

COMMUNITY-DRIVEN CONSERVATION

When land trusts listen to what people want from conservation, everyone wins



BY ROSE JENKINS





When the North Wind and the South Wind battled, they met at a hill on the banks of the Duwamish River, according to a legend of the Puget Sound Salish. The North Wind defeated his adversary—so the river froze, the salmon stopped flowing and the people suffered. But in time, a son of the South Wind returned and overthrew the North Wind. Then the river thawed, the salmon flowed and the people thrived.

It was this hill that came up for sale in Tukwila, near Seattle, around 2000. One possible outcome was that the hill would be leveled for industrial use—further dismantling a landscape where much of the Duwamish River, downstream from the hill, runs in a ledger-straight canal. A group of neighbors who lived nearby, including Brooke Alford, started campaigning to save it. These residents found an ally in a land trust then called Cascade Land Conservancy, which worked with them for years to raise funds to buy the 10.5-acre site, along with the City of Tukwila.

After the purchase, the site still needed a lot of work. So the land trust organized volunteers in a steady effort to remove invasive species and haul off garbage and then reintroduce native plants and build walking trails. Now Duwamish Hill serves as neighborhood open space, an outdoor classroom and an ongoing restoration site, offering beautiful views of snow-capped Mt. Rainier.

The experience of saving the hill was empowering for the people who took part, says Alford. She and several others took on roles in local government. She also started serving as a community trustee for the land trust, which is now called Forterra. “It kind of works both ways,” she says of this role. “You’re connecting the work you do to a larger organization and a larger mission. Then that mission is able to move out within the community more.”

For the Land...and People

Not long ago, Forterra focused exclusively on conserving natural lands, mostly in small parcels. But in recent years the land trust has taken on a wide range of community-based projects.

For example, it helped to create a community garden for Bhutanese and Burmese refugees. It organized trainings to empower residents, including those historically underrepresented, to influence local decision-making. It helped a Native American tribe relocate their village to higher ground out of the tsunami zone. It advocates for urban light rail networks and bike and pedestrian-friendly streets. And it has helped 12 localities to establish transfer of development rights programs.

What happened?

This new agenda came about when the land trust’s leaders surveyed their considerable achievements—100,000 protected acres—in the context of the larger landscape, and saw them falling short. “We realized that if we were going to be truly successful, we’d need to think about conservation differently,” says Natalie Cheel, Forterra’s marketing director.

The group decided that it needed to protect significantly more land, spanning working farms and forests as well as natural areas. It set a goal of 1.3 million protected acres, more than half of the total land base in its region.



ELSA SARGENT



FORTERRA

Top: The Duwamish Hill Preserve is managed as a public open space preserve dedicated to the conservation and enhancement of its rich Native American cultural history, ecological importance and community impact.

Bottom: A Cedar River Salmon Journey naturalist shows preserved samples of each life stage of salmon during an event on the Cedar River with Seattle Public Utilities, Friends of the Cedar River Watershed, Mountains to Sound Greenway Trust and Forterra.

Cheel says, “We recognized that if we’re going to conserve a majority of the land and we know the population is growing, we have an obligation to make sure that our communities are great places to live—attractive and affordable.” People have to live somewhere, so why not help to transform the places that are already developed so that people will *want* to live there.

