



**Rally 2009: National Land Conservation Conference
Welcoming Dinner Address by Rand Wentworth**

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I would like to tell you a story—a story about someone who is to the Columbia River Gorge what John Muir is to the High Sierras. Few have had such a profound impact on one of America’s iconic landscapes as Nancy Russell has had on the Columbia Gorge. When I first met Nancy, I was drawn to her quiet confidence, rosy cheeks, salt and pepper hair, and hopeful smile. She hardly fit my profile of a radical environmentalist. A lifelong Republican, she told me that her great loves were tennis and wildflowers. When her children were young, she would drop them at the bus stop and race to the Columbia Gorge to roam hills covered with lupines, irises, yellow camas and purple shooting stars. Then she would race back home to cook dinner for her kids. Nancy seemed ordinary but she had extraordinary vision, drive and perseverance.

Conservation leaders had been trying to gain federal protection for the Columbia River Gorge off and on since 1916 but all had failed until Nancy came along. She founded the Friends of the Columbia Gorge, hired Bowen Blair as its executive director, and set about to convince the world that the gorge needed federal protection. In a typical volunteer day, Nancy would give a talk at a breakfast meeting, call donors, soothe a senator, have lunch with staff, lead a wildflower walk and give a slideshow at night.

Fearless in the face of power, she took on timber companies, local governments and anti-conservation groups without blinking. Four Oregon counties and all of the Washington state congressional delegation opposed the legislation to protect the gorge. And this was when James Watt was secretary of interior and wanted to sell federal land, not protect more of it. Things got nasty—many a pickup truck had a bumper sticker reading, “Save the Gorge from Nancy Russell.” One night she and Bowen Blair were at a public meeting, and three of her tires were slashed. Bowen said, “Nancy, we’re making progress. A year ago they would have slashed all four.”

After years of controversy, in 1986 Congress passed the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area Act. The week after the bill passed, Skamania County flew its flag at half mast.

But for Nancy, winning a level of federal protection for the gorge was just the beginning of the fight. For the next 25 years, she worked tirelessly to acquire lands within the gorge. She helped the Friends of the Gorge to create a land trust subsidiary and she served on the board of the Trust for Public Land (TPL), which acquired 80 properties in the gorge. When necessary, Nancy and her husband would step in using their own money and

personally acquired 33 threatened properties. In total, Nancy and her many partners persuaded Congress to appropriate \$90 million and acquire 38,000 acres. Nancy had fun saving land—it was the motivating joy of her life. She once said, “When I was very young, I thought all parks either were created by God or beneficent fairies. It never occurred to me they were not always there.” Nancy was the beneficent fairy of the Columbia Gorge.

When she was young, Nancy loved to hike up a huge basalt mound known as Cape Horn. In 1981, Nancy was appalled to see signs announcing the construction of Rim View Estates, a new subdivision right on top of Cape Horn. She gave TPL a no-interest loan to buy the land in the hopes that it could become a public overlook. TPL was able to buy the property, but, unfortunately, a huge house was built before they could close the deal. For years to come, whenever Nancy would visit the gorge it bothered her that this house marred the view for miles up and down the river.

Four years ago, Nancy was diagnosed with Lou Gehrig’s disease. Even as her body weakened, she continued to work for the preservation of the gorge. In the spring of 2008, the Friends of the Gorge and TPL finally were able to purchase that house on top of Cape Horn and have it demolished. Last September, Nancy was unable to get out of bed, but she told her nurse that she wanted to drive to Cape Horn. Her nurse suggested that they wait a few weeks until she felt stronger. Nancy—strong willed as ever—said “No, I want to go today.” So the nurse called Nancy’s son Aubrey, who hired a private ambulance to drive them. When they got to Cape Horn, they rolled Nancy out on a stretcher and she saw the house gone and the land restored just as she had seen it on her wildflower walks 50 years ago. Aubrey remembers that day and says, “We sat there for a while, just taking it all in, and then I asked her, ‘Mom, where do you want to go next?’ She looked up at me smiling and replied, ‘East,’ to see the land she knew and loved.”

Nancy died a few days later.

Nancy was not some distant myth like Thoreau or Muir. She was one of us, an ordinary person called to do extraordinary things. The Land Trust Alliance presented Nancy with our highest award back in 2000, when Rally was last in Portland. There is nothing we can give her now except our gratitude and our willingness to devote our lives as she did.

