

Some Historical Context for
Skagit Land Trust's New Conservation Strategy
Remarks at Skagit Land Trust's Annual Meeting
January 15, 2015

Tonight's theme - - "It's all connected" - - applies to Skagit Land Trust in a host of ways. In a little while you'll hear about the Trust's new Conservation Strategy, a sophisticated, science-based approach to the work the Trust does. You'll hear about connections in the ecological and geographical senses. I'm going to first talk about a different kind of connection, the connection of the Trust's approach to conservation with what has come before in conservation history.

The notion that it's a good idea to protect, restore, preserve some places rather than developing them all is not a new one in America, though how and why we go about this have evolved greatly.

People like you and me take for granted that some places should be set aside from development - - preserved as strictly protected natural areas, or as farmland, or working forests - - but this was not always so in America. Protecting land was certainly not foremost in the minds of the earliest European migrants to this continent. They had economic or religious or other motivations for starting life anew here. They found a land already inhabited for more than 10,000 years by people with different ways of relating to the non-human world, from which these earlier Americans did not see themselves as separate. William Bradford, governor of Plymouth Colony, reported that in 1620 upon landing along the Atlantic shore the Pilgrims found a "hideous and desolate wilderness, full of *wild beasts and wild men*." Subduing the land seemed a desperate necessity if the Pilgrims were to survive, and, in fact, half of them died that first winter. Preserving land undeveloped was no where on their list of priorities.

We need to fast forward to the nineteenth century to see American attitudes towards nature and land preservation really beginning to shift. Writers such as Emerson and Thoreau expressed a new philosophy seeping into the consciousness of some. In his 1851 essay titled "Walking", Thoreau declared, "In wildness is the preservation of the world." The notion that people need a connection to nature, are in fact not apart from it, was a radical idea; still is to some. Emerson praised self-reliance, the individualism which seemed at the heart of being an American, but which had up to then meant a conqueror's attitude towards nature rather than a realization of interdependence with it.

After the Civil War, industrialization and urbanization rapidly separated many Americans from the frontier and rural life that had kept nature part of daily experience. Frederick Law Olmsted designed Manhattan's Central Park as a place for urban, industrial workers to ease their minds and bodies by reconnecting with nature.

In the mid-19th century, America's most famous scenic landmark was Niagara Falls. Entrepreneurs had bought up every foot of rim so that viewing this great natural spectacle required paying a private person a fee, threading your way through a souvenir shop and out the back door simply to see the falls. Such commercialism determined people to not let private profit overwhelm other inspiring natural places, and so the latter half of the 19th century began to see efforts to preserve places with stunning scenery or natural wonders: Yosemite Valley as a state park in 1864; Yellowstone, the world's first national park, in 1872.

The need to protect wildlife habitat in addition to scenery was recognized a bit later. Trade, both legal and not, in the plumes of egrets and other birds, including Trumpeter Swans, for hats and fashionable hand muffs, the mass slaughter of the continent's 40 million bison to near extinction for meat and robes - - - these kinds of disasters finally aroused action. President Theodore Roosevelt, for example, set aside national wildlife refuges as habitat for birds and other creatures. Private organizations acted to compel preservation of places where surviving remnants of wildlife would be safe.

Today we're very conscious of the fact that for much of our country's history when people "connected" with the land that usually meant they altered it very completely. This kind of consciousness of our impact on the natural world was not always present in America. These days few people read George Perkins Marsh's 1864 book *Man and Nature*, in later editions titled *The Earth as Modified by Human Action*. But at its publication, what Marsh said was new and startling. With detailed, painstaking documentation he showed that human action had changed the lands around the Mediterranean from lush and productive to barren and far less fruitful places where people struggled to support themselves. If attention weren't given to conservation practices, the same fate awaited North America, Marsh warned. The North American environment was no more capable of taking whatever people dished out than was the Mediterranean Basin, and look what had happened there.

The United States, compared with other countries, was early in recognizing a governmental role in land protection. Yosemite was first protected as a state park. With Yellowstone we see the beginnings of the national park system. In 1891 Congress authorized the President to establish national forests, and the 1906 Antiquities Act gave presidents authority still used today to declare national monuments on the federal public lands. The advent of the U.S. Forest Service, National Park Service, and what later became the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service was in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. They were a response to concern that resources were fast disappearing and that scenic places were being ruined. What once seemed unlimited forests were being cut at such a furious pace that some imagined the country running out of wood fiber; so, vast tracts were set aside as national forests. If North America's once abundant wildlife was to survive, habitat had

to be preserved. The United States, with its vast public domain, especially in the West, made a relatively early and large commitment to preserving some of those public lands.

But this approach to preservation tended to omit local conservation, preservation on a smaller scale versus setting aside large tracts of often remote places. We should remember though, that even federal preservation was more often than not the result of dogged campaigns by private individuals and non-profit organizations.

The 20th century saw the dawn of a growing ecological awareness, an awareness of the connectedness of the living and non-living parts of the environment. It followed naturally from climate disasters like the Dust Bowl of the 1930's to see the obvious yet more vividly: that people are connected to nature and dependent on it. Applying ecological principles to land and wildlife conservation increasingly became the norm as the 20th century continued. And states began to join the national government in land protection.

Many of you have read Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac*. Published in 1949, it was not the first but perhaps the most evocative declaration of the interconnectedness of nature and of human beings as part of the whole; part of an interdependent community of living things and the non-living parts of the environment along with the natural processes that link everything. Today we speak of ecosystem services in acknowledging that a healthy environment for people depends on well-functioning natural systems: wetlands that filter water, glaciers that maintain Skagit flows in summer, trees that release the oxygen we breathe. Leopold famously asserted that this isn't just science but ethics as well, and what is needed, he wrote, is a land ethic. "A thing is right," he said, "when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise." Skagit Land Trust's Conservation Strategy doesn't speak of ethics, but Leopold's idea is certainly at its heart.