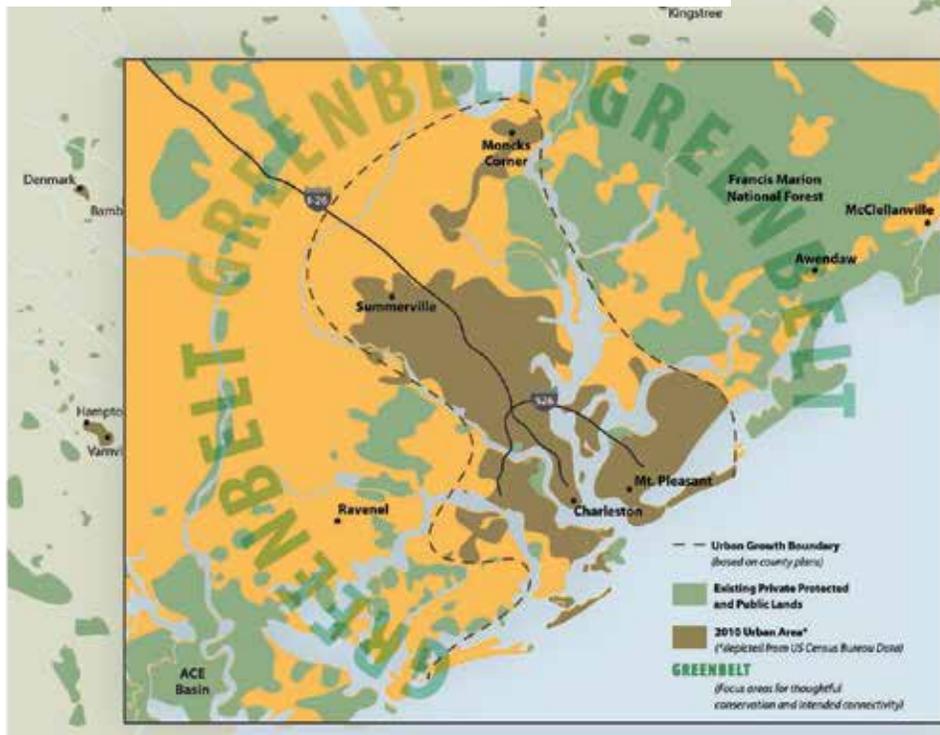
With this new approach came a new name, reflecting a mission that goes beyond traditional conservation: Forterra, “for the land.”

COMMUNITY-DRIVEN CONSERVATION



Growth & Conservation in the Balance

Thoughtful conservation is needed outside of the urban growth boundary in balance with development throughout the region



“Our work in communities is still for the land,” Cheel says. “Communities are a huge part of the solution.”

Forterra is not alone in arriving at that conclusion. Across the country, many land trusts are exploring ways to make their work more valuable to more people, where they live. As Forterra’s leaders realized, great communities and great landscapes go together. And the more people who feel that conservation directly improves their lives, the more people who will get involved as donors, volunteers, activists and advocates. Ultimately, that means more land can be protected and the future of protected lands is more secure.

Listening to Potential Partners

In South Carolina, the Lowcountry Open Land Trust took stock after 25 years of protecting a landscape of grassy marshes, ocean beaches, meandering rivers and dark farm soils surrounding Charleston. It had helped protect close to 88,000 acres, but its work was supported by a sliver of the population—a demographic that was mostly

white and growing old. In addition, many business people were estranged from conservation, put off by political land use fights that seemed to pit conservation against economic growth.

The land trust decided to reach out to people outside its existing circle, to create a more inclusive vision for conservation. For a year, it met with groups like the Chamber of Commerce and other business and community leaders, as well as individuals from diverse sectors of the community. In the process, it identified shared goals with new partners.

Lowcountry Open Land Trust found that many young people are particularly interested in public access. They value parks, preserves and shorelines they can use—but they also appreciate private land conservation. “They see the difference between paddling past a bunch of docks and condos versus open lands and historic waterways,” says Executive Director Elizabeth Hagood.

The land trust learned that many African Americans are interested in preserving

Lowcountry Open Land Trust created a brochure called “A Vision for Regional Conservation” that contains this mixed-use map. The brochure explains the interconnectedness of different land uses and how “Healthy lands sustaining healthy people is a fundamental ethic for the Lowcountry. It defines our sense of place.”

culturally important places and a long-standing way of life—on their own family farms, in the homeland of the Gullah (descendants of slaves with their own distinctive culture and dialect), or at historic sites, including plantations. In many cases, Hagood observes, black people and white people tie their different stories to the same places. And they share a common love and reverence for the land. She sees conservation as an opportunity for healing, bringing people together to preserve those sites.

The land trust also found common cause with business leaders, agreeing that both economic well-being and an exceptional setting are necessary for a high quality of life, which draws jobs. Businesses choose to locate in the Charleston region because it’s a great place to live—and conservation can help to keep it great.

This year of dialogues resulted in a vision statement that calls for strong rural and urban economies, a balance of the natural and built environments, protection of natural resources and increased outdoor opportunities. And, Hagood says, it resulted in new partnerships that are already at work, moving projects forward.

