impact the natural world and the ability of long-time residents to maintain their sense of belonging. They are concerned that changing zoning laws to accommodate more development means that working class people will be priced out of finding affordable homes.²

Flathead County is close to Glacier National Park and the beautiful Flathead Lake. It has become a

popular destination and the demand for housing there has risen beyond its ability to accommodate. In just ten years from 2012 to 2022, Flathead County was in need of 3,061 housing units. It is estimated that 14,803 will be needed from 2023 to 2032 if growth rates continue.³

Ecologist Garrett Hardin, author of *The Tragedy of the Commons*, emphasized that overpopulation isn't about shortage of resources, it's about 'longage' of people.⁴

He wanted us to focus on the fact that there was nothing wrong with the number of resources, but the threats presented when too many people need them. Montana may look like there is much open space, but it is home to the Rocky Mountains which take up 40% of the state's land, meaning large-scale developments are not practical or even possible. As Montana becomes more desirable, it loses the very resource it has to offer, a peaceful existence. COVID inspired over 21,000 to flock to the state in 2021 to avoid the crowds which were more conducive to spreading the virus. The higher demand turned small towns into suburban landscapes and with more development came the degradation of wild areas nearby. The quality of life they sought was threatened because too many wanted a slice of the good life.

THE HIGH COST OF GROWTH ON MONTANA'S INFRASTRUCTURE

As Montana grows so do the needs for expanding infrastructure. One major impact is on wastewater treatment facilities. Septic waste systems, common in rural areas, tend to leak into ponds and streams, creating problems of harmful algae blooms and other forms of contamination. There is a push to extend municipal water service to more residents, which creates other challenges. Wastewater must be treated to standards and discharged properly. The more growth, the larger these facilities – and the holding ponds – must be. For Big Sky County Water and

Sewer District, the utility entity that manages water and sewer infrastructure in the area, the increase in wastewater in need of treatment is due to population growth. Its general manager, Ron Edwards, reported that the demand for water has more than doubled in the last 30 years. Now for a cool 50 million dollars the treatment facility upgrade will help it with its peak flow of 176 million gallons per year. This is up from 80 million gallons in 1993. With continued population pressure there is no assurance that this new facility will not need to be improved again at additional expense to taxpayers.⁵

OVERCROWDING ON GOING TO THE SUN ROAD (GTSR)

Glacier National Park's 50-mile long Going to the Sun Road has become a parking lot. It crosses the Continental Divide and climbs more than 3,000 feet in elevation through gorgeous mountain scenery. It has become a great example of how growth can damage a limited resource.

Taking over a decade to complete, this amazing route was completed in 1933 without any of its planners able to conceive of a day when it would resemble a traffic jam in a major US city. Between Memorial Day and Labor Day, the GTSR is now a source of pollution as cars move at a snail's pace and spew exhaust fumes into Montana's blue sky and mountain air. This is all due to its popularity as a tourist destination which has increased by 60% in the last decade. The road itself is an engineering marvel, but because it is carved into the mountainside, it cannot be expanded to accommodate increasing demand.⁶

The GTSR is an example of what is happening all over Montana and the US. Growth ruins resources which cannot expand to accommodate excess demand. Beginning in 2016, visitation to Glacier started exceeding 3 million visitors a year. In an effort to try to manage the demand, the National Park Service had to implement a vehicle

registration system. This system was discontinued in 2026. This decision, due to personnel and other funding cuts, is likely to create problems for visitors who cannot be guaranteed entrance due to overcrowding.⁷

Fodor's, a popular tour guidebook company, has begun advising its readers to avoid Glacier National Park and put it on its "No" list. Glacier is one of eight places worldwide experiencing overtourism, so Fodor's is recommending its readers skip a visit to Glacier National Park for now.

CONSERVING OPEN LAND ONE BILLIONAIRE AT A TIME

Public lands are under threat from development due to a recent dismantling of public land conservation by the Trump administration. In a May 11, 2026, press release it was revealed that the Trump administration announced its rescission of the Public Lands Rule, rolling back protections on shared public lands across the West. This means that conservation lost its equal footing under The Bureau of Land Management's obligations to steward these lands in conjunction with mining, gas drilling, and industrial development interests.⁸

Private interests have their bottom line in mind. They are generally not concerned with the quality of life, wildlife, or the health of the soil, water, and air.

One way to fight this trend – which is disturbing to many who love wildlands and the wildlife who live there – is to buy it up, manage it for conservation, and throw away the key. The late Ted Turner, CNN creator and entrepreneur who passed away in May of 2026, purchased two large land parcels in Montana to do just that. He owned two ranches in Montana's Southwest. The 113,613-acre Flying D Ranch near Bozeman is a working ranch where bison and wildlife are the focus of management. The 13,343-acre Snowcrest Ranch is located along the Upper Ruby River. His business, Turner Enterprises, describes Snowcrest as a ranch

that is also operated as a bison and wildlife area, but managers also work to restore habitat and native species as a conservation property.

Turner spent much of his riches investing in his passion for conservation and worked tirelessly to reintroduce endangered and threatened species. Among those that are doing better because of his efforts are the American Bison, Black-Footed Ferrets, Mexican Wolves, Desert Bighorn Sheep, Bolson Tortoises, Native trout, Red-Cockaded Woodpeckers, Gray Wolves, Grizzly bears, pronghorn, and bald eagles. Turner blended economic enterprises with wildlife conservation and even owned a restaurant that served bison from his 45,000 herd.

There is some controversy over removing land from public access and putting it in private hands. It runs counter to how the West has been managed for years. Turner and his managers believed it to be a minor sacrifice. Turner understood the precarious future of wildlife in his adopted state. He deeply understood the negative consequences of population growth and the deliberate dismantlement of public land policy; he also recognized that the two were working against the future of wildlife, fueling his lifelong efforts to promote conservation. In 2013, Turner was 73. During his lifetime up to that point, the world's population tripled to seven billion. He believed population needed to stabilize or "we're just going to have more and more disasters." During his 87 years of a very productive life, his beloved Montana grew from roughly 552,000 to approximately 1.15 million today.

His efforts to counter the negative impacts of growth are both remarkable and commendable but it amounts to a large band-aid. There needs to be many more efforts to counter the pro-growth and pro-business policies which are well-funded into the future under the ill-advised mandates of our times.

NOTES:

1. <https://www.cntraveler.com/story/amsterdam-cracks-down-on-mass-tourism-again-by-removing-famous-i-amsterdam-letters>
2. <https://montanafreepress.org/2024/06/27/big-sky-aims-to-limit-the-impacts-of-growth-with-upgraded-wastewater-system/>
3. <https://flatheadbeacon.com/2023/06/12/housing-market-returning-to-pre-pandemic-trends/#:~:text=In%202022%2C%20there%20was%20shortage,housing%20inventory%20and%20population%20growth>
4. https://senate.universityofcalifornia.edu/_files/inmemoriam/html/garrett-hardin.htm
5. <https://montanafreepress.org/2024/06/27/big-sky-aims-to-limit-the-impacts-of-growth-with-upgraded-wastewater-system/>
6. https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/ticketed-entry.htm?utm_source=syndication&pubDate=20260510
7. <https://www.ecoflow.com/us/blog/glacier-national-park-vehicle-reservation-suspension-2026>
8. <https://www.npca.org/articles/11387-major-rollback-threatens-conservation-in-public-land-management-abandoning>

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