



Land Trusts: for People and Nature

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Private land trusts are on the front lines in defending and advocating for the protection of the most extraordinary natural areas and ecological treasures in the southern U.S. Beyond landowners, no one is more important than private land trusts and conservancies in safeguarding our natural heritage,.

I compose this essay in reaction to reading the recently adopted Land Trust Alliance (LTA) [Strategic Plan](#) for 2018-22. That plan and its proposed action steps are meritorious, ambitious, and logical in progressive evolution from the national association's previous strategic plan. But I see a glaring omission in the LTA Plan's introductory statement of purpose for the land trusts of America: it is entirely human-centric and ignores the critical role of land trusts in protecting natural ecosystems and special natural areas as refuges and sanctuaries for imperiled native flora and wildlife.

Conservation of land is not exclusively for the benefit of people, as narrowly implied in the introductory paragraph of the plan's Executive Summary. Land trusts across America have long recognized and acted upon the premise eloquently introduced 70 years ago by the pioneering statesman for wildlife and land conservation, Aldo Leopold, in his "A Land Ethic" essay (in *A Sand County Almanac*), who observed that, "All ethics so far revolved around a central premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts. . . . The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land." We humans are co-members of the larger ecological community.

I was reminded of this fact when, over three decades ago, I was principal author of the North Carolina Nature Preserves Act (1985). Its declaration of policy and purpose read, in part:

The continued population growth and land development in North Carolina have made it necessary and desirable that areas of natural significance be identified and preserved before they are destroyed. These natural areas are irreplaceable as laboratories for scientific research, as reservoirs of natural materials for uses that may not now be known, as habitats for plant and animal species and biotic communities, as living museums where people may observe natural biotic and environmental systems and the interdependence of all forms of life, and as reminders of the vital dependence of the health of

the human community on the health of other natural communities. It is important to the people of North Carolina that they retain the opportunity to maintain contact with these natural communities and the environmental systems of the earth, and to benefit from the scientific, aesthetic, cultural, and spiritual values they possess.

That statute went on to authorize and determine the process for North Carolina's system of dedicated nature preserves, "for the benefit of present and future citizens of the State." If I was composing that statute today, I might edit that preamble, but its essence and urgency would remain the same—that we must take action to protect critically important ecological resources for their benefits to people as well as to sustain the health and viability of life-sustaining natural ecosystems and native plant and animal species.

Fortunately, many local land trusts across America and particularly in the southern U.S., while recognizing the benefits of protecting productive land and clean water and air for human benefits, also have dedicated themselves to protecting natural habitats of critically imperiled animal and plant species, as well as exceptional natural biotic communities and functioning natural ecosystems. National and international organizations like The Nature Conservancy have been leaders in ecological preservation, but the preponderance of natural areas protection has been accomplished by locally and regionally focused land trusts across our region and country. Natural area and biodiversity protection accomplishments by land trusts have been most dramatic in the southern region of the U.S., where ecological richness is greatest—having avoided the glacial scouring of not so long ago, and with eons for the biota to survive, evolve, and diversify.

I wonder if the LTA Strategic Plan fails to recognize land trusts' critical importance in protecting America's extraordinarily rich, but imperiled, natural areas and wildlife habitats in part because its primary authors are located in urban centers and in the northern latitudes of the country (not so well blessed with ecological diversity and assets). Here in the southern U.S., many land trusts continue to recognize that their mission is to protect BOTH human and natural environmental resources, for human and natural benefits and values.

We are part of the ecological Whole Community. The safeguarding of Nature is inseparable from ensuring human benefits from a healthy and accessible natural environment. I am reminded of several other quotes dear to me that underscore the indivisible connections of humans with nature and the land. Kentuckian Wendell Berry observed: "There is in fact no distinction between the fate of the land and the fate of the people. When one is abused, the other suffers." And from environmental historian William Cronon, in his address to the National Land Trust Rally in 2005: "Land trusts are in the business not just of

conserving lands, but of conserving the human values those lands embody. . . . We protect preserves and natural areas and open spaces because they stand for some of our most dearly held values.”

Hopefully those “dearly held values” include respect and a sense of responsible stewardship for the natural world and America’s native plants, animals, and natural ecosystems. Some of us would go so far as to add, responsibility for protecting God’s Creation as well. Certainly we must include protection of Nature as equally fundamental to the purposes of America’s land trusts, for we cannot separate the benefits and values of safeguarding our human and natural environmental health and security.

—Charles “Chuck” Roe, *president, Southern Conservation Partners, Inc.*

My comments and perspectives derive from a professional career in land and environmental conservation, spanning more than 40 years: as the first director of North Carolina’s state natural heritage program, with its invention of the later globally adopted ranking system for imperiled species and natural communities, and its statewide system of dedicated and registered nature preserves; as author of the introductory guide to conservation easements for landowners and public agencies across North Carolina; as original organizer of North Carolina’s network of local and regional land trusts; as founder and first director of the Conservation Trust for North Carolina, with its land trusts assistance center and revolving loan program, and its ongoing Blue Ridge Parkway corridor protection project; and including an eleven-year tenure as the Land Trust Alliance’s regional program director advancing the excellence, performance, and collaborations of land trusts throughout the southeastern U.S.; and now (in semi-retirement) as president and chief executive officer of Southern Conservation Partners, Inc., promoting creative innovation and partnerships in land and environmental conservation.

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