



Connecting People TO NATURE

BY EDITH PEPPER GOLTRA

Public access becomes a way to build support for conservation

Above: A family crosses Bow Bridge in Wood River Land Trust's Draper Wood River Preserve in Idaho. The preserve's design provides for public use while still protecting fragile areas.

Among land trusts there is a growing awareness that connecting people directly to the land is critical in terms of earning community support—not only for specific projects but also for land conservation work more broadly. “We cannot expect people to care about or support the conservation of nature before they learn to love nature,” says MaryKay O’Donnell, Midwest conservation manager for the Land Trust Alliance. “Whether it is a wilderness area, a pocket park in your neighborhood or a paved trail along a river, we need access to the natural world. We need a way to connect.”

In some situations, public access is not appropriate. But if a land trust wants to encourage public use, often it will protect the land the old-fashioned way, by owning it, or in some cases, working with a public agency to acquire and hold the land. A relatively small percentage of conservation easements allow for public access and some require it (often for trail access or hunting purposes).

Balance is important, though. When determining the best tool to protect a certain parcel of land or larger landscape, land trusts often balance competing goals and values for the land. For working lands, conservation easements are often, but not always, the



Mohawk Chief Tom Porter opened the dedication of Deowongo Island to Otsego Land Trust with the Haudenosaunee Thanksgiving Address.



The Pilgrim Haven design charette held by Southwest Michigan Land Conservancy included breakout discussion sessions that allowed attendees to share their ideas, questions and concerns with the landscape architects. Public input was essential in shaping the vision and design for the Lake Michigan natural area.

best tool. For high-quality natural habitat that may require intensive management, ownership of the land is often, but not always, the best tool. Many land trusts have both fee land ownership and conservation easements in their toolkits. Finding the right balance is the key.

Changing Priorities

For years Otsego Land Trust (OLT) in upstate New York was primarily focused on negotiating and securing conservation easements. With changing times and priorities, however, its mission has evolved. The group now embraces the idea of buying and managing land, mainly as a way to ensure public access. “We realized that to protect more land, we had to get more people out on the land,” says OLT’s executive director, Virginia Kennedy.

Many land trusts are practicing their work in a whole new way—one that involves forging alliances with private, public and nonprofit partners, building awareness among a much broader segment of the community and engaging the public with a wide array of communication tools.

This new community engagement approach is becoming business as usual for Otsego Land Trust. OLT has joined forces with a number of public and nonprofit partners to create the Oaks Creek Blueway, a 15-mile stretch of properties extending from Candarago Lake to Oaks Creek to the Susquehanna River. It’s an area that provides endless opportunities for fishing, hiking, paddling, bird watching and outdoor education.

In the middle of Candarago Lake sits 11-acre Deowongo Island, acquired by OLT in 2012 through the generosity of the Schoenleins, a local family. It is the former site of two Haudenosaunee longhouses and has long been a destination of Native Americans, travelers, tourists and local residents. Using a variety of funds from public, private and nonprofit sources, including a Land Trust Alliance grant, OLT

partnered with area residents and the Candarago Lake Improvement Association to conduct a major cleanup and clear trails before opening the island to the public. “We engaged the entire community to share in the cleanup and regular upkeep, and to conduct future planning,” says Kennedy.

One of the key points that OLT emphasizes is that protecting land is a vital community service, just like a hospital or a library. “People need us,” says Kennedy. “If a community doesn’t have conserved land, clean water and open space, it will not be healthy.” For an organization that once shied away from owning property, OLT has changed its way of thinking about conservation.

The Tipping Point

The Southwest Michigan Land Conservancy (SWMLC) has followed a similar trajectory. “There was a tipping point for our organization,” says Executive Director Peter Ter Louw. “Twenty years ago, we used to be an all-volunteer organization. Our core group wanted to protect plants and habitat with public access as a secondary purpose. But now we have protected 12,000 acres—a quarter of which we own and manage outright—and we see that the long-term viability of the sites and the organization depends on allowing public access.”

The 26-acre Pilgrim Haven project on Lake Michigan illustrates what SWMLC’s evolving mission looks like on the ground. Following the site’s 2011 acquisition (a generous bequest from the estate of Suzanne Upjohn Delano Parish), SWMLC convened an advisory committee to begin visioning for the site. Later that year a two-day design charette was held on the property, drawing nearly 250 neighbors, trail advocates and others who shared ideas, concerns and expectations for the project. Leading up to the charette, SWMLC staff had reached out to various service and conservation clubs, issued press releases and blanketed the area with

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posters. Based on the community's input, various design options for the Pilgrim Haven project have been formulated and presented to the public for review, and a management plan is in the works.

Nowadays community engagement is the standard approach for SWMLC. Each project looks a little different, of course, but the emphasis on bringing everyone to the table—and mobilizing them around SWMLC's broader mission—is the same. "Some of our most dedicated volunteers have come out of charettes," says Ter Louw. "They become donors and estate planners, do work on the preserves and become invested in the success of the organization."

Benefits and Challenges

Since 1987, the Land Trust of North Alabama (LTNAL), working in and around Huntsville, has protected 6,500 acres of open space, 75% of which is open to the public. In terms of managing legal risks associated with public access, LTNAL uses the same tools that most land trusts do. Its liability, for example, is greatly reduced due to a state recreational use statute that shields it from liability when recreational use occurs on its sites. An umbrella insurance policy provides an additional layer of protection against a range of potential issues.

Speaking of Risks ...