There are many who joined with Nancy and continue to protect land along the Columbia River. Tonight we also honor Bowen Blair, Kevin Gorman, executive director of the Friends of the Gorge, Nancy’s son Aubrey who serves on their board, Glenn Lamb, the Columbia Land Trust and all the land trusts, government agencies and partners who work on the Columbia River. Could you please stand?

Like Nancy, we are facing some daunting obstacles: a devastating recession, budget cuts, and layoffs. Our hearts go out to our colleagues who have lost their jobs, but we cannot let our current problems paralyze us. Nancy persevered through four recessions while she was working to protect the gorge. We are saving places that will shape the character of our country for centuries, and this is just a brief moment in that long journey. In spite of

our economic difficulties, this is a time of breathtaking opportunity—a time to prepare for the economic recovery and to advance a bold conservation vision for America.

Never in our history have we had so much support in Congress. Thanks to your relationships with Congress, last year they approved more than \$1 billion in easement funding in the Farm Bill, and we won a two-year extension of the enhanced tax incentive for donations of conservation easements.

Now we need to make this tax deduction a permanent part of the tax code before it expires on December 31. This is particularly important for conservation at a time when many government agencies are cutting back acquisition funds.

When we first introduced this bill in 2001, we were able to recruit 18 co-sponsors in the House. Thanks to your work and a remarkable coalition of sportsmen, farmers and ranchers, we now have 245 co-sponsors for H.R. 1831—a majority of both the Democrats and Republicans! You have done an extraordinary job of showing members of Congress why land conservation matters in their home districts. The Republican Whip, Eric Cantor, agreed to sponsor the bill after the Piedmont Environmental Council presented him an award at a family-owned Christmas tree farm in Virginia. And the Manhattan Land Trust invited Rep. Charles Rangel's chief of staff to the Five Star Garden in Harlem. The lead gardener, Classie Parker, told him how this garden is the only safe place in the neighborhood for the elderly and children to gather together. Admiring the collards, tomatoes and peppers, I asked one of the gardeners, "What grows best here?" He replied, "People." Classie gave the chief of staff a jar of her famous Harlem-grown red pear preserves, and, a few days later, Rep. Rangel agreed to sponsor the bill. And despite an era of divisive politics, Representative Cantor agreed to co-sponsor the bill with Representative Rangel.

This year, Congress will also redesign the estate tax, and we are grateful to Representative Blumenauer for introducing a bill to raise the cap on exemptions for conserved land from the current \$500,000 to \$5 million. With this change, the estate tax incentive can once again be a major driver of conservation donations.

We have a real chance to get these bills passed, but to do so we need your help. Go see your representatives; invite them to a press conference on preserved land; give them credit in your local paper; and inspire them to fight for the passage of H.R. 1831 and H.R. 3050.

Congress is also working on climate change legislation, which is proving to be highly controversial. Regardless of your political persuasion, those who hunt or fish or farm are seeing signs that our climate is already changing. Land conservation can reduce the impacts of climate change, and we need Congress to provide funding to help nature adapt to a changing world. In a recent survey, over 60% of land trusts reported that they were already including climate change in their conservation plans. If you would like to learn more, go online to the new Alliance "Climate Change Toolbox." [accessible November 24]

Most of us support the idea of renewable energy, but we need to remain vigilant so that our most precious natural and scenic areas are not sacrificed in the process. We are especially alarmed by utility companies that are condemning land protected by land trusts to build new transmission lines. This is often done in the name of green energy, even though most of the electricity on these lines is from coal-fired plants. The Land Trust Alliance and many partners are working to add language to the Energy Bill that would require utilities to avoid conservation lands and to compensate and mitigate if an impact is unavoidable.

Looking ahead, we have some great opportunities to create a new generation of funding and tax incentives for land conservation. We understand that it is difficult to get donated easements in many parts of the country, and land trusts need funds for acquisitions. The new Secretary of the Interior, Ken Salazar, is a friend of land trusts and wants to do something big to protect America's treasured landscapes. He has asked our help to design new policies and funding for land conservation. Imagine what we could if we could expand the Land and Water Conservation Fund to \$3 billion per year or if we could pass federal tax credits like those that have been so successful in Colorado and Virginia. I do not have any illusions about the difficulty of getting new funding in this economy, but if we do not fight for this, who will?

