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A Time of Change and Innovation

The following is excerpted from Rand Wentworth's speech at Rally 2013: The National Land Conservation Conference in New Orleans, Louisiana.

In a recent *New York Times* editorial, Thomas Friedman wrote, "If you want to be an optimist about America today, stand on your head. The country looks so much better from the bottom up." Washington, once the pinnacle of power, is paralyzed in partisan battles. America's leadership, innovation and prosperity are now generated at the local level, and, in the world of conservation, this is an exciting time of change and innovation as land trusts partner with local communities.

Here's one example.

ASK US WHAT WE WANT

Derrick Evans is a big guy. At six feet tall and over 200 pounds, he is an imposing presence around Turkey Creek, a small, African-American community about an hour east of New Orleans in Mississippi. He wears an old T-shirt, baggy blue jeans and a Boston Red Sox cap backward, with his long hair sticking out on either side. He is also one of the most effective conservation leaders I have ever met.

Derrick lived in a dozen places growing up but always came back to Turkey Creek where his grandparents lived. He told me, "I have six generations of my blood in the soil here." When his ancestors were released from slavery, they purchased 160 acres in Turkey Creek, living off fishing, hunting and subsistence farming. For generations, people would baptize their babies in Turkey Creek—alongside the blue herons and snowy egrets. Until desegregation, Blacks were not allowed on the Gulf Coast beach, so this was the only place they could swim.

Things stayed pretty much the same for a hundred years after the Civil War, until the Gulfport-Biloxi airport and the interstate brought sprawl. The elected officials were focused on casinos and beach resorts and did not care about an African-American community with only 250 residents. The woods and wetlands that once absorbed rain were being covered with roads and rooftops, causing increased flooding. During Hurricane Katrina, Derrick's mother was trapped in her house with water up to her chest when neighbors rescued her with an inflatable mattress. The people of Turkey Creek saw Katrina not as an act of God, but an act of bad land use planning.

Two years before Katrina hit, Derrick was living in Boston, having taught African-American history at Boston College for 13 years. He decided it was time to stop teaching about his heritage and do something to protect it. He left Boston and headed home.

When Derrick and others pushed for land use regulations around Turkey Creek, the newspaper quoted the mayor of Gulfport calling residents "a bunch of dumb bastards." Derrick talked to Rev. Ed Moses, the local Methodist minister, and said, "This is the Bible Belt. Let's see if they'll call a church a 'dumb bastard.'" Rev. Moses launched an environmental ministry and printed bumper stickers reading "Clean souls need clean water."



KATHERINE LAMBERT



Rand Wentworth and Derrick Evans

Derrick was like P.T. Barnum, a catalyst-instigator-impresario pulling together a three-ring circus of environmental activists. It wasn't easy. Bobby Kennedy, Jr. agreed when Derrick once chided that "environmental groups are really good at circling the wagons and shooting inwards."

So Derrick needed a co-conspirator with credibility and went shopping for people. He soon found Judy Steckler of the Land Trust for the Mississippi Coastal Plain.

The land trust ran a series of listening sessions and got overwhelming community involvement. People said that they wanted public access for fishing and a greenway trail—and the land trust listened. Working with the community, they got government and private grants and regulatory changes requiring that wetland mitigation fees stay within the Turkey Creek watershed to fund acquisitions, trails and restoration. At the end of one listening session, Derrick's mother spoke up and said, "This is the first time that anyone has asked us what we want rather than telling us what we *should* want."

COMMON SENSE

All across the country, land trusts are exploring new ways to respond to community needs and expand the circle of those engaged in conservation. Land trusts are listening to

new voices, creating new partnerships and building lasting relationships. Working with sometimes unexpected partners, they are helping to solve local problems. Some people call this "community conservation"—others just call it common sense.

Each land trust is finding its own way, but here are three approaches to engaging communities:

1. Connect people to the land.
2. Embrace diversity.
3. Help people stay healthy.

Connect People to the Land

By finding more ways to connect people to the land, we are engaging a new generation of allies who support land conservation.

