

## A Talk with Will Shafroth

**O**n July 13, Rand Wentworth, president of the Land Trust Alliance, sat down to talk with **Will Shafroth, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for Fish and Wildlife and Parks for the U.S. Department of the Interior.** Will is one of our own, coming from a long career in land conservation. He is the founder and former executive director of the Colorado Conservation Trust, former head of Great Outdoors Colorado, and past chair of the Land Trust Alliance. Now he is part of the team responsible for executing Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar's policy agenda on national parks and fish and wildlife resources.



RICK LEWIS

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**RAND:** How did you first develop an interest in conservation?

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**WILL:** Growing up in the country, south of Denver, we used to go to a place called the Highline Canal. We would take our innertubes and spend the day floating, catching crawdads, riding on the rope swing, gathering wild asparagus. This place was a major natural lifeline near my house and it helped me to grow up feeling very connected to the natural world. We would visit my grandmother at the Massachusetts coastline and dig for clams or hunt crabs. These were treasured places, and from them I developed a personal commitment to protect the land that I love.

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**RAND:** What is it like being part of the leadership team for the Obama administration?

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**WILL:** In three words: intense, fascinating and exhilarating! This is an amazing opportunity to be a part of the great changes sweeping the country. In the Department of the Interior we are making tangible improvements to our national parks, being more protective of endangered species and wildlife habitat, enabling the increase in renewable energy production, laying the foundation for a 21st century youth conservation corps, and re-establishing a trusting relationship with Native American communities.

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**RAND:** How is working in the federal government different from running a land trust? How is it similar?

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**WILL:** This is primarily a policy job—setting policy. And the scale is quite different. DOI has 67,000 employees, 33,000 of whom work at either the National Park Service or the Fish and Wildlife Service. On the other



More than a year before they became part of the Obama administration, Will Shafroth and Ken Salazar spoke at Rally 2007 in Denver.

lishing Great Outdoors Colorado, private land conservation will indeed play an important role. We definitely see the value and necessity to constructively engage private landowners if we want to

Roosevelt created the Civilian Conservation Corps during the Great Depression, the legacy of which lives on today. So, despite the difficulty of these times, we need to continue to work hard for the protection of our nation's open lands.

hand, I work most closely with 15 people. In that way it doesn't feel that different from working at a land trust.

My land trust experience gave me a depth of knowledge—in conservation planning, managing people and projects, using GIS—and all these things really helped prepare me for this job.

A lot of what we do everyday is problem solving. The problems are different, and in many cases bigger. Our senior team had to figure out how to spend \$3 billion in new stimulus funds in a matter of months. That was intense! But I attribute a lot of my ability to solve problems to my work in small conservation organizations where you have limited resources. Land trust professionals have to wear so many hats—fund-raiser, communicator, steward—it forces them to be creative and flexible. These same skills have served me well in my current job.

**RAND:** Secretary Salazar has spoken of an initiative to protect America's "treasured landscapes." Does that vision include private lands, and how can land trusts be helpful in accomplishing that vision?

**WILL:** Tom Strickland, Assistant Secretary for Fish and Wildlife and Parks, and I serve as the Secretary's lead staff on the Treasured Landscapes Initiative, a program to establish a substantial dedicated funding stream for land and water conservation, national parks, fish and wildlife resources, restoration of ecosystems, and recreational opportunities. Given Secretary Salazar's leadership in estab-

accomplish our goal of preserving large ecosystems. Two of the great legacies of GOCO's success are the 35 new land trusts and 45 new local government open space programs in Colorado. As a result, Colorado has a fairly sophisticated land conservation community that is able to get a lot done. We hope to be able to be a catalyst for more conservation activity throughout the country.

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Land trusts need to be in close contact with the Alliance to see what's going on in Washington and to see how they can engage in a constructive way. This is a significant moment in time when things are happening. Land trusts have to be a part of that, and make sure their interests are being represented.

**RAND:** What are the challenges you see ahead?

**WILL:** The economy and the budget. And while these may be tough times to advance a conservation agenda, it has been during tough times that our country has responded. During the Civil War, President Lincoln set aside the land that later became Yosemite National Park. Theodore Roosevelt created the backbone of our national forests, wildlife refuges, and national parks during a difficult period in our nation's history. And Franklin

**RAND:** What's the most fun part of your new job?

**WILL:** [Laughing] Fun is a relative word. Working very long hours isn't fun like going to the beach for a week. But, professionally, this is what I want to be doing, what I've been trained for in so many ways. Personally,

I've loved getting to know Washington, and I get to play basketball with the Secretary and others from Congress and the White House. This casual time allows for some great networking. And then there's the time I got to play basketball with the President. That was really fun, even though we lost.

**RAND:** You have a broad land trust audience to address; what advice do you have for them now?

**WILL:** We're entering a third wave of conservation. First we had to establish ourselves. Then we had to strive towards excellence. Now land trusts need to step it up, one more time, to be even better than they have been. Whether that's getting accredited, being a part of a new easement defense program, or engaging with your local, state and federal elected officials, it's time to take conservation to a new level. 🍌