If we are asking for more in a time of less, we must have a rock-solid foundation of public trust. Taken together, our standards, training, accreditation and defense insurance provide an institutional infrastructure that will help give Congress and other funders the confidence to make big investments in land conservation.

We all remember the congressional investigation of four years ago, which led to the IRS listing conservation easements as one of the top 10 tax abuses. In spite of the progress we have made, the IRS continues to aggressively audit easement donors, causing great distress to many well-meaning landowners and land trusts. One of the greatest concerns has been exaggerated appraisals, and the Alliance has worked with the Appraisal Institute and other professional groups to launch a training and certification program for appraisers doing conservation easements. I am pleased to report that over 900 appraisers have already been certified.

We created the Land Trust Accreditation Commission to help preserve public trust and to help those land trusts that wanted to improve their practices. This program provides the assurance of quality and permanence that the public is looking for. Tomorrow morning, we will celebrate the first 82 land trusts to be accredited. These groups tell us that accreditation has made them more effective at both saving land and raising money.

I know that getting accredited is a challenging process, so the Alliance has developed "Pathways to Accreditation." You can find it along with model documents and courses on our online Learning Center. We are also working with partners and consultants around the country to coach and assist land trusts in preparing for accreditation. We are working

hard to inform the IRS of our progress, and, with your help, I expect that the number of audits will decrease over time.

Public trust also depends on our ability to defend our conservation lands against violations and legal attacks. We are all concerned about the potentially huge costs of defending a conservation easement and the risk of bad case law that could weaken all easements. The proposed defense insurance program is a low-cost way for land trusts to fulfill their obligations to defend their easements. This service will only be feasible if land trusts enroll at least 12,000 properties. After just three months, land trusts have already enrolled 4,889 properties—40% of the goal.

With a foundation of public trust, we can present an inspiring vision for land conservation in America: A vision of great wild places, rivers, forests and farms. A vision that every child in America will grow up within 10 minutes of a park, trail or natural area. We need to communicate how conservation contributes to what people value most: clean drinking water, fresh food, healthy children, wildlife habitat and a strong and sustainable economy. Land conservation supports millions of jobs in tourism, agriculture, fisheries, and it provides ecosystem services valued in the trillions each year.

There is nothing more powerful than a conservation vision to motivate people to action. Eight years ago—in the midst of another recession—David Hartwell (one of the founders of the Minnesota Land Trust) told me about a plan he had to map the top remaining natural areas in Minnesota. His vision started with a low-key planning process. Over the years, he raised funds, worked the political process and recruited partners. Against all odds, they managed to get the legislature to put \$5.5 billion of conservation funding on the ballot last fall. Unfortunately, the market crashed a few weeks before voters went to the polls. But voters in Minnesota are a hardy stock, and they approved the funding anyway.

And Minnesota was not alone. 2008 was a banner year for bond issues with voters approving \$9.7 billion in funding for land conservation. Even in this economy, polls show that voters remain willing to approve local and state bond issues, and these local funding measures will offer breathtaking opportunities in the years ahead. If you would like to explore a funding measure in your state, contact the Conservation Campaign, TPL or the Nature Conservancy. Also, read the *Conservation Program Handbook*, a new book by Sandra Tassel on how to work with your local government to build a strong conservation program.

There is an old African proverb: “If you want to go quickly, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.” In nature, we know that a flock of geese can go 70% further than if they traveled alone. If we want to go far as a land trust community, we must work together to ensure public trust through accreditation, credible appraisals and easement defense. And it is only by working together that we can build the network of congressional relationships necessary to pass major new funding and tax incentives for conservation. I am grateful to all of you who are members of the Alliance, donors, faculty and friends.

All of you have joined together to build a strong future for land conservation. It is our mission to help you be successful with yours.

Once I was walking in the Columbia Gorge on a drizzly, grey autumn day. I came to Multnomah Falls, which was framed by trees whose leaves had turned a brilliant yellow. I watched the powerful cataract crash down 600 feet from Larch Mountain into the pool below. In an instant, a huge gust of wind broke loose thousands of bright yellow leaves. But, instead of falling, the updraft from the waterfall lifted them upwards, glittering, dancing – defying gravity. I think I got a glimpse of Nancy Russell’s spirit that day.

Nancy defied gravity. She rose up against powerful forces to fight for a place she held dear. All of us here are lifted up by the same wild winds, the spirit of the mountains, and the lives of those who have gone before. Now it is our turn to give our lives to the land we love.

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