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Conservation without politics

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Today, locals from all walks of life will gather at Angel Oak Park for a potluck to honor the monumental live oak, estimated to be 400 to 500 years old, and its “legacy as a place of spiritual power, cultural history and unity.” The event, organized by the Lowcountry Open Land Trust, is part of its current campaign to raise \$1.2 million to secure 17 acres adjacent to the tree.

It is the trust’s latest effort to preserve precious land and features threatened by development in its 27-year history, in which it has helped protect 88,000 acres of land through conservation easements and other tools that provide tax incentives for keeping land natural.

A Southern model

And while the land trust is a regional entity, it makes up a tapestry of like-minded groups in an area that is more conservation-minded than most.

The Lowcountry and the Carolinas, as a whole, have served as examples of collaboration and accomplishment for preserving land to the South and the rest of the nation, according to Chuck Roe, the Southeast regional program director for Land Trust Alliance.

“In the Southeast, North Carolina and South Carolina are the best states in terms of sophisticated and accomplished land trusts and interacting with governments in private-public initiatives,” said Roe, who has overseen the 12-state region for nearly a decade.

The importance of innovation and collaboration is even greater at a time when “we’re all being forced to be more innovative and creative” with government cutbacks, Roe added.

One of the most celebrated collaborations, the ACE Basin Project, in the past quarter century has protected the estuaries of the Ashepoo, Combahee and South Edisto rivers.

It brought together a coalition of private landowners, Ducks Unlimited, The Nature Conservancy, Lowcountry Open Land Trust, S.C. Department of Natural Resources, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Westvaco Corp., and Nemours Wildlife Foundation.

Lowcountry Open Land Trust Executive Director Elizabeth Hagood says the relationship between the organizations, including smaller ones across the region, is different from many nonprofits.

“We don’t fight each other,” says Hagood. “Nonprofits can be competitive because the philanthropy pool is so small. I think we take an ‘enlarging-the-pie’ view and work side-by-side, not against each other.

Roe notes that those conservation efforts in the Lowcountry have taken place primarily because of alarm of creeping development, not in reaction to disaster.

Together by disaster

The Gulf Coast was a different matter. It took the BP oil spill in the spring of 2010 to bring trusts and governments from the coasts of Texas to Florida to the table to form The Partnership for Gulf Coast Land Conservation. The Land Trust Alliance is serving as the fiscal agent until 2015.

“Before the spill, there was not much of a sense of fraternal collaboration,” said Roe. “This partnership represents a unified conservation effort along the Gulf Coast because most know



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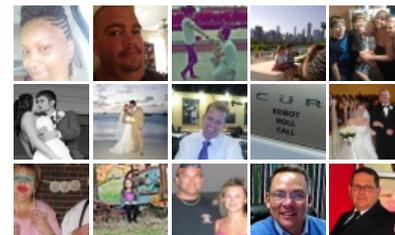
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there will be another disaster, whether it's a hurricane or spill, and there needs to be collaboration on assessing damage and restoring it."

Removing politics

Land trusts and conservancies, which vary greatly depending on location and mission, also are ideal organizations to achieve conservation goals in the Southeast because they remove politics, partisan and otherwise, from the picture.

"We don't talk politics or religion at board meetings because there will be such a diversity of people there," Roe said.

Trusts and conservancies often unite black and white, Democrats and Republicans, and animal lovers and hunters for a common cause — saving natural lands for habitat, recreation or views — typically by purchasing it, accepting land donations, or placing protective easements on it.

In the United States, the alliance says that 1,700 land trusts with 5 million members and 100,000 volunteers have worked to conserve 37 million acres of land. To put that in perspective, that's an area roughly the size of all the New England states combined.

Conservation at risk

Yet continued progress is in jeopardy.

Mary Pope Hutson, executive vice president at the Land Trust Alliance, says the lapse in approving the farm bill puts the largest source of conservation funding at risk.

On Oct. 1, the nine-month extension of the 2008 farm bill expired, stopping new enrollments in the Conservation Reserve Program, Wetlands Reserve Program and the Grassland Reserve Program. In all, federal funds have invested more than \$4 billion in a suite of conservation programs.

"We are at critical juncture in conservation where everything we have worked for is at risk to be able to continue our work," said Hutson.

"The enhanced tax incentives for private land conservation using conservation easements will expire Dec. 31, and many landowners fear that the absence of these tools means there are few options to hold on to their land."

Hutson noted that Rep. Mark [Sanford](#), R-S.C., has co-sponsored legislation for the conservation easement deduction, but that Republican Sens. Tim Scott and Lindsey Graham have not.

Big & small

Even as that battle is fought in Washington, D.C., the effort to save land in the Palmetto State runs a spectrum from larger, regional trusts to community conservancies, which may save little to no property but help work to preserve nature.

Roe categorized trusts in echelons, with the Lowcountry Open Land Trust and Greenville-based Upstate Forever in the upper level, based on resources, personnel and the scale of land typically saved.

His second tier includes the Pee Dee Land Trust and Beaufort Open Land Trust.

Likely due to the success of the ACE Basin initiative, the Lowcountry spawned a third layer of like-minded community trusts and conservancies, which may have one paid staffer or are all volunteer and work on a much smaller, more tailored scale.

Those include the Edisto Island Land Trust, Kiawah Conservancy, Hilton Head Land Trust, Lord Berkeley Conservation Trust, Johns Island Conservancy, and the recently renamed East Cooper Land Trust.

None the same

Each of those groups is about as different in scope as the "islands" they seek to protect.

Edisto's trust, celebrating its 20th anniversary this year, was created in the wake of the ACE

Basin Project. Working in conjunction with many of the basin's partners, more than 50 percent of the island has protections, according to Executive Director John Girault.

But while those other groups work in other areas, Girault said the Edisto trust is "hyper-focused on preserving the rural and natural integrity of Edisto."

As Edisto's lands gain protections, Girault said, his job continues to shift more toward monitoring, maintaining and legally defending any threats.

Kiawah's conservancy, started 17 years ago, has protected 400 acres, which seems minuscule compared to the Lowcountry Open Land Trust's 88,000.

"It doesn't sound like a lot, but considering the fact that the island, at 11 miles by two miles, is the size of Manhattan, it's significant," said Donna Windham, executive director of the Kiawah Conservancy for all but the first year.

Instead of directly saving land, which on Kiawah is at a premium, Windham said the trust works more with property owners to preserve Kiawah's maritime forest understory and maintain habitat for animals such as bobcat and deer.

Last week, the trust dedicated the Kiawah Island Natural Habitat Demonstration Garden, where property owners can learn about the vegetation layering needed to preserve Kiawah's understory. Those who do get the "Naturally Kiawah" designation, posted prominently on the property owner's mailbox.

"Kiawah's landscape is special. We wanted property owners to know that the grass and azaleas that you had in New Jersey is not going to work here," said Windham.

Expanding scope

In September, the Mount Pleasant Land Trust expanded its geographic scope to the entire East Cooper area, which now includes Daniel Island, McClellanville, Awendaw, Isle of Palms and Sullivan's island, and changed its name to the East Cooper Land Trust.

That expansion is partly in response to ripple effects of Mount Pleasant's 42 percent growth rate between 2000 and 2010 and the pressure it was putting on the rural communities of Awendaw and McClellanville.

East Cooper's Executive Director Catherine Main says community-based trusts have different issues from regional ones and fill a niche, such as saving smaller natural areas within developed areas, that the larger trusts can't.

"We have the Francis Marion National Forest, but who has the time to go there every day," Main said. "We want to save properties that people see on a daily basis because we believe that having nature intertwined in your life is really healthy."

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