



**Conservation Director Martha Bray's acceptance speech  
for ReSources "environmental heroes" banquet  
September 4, 2014**

*(Note: Click on hyperlinks of property names for more information, and pictures)*

Thank you, I'm grateful to be here. I have been lucky enough to do the work of saving land in Skagit. I don't deserve so much credit for it -- but that's another story -- you are here showing your gratitude – so, thank you. I'd like to tell you just a bit about local land conservation in Skagit and why it matters, why it gives me hope.

But first -- Here I am in Bellingham, in Whatcom County – I want to thank the folks at [ReSources](#), for including Skagit in this celebration, and for the important work you do on regional issues -- work that benefits your sister community to the south in such crucial ways. In times like these, I think we need each other. We are all part of the North Puget Sound Region -- Skagit -- Whatcom -- Island – and San Juan Counties – all connected -- what happens in one affects all the others – for better and worse....

In terms of land conservation, Skagit isn't particularly unusual -- each of these North Sound counties has one or more local land trust – and each of these land trusts is doing its best to save private land from development –and thankfully Skagit Land Trust is one of some seventeen hundred land trusts nationwide. So, we are by no means unique, but each parcel of land we protect is unique.

These are not big wilderness tracts and public lands; the lands I have worked to protect for some 19 years are closer to home -- small parcels and medium sized parcels in the rural and urbanizing landscape – lands that people love– and that fish and wildlife need – the rich and productive Puget lowlands. We are all occupying this land – a land of towering conifers -- and huge rivers -- and fertile deciduous bottomlands -- and dynamic changing floodplains and teeming estuaries – all fed by the glaciers of the [North Cascades](#).

We've made our livings from these places, gradually converting them to productive farm and timber lands; and to houses, highways, refineries, box stores, and international ports. ... You all know this story too well....We can and must coexist within this place – this vibrant alive diverse and productive place. And everyone celebrated here tonight is playing some part in that. My part

-- our work -- at the land trust is to save the remnants and pieces of Skagit – some are iconic places -- which you may know -- Guemes Mountain, Anacortes Community Forestlands, Barney Lake, Hurn Field and the shores of the Skagit River:

[Guemes Mountain](#) is a perfect little hike through protected private forest that opens to a 360 degree view of the San Juans and the Cascades. This 70 acre preserve connects protected State land on the saltwater shoreline to an inland pastoral valley protected by our partner San Juan Preservation Trust....and if you go at just the right time in the spring, you may see a haze of purple blooming camas, or dancer perfect fawn lilies, at the top of this remnant rocky bald....

[Barney Lake](#) is in the lower Nookachamps watershed – right at the city limits of Mount Vernon -- the largest freshwater wetland in western Skagit County supporting thousands of wintering ducks, swans and raptors – creating a cacophony heard a mile away ....

[Hurn Field](#) - perhaps the one place you would notice driving east on Highway 20 – where you can stop and watch a herd of elk right next to the highway. But preserve is also floodplain -- with a sweet little freshwater stream that fills an old oxbow. -- And, it's part of thousands of protected acres along the Skagit River floodplain east of Sedro-Woolley.

After 20 years and dozens of land transactions – in this "Middle Skagit" area -- A network of protected lands is forming. Allowing the Skagit – the biggest river flowing into Puget Sound -- to move freely across its floodplain. Forming and reforming islands and backwaters and side channels where juvenile salmon prosper, and a host of lowland riparian dependent species continue to thrive

And, within this floodplain, on a big bend in the river is a conservation easement – [Elysium Meadows](#) – on a 100 acre working farm – a farm that seeks to balance the needs of fish with growing food; and tries to model how landowners might create some kind of peace between elk and cows; and the people who make a living on the land.

At the other end of the spectrum, we work at a scale so small that our preserves don't really show up on a countywide map – but these are completely irreplaceable lands. I can't tell you how many times I have stumbled upon some jaw dropping experience of nature in the most seemingly run-down and ordinary of places. We all drive by these places every day -- I have had the privilege of needing to look more closely, which -- overtime -- has revealed a stunning tapestry of place:

- 300 nesting pairs of Great Blue Herons on a 3 acre postage stamp of forest, surrounded by industry, oil refineries and a major highway – the largest concentration of breeding Great Blue Herons in Puget Sound and perhaps in North America. ([March Point](#))
- On the margins of an unassuming lake and a busy County road -- a rare low elevation bog replete with carnivorous sun dew plants, and dwarfed pine trees, and native cranberries -- on floating mats of sphagnum moss. ([Sumner Lake](#))

- The only occurrence of native Garry Oak in Skagit County growing on a still pristine saltwater shoreline in between high-end suburban development. ([Samish Point – Corkery](#))
- 40 acres of mature forest on the flanks of Sauk Mountain bridging public and private land -- With old fir trees big enough to make branched platforms for marbled murrelett; and sheltering a stream cold and clean enough for endangered Bull Trout .... ([Barr Creek](#))

These are a few of the places that are protected by Skagit Land Trust. I think of these places scattered on a map of Skagit County as parts to a jig-saw puzzle. In the day-to-day work, we've learned the pattern of the parcel lines. We know who lives next door to our preserves. We know the landowners who trust us and who don't. We know our conservation partners and their companion ownerships.

These protected lands, large and small – tended to and loved. These lands will provide the refugia – the linkages – the resiliency and the seeds for survival of a native place – not what “once was” – but still rich in “what can be”. So, it's a landscape scale puzzle – the challenge is to knit enough of the pieces back together to keep it all working.

I don't need to hit you over the head with how fast we are gobbling up land here – you know. I believe we all feel this loss deeply whether we know it or not. Our challenge is to keep noticing – find these extraordinary places behind the ordinary, remember that they matter -- tell others why they matter -- tell their stories. Mourn their loss but celebrate the ones we save.

There are so many ways to love these lands.... I have had the privilege to witness the dedication of people showing me how to do this – many of whom are here tonight: my hardworking coworkers; community members who dig deep into their pockets -- and log endless volunteer hours; landowners who invite us on to their treasured land and make the difficult decision to give up property rights by donating a permanent conservation easement; agency partners who put cooperation before bureaucracy.... I believe this all reflects a fierce abiding love of place – and who can't see the hope in this??

So, to me, this is all about finding what it is we are good at doing -- and what part matters most to us. We use the resources we have – large or small -- to contribute to a more resilient, rich and vibrant future. Each of us is like one of the pieces of that puzzle -- together -- gradually knitting it all back together. So -- Thank you for your incredible support here tonight, and especially for what each of you do.....

-- Martha Bray