The 1960's and 70's saw a new determination, as many of us here tonight personally witnessed, to more seriously address environmental degradation in America - - with the passage of the Clean Water Act, Clean Air Act, the establishment of the Environmental Protection Agency, and more. There's a direct line from Leopold's land ethic to the law making prevention of species extinction a national priority. The 1974 Endangered Species Act embodies the moral imperative behind the notion of biotic community; that all living things, including people, are interdependent and that causing species extinction is not only unwise but unethical and certainly unacceptable. This fundamental law emphasizes protection of habitat needed for the survival of declining species, an emphasis you will see too in the Trust's Conservation Strategy.

I can imagine that it was the ideas and attitude of people like Leopold that also created another realization: it's not enough to save great swaths of scenic public land or great blocks of wildlife habitat and ignore the environment closer to home. You know; even today there are critics of designating wilderness areas and national parks who come from the perspective of a devil's

advocate. They say that we do great harm if, having protected these big blocks of often relatively remote lands, we then excuse ourselves from conserving what's near at hand, close to home. It's a valid concern. Skagit County is a classic example - - to the east, a big national forest and national park with designated wilderness areas in uninhabited mountains - - - and in the Skagit Valley and the western half of the county, hugely altered lowlands. Skagit Land Trust fills the vital gap in conservation, protecting lowland habitat in all its variety, working with other groups to link the pieces together, including habitat, working farms, and forests, acting on the realization that conservation close to home is vital. - - I'm reminded of poet Gary Snyder's declaration: "*Nature* is not a place to visit. It is home." From the highest Cascadian summits to the deepest waters of Puget Sound - - - and to our backyards, nature is all around us and simply needs our awareness and our readiness to act on its behalf.

Land Trusts, by the way, are not something new in filling this near-home conservation role; they've been around since the 1850's. The country's first land trusts were established in Massachusetts, where Thoreau was writing at the time. Often called "village improvement societies," their purpose was protecting small parcels of land for public use. A century later, there were 53 land trusts across 26 states. In recent decades, dramatic expansion has increased the number to over 1,500 protecting more than 9 million acres of farmland, wetlands, ranches, forests, watersheds, river corridors, etc. And several national land trusts have protected millions more acres.

So what? So why does this all matter?

In announcing tonight's meeting in the Trust's newsletter, Molly Doran wrote this question: "What do places people love, climate change, groundwater, frogs and Aldo Leopold have in common?" Let me try to answer that. Land Trust properties, and other protected lands too, can put us back in touch with Leopold's "biotic community" of which we are truly part. *Skagit Valley Herald* reporter Kimberly Cauvel recently wrote about Emerson School students doing restoration work at the Trust's Lyman Slough property, removing invasive vegetation, planting trees. She quoted Trust Stewardship Director Michael Kirshenbaum: "The trust, at its core, is about connecting community with the natural environment and conserving it, taking care of it. The kids are an important part of that."

Places that people have been involved with caring for, that they have learned something about, places where they've monitored frogs, salamanders, and other species; these are places they will love. Places people love. Climate change? It's happening now, and one of the things typical land trust members want to do - - typical in their hopefulness and optimism and readiness to act - - is provide the environment, on which we and all other creatures depend, with enough resilience for our and their survival. That means protecting habitat and ensuring that blocks of it are connected

so that species of plants and animals can move to the places they can survive. The reference to groundwater in Molly's question is about that too, I believe. Geologists are able to tell us now that certain geological formations in the middle Skagit Valley hold large volumes of water which, like the disappearing Cascadian glaciers, help keep water, and thus, salmon, in the river during dry months. Such places clearly need to be preserved, undeveloped. The Conservation Strategy is a carefully constructed approach to considering these things, and much more, when choices about what to preserve have to be made. What lands are most important – functionally for the ecosystem and the continued existence of other living things, practically for our continued ability to live in this place we love, aesthetically and emotionally for the support they render to the human spirit. Hear the echo of Leopold's land ethic.

We Land Trust members here tonight are obviously people who for one reason or another think it important to protect land. If we polled ourselves about why we support what the Land Trust does we'd find a variety of answers and motivations. Many would no doubt be about connections. Some of us might say, "Helping preserve wild places makes me feel connected to the natural world. It gives me a sense of belonging and peace." Or, some might say, "I want to be connected with others taking action to restore some of the world, to undo some of what we wish now we hadn't done." Or we might say, "I realize that with climate change the survival of some species will depend on connections, on corridors, between areas of plant and animal habitat, and I want to help that happen." Or simply, and perhaps most importantly, we might express a connection to the future. "I want the kind of world this Conservation Strategy envisions. And I want to leave the world a better place than I found it. I want to ensure that the natural places, the creatures, the native plants with which we share the world today will be here for many generations to come."

Realizing we are part of the great community of life, Leopold's biotic community, and acting on that realization to protect the web of interconnection is one part - - just one, but an important part - - of living a meaningful life.

Conserving land - - for its scenic appeal, as a vital home to other living things, as a necessary support for our physical well-being - - has a long and venerable history in the United States. With the Conservation Strategy's grounding in ecological principles and sound science, its consideration of great mounds of data, and its inclusion of what comes from the heart - - in these ways this plan stands solidly in the long, evolving story of conservation. You see, it really is all connected. - - - Let me close with something else poet Gary Snyder said which applies well to what the Land Trust - and you its loyal members - and this Conservation Strategy are about. Snyder said, "Find your place on the planet. Dig in, and take responsibility from there."