- On an island off the coast of Maine, the Vinalhaven Land Trust has a goal of getting every school kid out on its network of trails at least once each year.
- Mass Audubon has partnerships with dozens of school districts, runs an overnight camp and 17 day camps.
- Openlands is conserving urban greenspace in Chicago, the Western Reserve Conservancy is healing blighted neighborhoods in Cleveland and the Brooklyn Queens Land Trust manages 32 community gardens.
- The Willistown Conservation Trust created a CSA and farmstand near Philadelphia, and many other land trusts are conserving agricultural lands and working forests.
- In Idaho, the Wood River Land Trust mostly works on conservation easements with ranchers who value their privacy. However, last summer I joined Executive Director Scott Boettger on a trail the land trust built in the town of Hailey. We walked along a boardwalk through a wetland where the land trust had removed 1,200 tons of trash from the old city dump. We came across a group of four-year-olds looking at a frog. As we crossed over a new pedestrian bridge, the trail became alive with dozens of walkers, joggers and moms pushing infants in strollers.

Winston Churchill once observed that "We shape our buildings, and afterwards our buildings shape us." And it is



SUSIE SHABICA/COURTESY OF OPENLANDS

the same with land. When we create a trail, garden or park, we shape the pattern of community life for centuries to come.

Embrace Diversity

We all come alive when we are in nature, and everyone deserves a chance to have that experience in their daily lives—no matter their ethnic or economic background. As *Ghetto Plainsman* author Jarid Manos says, “Even in the ‘hood, we share the same sun, storms, wind and water. Our bodies, lives, relationships and communities are part of nature, too.” As the demographics of our nation change, communities of color will have increasing influence on legislation, public funding and land use planning.

Land trusts everywhere are expanding the diversity of people who are actively engaged in conservation.

- The Taos Land Trust in New Mexico worked to return a native sacred site back to a local tribe.
- Fernando Lloveras and the Conservation Trust of Puerto Rico are connecting children to the heritage and ecology of their commonwealth.
- The Androscoggin Land Trust in Maine is taking young Somali immigrants fishing and camping.
- And LandPaths in Sonoma County, California, is taking Hispanic gang members from Santa Rosa out to its farm and redwood forest.



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Walt Whitman once wrote: “Now I see the secret of making the best person: it is to grow in the open air and eat and sleep with the earth.”

Children that spend time in nature have increased attention spans, are more creative and achieve higher test scores. A 20-minute walk in nature is the equivalent of a dose of Ritalin at peak effectiveness. You can cut your risk of Alzheimer’s in half by taking a vigorous walk every day. Land trusts around the country are helping by conserving parks and trails close to home, and you can read some great examples in the “Good Health for All” article in the Spring 2013 issue of *Saving Land*.

A STRONG FUTURE

The future of land conservation depends on engaging our communities. We are all working for the day:

- When our preserves are alive with the sound of laughing children.
- When all people have access to nature close to home.
- When we have fresh, local food and strong rural economies.
- When land conservation is seen as essential for human health.
- When the people involved in land conservation look like the rest of America.

Thanks to Derrick Evans, Judy Steckler and land trust leaders throughout the country, this is already happening. Working with local communities, land trusts are enriching the lives of millions and preparing a strong future for land conservation.

Rand Wentworth

COME HELL OR HIGH WATER: THE BATTLE FOR TURKEY CREEK, A DOCUMENTARY BY LEAH MAHAN, FOLLOWS DERRICK EVANS’ STORY AND WILL AIR ON PUBLIC TELEVISION IN 2014. SEE WWW.TURKEYCREEKPROJECT.ORG.



CHRISTINA EPPERSON/COURTESY OF ANDROSCOGGIN LAND TRUST

Help People Stay Healthy

To understand the nature of health, follow just one drop of water from its source: a pure spring trickles over a moss-covered rock; it becomes a stream, which is home to crawdads, minnows and mollusks. It refreshes the thirst of deer, raccoon and raven. It flows into a lake that is home for trout and a deep-diving loon. And, in time, it also irrigates farms, provides a place for people to play and becomes the water we drink. Someplace in every one of us is a deep longing to go back home, to be fully alive as a member of the holy web of life.