A new curriculum book from the Land Trust Alliance, *A Guide to Risk Management for Land Trusts*, will equip land trusts with information, resources and strategies for designing and implementing a practical risk management program. The book covers common risks land trusts face and how to craft a plan that suits the unique needs of individual land trusts. It concludes with an overview of the types of insurance that land trusts purchase along with tips on how to evaluate insurance needs, obtain coverage and save money and time. Find an advance copy in The Learning Center at <http://tlc.lta.org/library/documents/35980>.

"Limiting legal liability is always a concern," says Cynthia Potts, executive director of LTNAL. "But I honestly rarely look at it from that side of the coin. I typically think in terms of how can we inform, educate and remind people of things that they can 'use' our lands safely for?" Potts is referring to educating people at events, during guided hikes and via various digital and print materials. "We talk about it constantly—how to be safe on properties, how to be considerate of others using the land and who to call with questions or concerns."

Throughout its preserves and sites, LTNAL sees the range of management issues that are no doubt typical of other land trusts: erosion, re-routing of trails when needed, mowing, marking of boundaries, trash removal and clearing trails of debris. LTNAL also manages areas that are closed to the public with "No Trespassing – No Entry" signs that must be replaced when torn down. Potts admits that managing for public access is a lot of work. But given the 45 miles of hiking trails within 10 minutes of downtown Huntsville, "It's all worth it," she says. "The benefits definitely outweigh the challenges."



Above and next page: The Land Trust of North Alabama's award-winning "Tuesdays on the Trail" environmental education program celebrates the unique geology and wildlife of North Alabama, while inspiring the next generation of land stewards.

BOTH PHOTOS COURTESY OF LTNAL

One full-time land manager and a part-time land steward, along with a cadre of dedicated volunteers and board members, handle property management for LTNAL. “Basically,” says Potts, “you want to leverage the small staff you have with volunteers so they can assist with a lot of the heavy lifting—assessing properties, figuring out what to do on the site and ultimately helping to maintain and steward the property.”

LTNAL soon will be launching an innovative Trail Care Partner Program—a terrific model for leveraging volunteer support. Similar to an adopt-a-trail program, it identifies partners who are willing to walk certain segments of trail each season, report on the conditions, cut back brush and do light maintenance. The land trust’s maintenance truck, trail kiosks and website will display a special Trail Care Partner logo.

Good Management Through Design

The 84-acre Draper Wood River Preserve in Hailey, Idaho, features trails running through cottonwood and aspen tress along the Big Wood River. This beautiful setting now draws hikers and wildlife enthusiasts, thanks to the Wood River Land Trust (WRLT). Not so long ago the property was the go-to location for parties in the woods, something that neighbors have long considered a nuisance. WRLT, once it took ownership of the land from the State of Idaho, responded to the situation by hiring a part-time security patrolman whose periodic presence served to discourage people from partying.

The land trust incorporated good design elements when planning Draper Wood River Preserve to make it valued by all who visit the park. Trailheads and kiosks were situated in highly visible locations. Parking lots intentionally were closed at dusk. The land trust has also installed wildlife-viewing cameras, to be available on the organization’s website, to engage people with nature but also to act as a deterrent to vandalism and other bad behaviors. “When they’re on the trail, we’ll make sure people know these cameras are there,” says WRLT Executive Director Scott Boettger.

One area of the preserve contains sensitive wetlands and a beaver pond, habitat to a large duck population. WRLT wants to protect this natural resource but also invite the public to experience the ecosystem and the wildlife firsthand. The solution involves creative design. WRLT constructed a wooden boardwalk that brings visitors close to the action without actually putting them on the ground.

“The hardest part of public access is balancing protection of the resource with allowing access,” says Nate Fuller, conservation and stewardship director for the Southwest Michigan Land Conservancy. “In other words, offering people a place to love, but not letting them love it too much.”

Tools at Hand

Savvy land trusts are engaging their communities through the use of technology and digital media. Using the Web, apps and social media, there are endless ways to engage people before they take a trip,



during the trip and after they’ve returned home. Take geocaching, for example—a great mixture of treasure hunting, GPS technology and open space exploration. Along the Chesapeake Bay, volunteers of the Chesapeake Conservancy have hidden some 40 geocaches where Captain John Smith, English explorer and founder of the Jamestown Colony, had some of his notable sailing adventures. Once you visit 15 of these sites and record a code word in your Captain John Smith Geotrail Passport, you can receive a collectible coin. Some organizations are even using geocaching as a creative fundraising tool.

The Chesapeake Conservancy has also built three highly rated apps for people to explore and enjoy the Chesapeake Bay’s wildlife and environment. The app *National Wildlife Refuges: Chesapeake Bay* encourages people to become explorers of wildlife; *Smart Buoys* transmits real-time weather and weather data from buoys in the Chesapeake; and *Chesapeake AdvoCards* allows users to take pictures and create advocacy campaigns in support of conservation.

Cultivating a Conservation Ethic

It’s no surprise that getting people—especially young kids—outside on the land is the best way to cultivate a true conservation ethic. Wisconsin’s Ice Age Trail Alliance has created an innovative program, “Summer Saunters,” that gets elementary school kids out on the trail learning about nature, history and environmental science—all while exercising and having fun in a beautiful setting. The program began with 30 students and has grown to over 225 students from many different school districts.

At the June 2013 dedication of Deowongo Island in New York to Otsego Land Trust, Mohawk Chief Tom Porter asked the assembled community to have “respect for the land, the water and all living beings that share the earth.” Gratitude for nature—and its ability to nurture and sustain people—was a value instilled in Chief Porter by his grandmother and his mother. For many people, the first step toward gratitude for nature is the possibility to experience it firsthand. 🍌

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