



The Alberta ECOLOGICAL *Gifts* PROGRAM

Norman and Hilah

SIMMONS

A Conservation Easement Southwest of Pincher Creek Ranching and Conservation in the Foothills of Alberta

"... I think that good ranchers are a real blessing for conservation. They manage their land—as we do—as an entire ecosystem. They prefer native grass to introduced grass. They manage for wildlife and fish, not just cattle. I realize that our ranch is just a drop in the bucket. We're not changing the world. But what I'm hoping happens is that there are enough of us around that we'll influence other ranchers to follow our trail."

— Norman Simmons

"This land has been a haven for our family and friends and for wildlife and plants."

In 1982, Norman and Hilah Simmons made a pivotal change in their lives. Ranching was something that they had both thoughtfully considered for some time. Norman had previous training in grassland and livestock management as a biologist. Hilah didn't want to live in a city. More importantly, with Norman thinking about retirement, they knew they wanted to remain close to the wilderness. It turned out that one visit to Pincher Creek was all they needed. Leaving their lives in the Northwest Territories—and Norman's career in wildlife management—they made the Gladstone Valley their new home and established the Ketaorati Ranch.

Sheltered by forests of white spruce, lodgepole pine and poplar intermingled with foothill valleys and native fescue grassland, the Ketaorati Ranch is located a short distance north of Waterton Lakes National Park—a UNESCO World Heritage Site.¹

This region has continental significance as habitat for grizzly bears and other far-ranging wildlife species. It is a vital part of the North American Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative.²

Historically, the area was also the heartland of the ranching frontier in southwestern Alberta; today, it remains one of the continent's preferred ranching areas.³

Knowing that well-managed landscapes can support a diversity of wildlife along with cattle, Norman and Hilah Simmons have woven a range of sustainable agricultural techniques into their ranching practices. Protection of the native grasslands, rest-rotational grazing, off-stream watering and reclamation agreements with oil and gas companies are business as usual for the Simmons.



Ecological diversity and health, and a successful cattle operation, have all thrived under this management regime. The Simmons have seen moose, deer, grey wolves, as well as black and grizzly bears. Cutthroat trout spawn in their creek. And there is the continued presence of other vulnerable and sensitive species like the wolverine, Swainson's hawk, western tanager, pileated woodpecker, lynx and cougar.

The Simmons' concern for land conservation is also expressed in their commitment to the ranching community. In 1998, Norman helped found the Southern Alberta Land Trust Society (SALTS) to address growing concerns about financial pressure on ranchers to subdivide their land for acreage and vacation homes.

The Simmons have since placed their entire ranch under a suite of conservation easements,

in perpetuity, with the help of SALTS and the tax benefits provided by the Ecological Gifts Program of Environment Canada.

These conservation easements will not only prevent subdivision of their land for development, but will also ensure that the Ketaorati Ranch will remain in agricultural production in the future and continue to be managed for fish and wildlife.

By working with SALTS, the Simmons will have the long-term support of a land trust for their conservation objectives. The incremental approach they chose in the placement of conservation easements on their property has allowed them to maximize the tax benefits they have received through Environment Canada's Ecological Gifts Program.

As a community-based land trust "of, by and for ranchers," SALTS can offer support to ranchers who want to integrate wildlife management into their ranching operations and who are considering placing conservation easements on their own properties.

"Rather than just 'hope' or 'wish' for proper management of ecosystems along the Eastern

Slope, we preferred to take action," says Norman.

Today, both Norman and Hilah continue to advocate for the environment as members of the ranching community.

"This is the longest we've lived in any one place," reflects Hilah. "And that is important to us."

"This land has been a haven for our family and friends and for wildlife and plants—for 'all' of us. . . . We would like to see agriculture continue in this area. And we'd like to see the forest in this region better protected. These forests are a fountain of biodiversity and wild species of plants and animals, and these things are irreplaceable."



- 1 <http://watertonpark.com> (select: UNESCO World Heritage Site)
- 2 www.y2y.net (select: Priority Areas – Crown of the Continent)
- 3 www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com (select: Ranching History)

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