



Welcoming Dinner Speech October 14, 2011

Our Great Strength By: Rand Wentworth

In these difficult times, many of us look to the past to find our heroes, and both Democrats and Republicans see in Teddy Roosevelt much of what is missing in the current generation of politicians. He was tough, determined and passionate in everything he undertook – especially land conservation.

When the man who became known as the “Rough Rider” was a child, he was asthmatic, nearsighted and mercilessly ridiculed by other children. In his words, he was “a foreordained and predestined victim.” He sought relief from both his asthma and his tormentors by spending long hours in nature. He particularly loved birds, and compiled a bird guide to the Adirondacks before he was 20.

As a young man, Roosevelt lost both his wife and mother on the same day in the same house – one in childbirth and the other from typhoid. For the next two years, he worked out his grief in the wild lands and ranches of the Dakotas. Roosevelt felt indebted to the healing power of nature and repaid that debt while president by protecting places like the Grand Canyon, Muir Woods, Crater Lake and Mesa Verde; six national parks, 18 national monuments, 51 bird sanctuaries, 150 national forests – a total of 230 million acres.

On this exact day 99 years ago, Teddy Roosevelt was in Milwaukee to make a speech as a candidate for the Bull Moose Party. He was just across the street from here when a deranged saloon keeper named John Shrank shot him in the chest at close range. He had aimed for the heart, but the force of the bullet was slowed by the 50-page speech Roosevelt had folded and stuffed into his vest pocket.

With the bullet still in his body, Roosevelt insisted on going into the hotel and giving the hour-long talk. Pulling the bloodstained speech from his pocket, he said, “You see, it takes more than this to kill a Bull Moose!” (Although it saved *his* life, it would endanger mine if I tried to make a 50-page speech tonight!)

As we gather here at Rally, we are in the midst of the Great Recession, a federal budget crisis, and a wildly swinging stock market. We, too, may feel we have taken a shot to the heart. Land trusts have been hit by a decline in charitable giving and government funding. And, with the drop in real estate values, many landowners have been reluctant to donate conservation easements.

We are not alone. In 2010, 40% of charities across the country reported a decline in donations and many have had to cut budgets and reduce staff. Land trusts may soon be hit by state and local governments looking for new sources of revenue: Kansas is considering making charities pay sales taxes; Hawaii has proposed a 1% tax on nonprofits; Pennsylvania and others are considering eliminating property tax breaks for charities, which could be catastrophic for any land trust with many preserves.

With all of this bad news, I expected to see a dramatic decline in conservation activity when we tabulated the results of the National Land Trust Census for the past five years. But I am delighted to report that land trusts protected 10 million acres over the past five years, an average of 2 million acres a year. Land trusts have actually saved more land than was lost to development! Together, we have now protected a total of 47 million acres – an area 5 million acres larger than the state of Wisconsin.

This is a breathtaking accomplishment! Land trusts have demonstrated that they are tough, creative and resilient – even in hard times. At a time when many big government programs are out of money, our great strength is that we are small and local. We know our neighbors and, sitting around a kitchen table, we come to common-sense solutions to help them save their land. We work in the intimacy of a local community – a space that technology and global commerce have abandoned, but which remains rich with opportunity.

Consider the story of Ausbon Sargent, a retired maintenance man in New London, New Hampshire. At the age of 94, after his wife and daughter had both passed away, Ausbon took his entire life savings and bought the land that served as the commons for his little town. In gratitude, the community named their land trust after him.

It's worth thinking about why land trusts are doing so well in spite of the economy. Although each land trust is doing good things locally, I think our great strength is the way we work together.

- Working together, land trusts have joined forces to protect large landscapes like Greater Yellowstone, the Coast of Maine, the Blue Ridge Parkway, the California redwood forests and now the Gulf Coast.
- On Cape Cod, 20 land trusts came together to form the Compact of Cape Cod Conservation Trusts to share services and lower costs.
- Land trusts have formed state associations to pass tax credits and funding in state capitols.
- And, in Cleveland, eight land trusts spent a year discussing ways they could cooperate to save more land. In the end, they agreed to merge and create a new organization called the Western Reserve Land Conservancy. Now here's the amazing thing: prior to the merger, these groups combined had protected 8,000 acres. Now they will protect that much this year alone! And, during the past three years, their staff grew from 10 to 35 and their assets grew from \$5 million to \$11 million. All of this during the recession!