Fishing Lessons on the Androscoggin

The day a bunch of East African children caught their first fish in a Maine river was an amazing experience, says Julie Sleeper, director of the Tree Street Youth Community Center in Lewiston. Most of the youth at the center come from refugee families, predominantly from Somalia. But whether foreign- or American-born, these urban kids often find themselves cut off from the outdoor experiences that, for many people, define life in Maine.

One child told Sleeper, “Maine is ugly! There aren’t any trees here.”

She answered, “You haven’t seen Maine!”

A partnership with the local Androscoggin Land Trust helped to change that.



The Conservation Trust of Puerto Rico provides science-based educational tours that highlight the importance of bats as the major nocturnal predators of insects and as contributors to pollination and dispersal of seeds.

It started with a fishing trip to the Androscoggin River within walking distance from the youth center. The children hooked their first worms and learned to cast. “Then they started getting one and they’d freak out,” Sleeper says. “They’d yell, ‘I got one! I got one!’ and they’d be jumping up and down, and everyone would run to see.”

The fishing trip led to further adventures—paddling on the river, hiking in a state park, riding in a boat on the ocean and camping in Acadia National Park.

In a video about the project (www.outdoors.org/getinspiredoutdoors/alt-video.cfm), a smiling girl in an orange headscarf advises, “Hiking is fun. You should try it.” A boy offers camping tips in accented English: “You’re going to hear some animals in the night. Don’t be scared.”

For Jonathan LaBonté, executive director of the land trust, seeing the kids’ enthusiasm outdoors brings home why conservation is important. The land trust has protected about 5,000 acres, including over 10 miles along the Androscoggin River. And the river itself is a success story. Once an industrial dumping ground, today it’s a place where he can teach kids kayaking maneuvers.

LaBonté also sees in these youth the potential to revitalize an economically struggling city. He says, “If these kids grow to love what Lewiston has, they may not realize that they grew up in an old mill tenement downtown. They’ll remember that they had a lot of family around, that the community welcomed them and that they had a great time getting outside. Then they’ll go off to college, and ideally, when

they are ready to start their career, the quality of life that they experienced by being able to be outdoors will attract them back here.”

Creating Citizen Scientists

Para la Naturaleza is the new, nonprofit unit of the Conservation Trust of Puerto Rico that manages more than 42 natural areas, encompassing nearly 25,000 acres that include some of the most ecologically rich areas on the islands of Puerto Rico—from a steep canyon where waterfalls plunge through tropical forests to coral reefs, mangrove swamps and a bioluminescent lagoon. Some 80,000 visitors tour the natural areas every year. But it has taken years of community outreach to gain the support of people living nearby. “We have invested many efforts in engaging stakeholders from all sectors to gain their support,” says Fernando Lloveras, the executive director.

The organization is using Citizen Science as a platform to draw in volunteers to help in data collection for land management purposes. In some cases, that involves catching bats. Volunteers, most from local communities, help experts set nets. Then they venture out in the dark of night to carefully handle and observe the captured bats. Their observations help scientists assess the impacts of habitat fragmentation on the bats, as well as the ecological services that they perform.

This is one of an array of Citizen Science projects that the organization started in 2008. In others, volunteers study the composition of sand from a riverbed, looking for evidence of land disturbances upstream. Or they check on the reintroduced tadpoles



CONSERVATION TRUST OF PUERTO RICO

of the Puerto Rican crested toad, a threatened and endemic species once thought to be extinct. Or they catalogue artifacts from pre-Hispanic archaeological sites. These events are free and geared toward local residents. So far, nearly 3,000 people have participated, many of them more than once.

The volunteers’ efforts contribute substantially to scientific studies and the hands-on experience gives them a new sense of connection with the ecology of their backyards. That gives the organization a growing network of allies.

“This program engages thousands of citizens from diverse communities around the islands of Puerto Rico,” Lloveras says, “giving us over 25,000 hours of their time. They really get connected after spending four or five quality hours capturing bats or land crabs. These citizen scientists learn hands-on how to protect nature while also enjoying it.”

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ANDROSCOGGIN LAND TRUST

Children learn how to fish during a program of the Androscoggin Land Trust, the Tree Street Youth Community Center and Maine’s Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife. A video captures the wide smiles of the kids, one gently releasing his catch back into the river.