Working together, land trusts are connecting more people with nature, especially in urban areas:

- Here in Milwaukee, the River Revitalization Foundation completed a pedestrian bridge across the Milwaukee River, which was traditionally a racial dividing line. Instead of a ribbon-cutting, they held a ribbon-tying ceremony, connecting a divided community.
- In New York, Scenic Hudson is transforming gritty industrial sites into beautiful river parks.

In engaging new and diverse communities, land trusts are broadening our political strength and keeping conservation relevant in a changing America. Five years ago, 8% of land trusts were doing significant work in urban areas; now that has grown to 27%.

Working together, we are defending our easements from legal attack. Over the past five years, our Census shows that land trusts almost tripled their endowments and doubled the amount of operating funds that they spend for monitoring, stewardship and legal defense. Now, we are creating our own conservation defense insurance service, which we expect to be up and running in mid-2012. Together, we have set a goal to win every precedent-setting case.

Working together, land trusts are preserving public confidence in our professionalism and effectiveness. If the entire current class of applicants is accredited, 50% of the conservation land in America will be held by an accredited land trust. We are well on our way to our goal of 90%. Congress is looking everywhere for things to throw off the boat, and accreditation helps to distinguish land trusts as trusted partners and a worthy investment.

Working together, we have built broad political support in Congress and renewed the conservation tax incentives.

Last spring, I met a self-described “cowgirl” named Anne Brockenbrough. She is a writer and runs a horse ranch in the Hill Country of Texas. She told me that, this year, she had set her mind to focus solely on her writing. But, when she heard that we convinced Congress to extend the tax incentives, she decided that this was the year for action. Anne said, “I have to act fast. I went barreling down to the Hill Country Conservancy... I see it as my job to help these ranchers find the right tools to hang on to their land before it’s too late.”

Anne could only afford to donate one quarter of the value of her ranch and the Hill Country Conservancy found one quarter from Travis County and half of the funding from the federal Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program. At the last minute, however, they found out that the county wasn’t authorized to spend money on a private conservation easement. With typical Texas gumption, they went to the state capitol, passed a new state law and closed on the easement on August 10. The county was so impressed by all this that they approved a ballot measure for 2012 to conserve more ranches. Anne Brockenbrough started something big!

Watching the battles over the budget deficit, we all wonder if Congress can get anything done. Next month, the Super Committee will propose the architecture for federal funding and the tax code – including conservation – for the next decade. This is a call to arms for land trusts everywhere. We will all need to work together in Congress to defend the funding and tax incentives that leverage so much great work by land trusts.

Working together, we are telling a compelling story of why conservation matters. We speak in terms of what people most care about: the economy, clean water, food and health. We are making the case in Congress that conservation is a smart-money investment that creates jobs and grows the economy. We add \$1 trillion to the economy and support 8.4 million jobs.¹

In Michigan, for example, the Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy protected enough cherry orchards that Burnette Foods – knowing that they would have a steady supply of fruit – decided to purchase the last surviving cherry processing plant. They now employ more than 500 people and are the largest producer of dried cherries in the country.

With annual health care costs soaring to \$2.2 trillion, the creation of nearby parks and trails is one of the most cost-effective ways to stem the epidemic of obesity, diabetes and heart disease. And time in nature is the best way to promote good mental health.

When we go on a long walk in nature, our worries fade. We are surrounded by birds, insects and animals that go about their business without needing anything from us. We understand that, long before our short lives, mountains erupted from the earth, rivers shaped their path, and ancient glaciers carved deep, clear lakes. We come to a knowing, deep in our bones, that we are part of an abundant and beautiful web of life. In the midst of economic turmoil, we are reminded that we could lose everything and still be wealthy beyond words.

Emerson thought walks in nature were “enchantments” that are “medicinal, they heal and sober us... We nestle in nature, and draw our living ... from her roots and grains.”

The places that we conserve draw out the best in Americans – they teach generosity, endurance, patience and gratitude. I think the highest purpose of land conservation is that it gives us places where we can rediscover what it means to be fully human. A chance to slow down – to observe, in the words of Teddy Roosevelt, the “pelicans winging their way homeward across the crimson afterglow of the sunset.” He said losing those places would be “like the loss of a gallery of the masterpieces.”

Land conservation is more important now than ever. After eight years of serving as president, Teddy Roosevelt said, “There can be no greater issue than that of conservation in this country.” Where are the politicians today with this kind of vision? I believe the leaders we need are in this room tonight. We must be the Teddy Roosevelts of our time. Working locally, working together, we will prevail.

Recession? Budget cuts?

“It takes more than that to kill a Bull Moose!”

¹ Combined value of outdoor recreation, natural resources conservation and historic preservation