

Forests: Holding Our Natural Skagit Together



“All of this used to be trees.” It’s a common statement many of us have said or heard as we have driven the I-5 corridor. The conversion of forestlands south of Skagit County has blurred the edges of cities and towns. The changing landscape affects a lot more than our view. Fortunately, some landowners are helping to keep our local forests intact through conservation.

Jim Owens, who owns working forestlands south of Mount Vernon, is getting ready for spring. “The wood ducks are coming back and I’ve got some new nest boxes to install for them.”



Jim Owens installing wood duck nesting boxes on his property.

The nest boxes are part of an ongoing cycle of caring for the forest he has owned and managed for the past 25 years. Also on the task list is checking the wildlife cameras that he has stationed throughout his 40-acre property. “Someone said they saw cougars the other day,” Jim shares with excitement in his voice. “It’s about time for a bear to show up. That’s what I look for in the spring. Wood ducks and bear tracks.”

Jim Owens is working with Skagit Land Trust to put a working forest conservation easement on his 40-acre property south of Mount Vernon. The project area is near Devil’s Mountain, the forested ridge between I-5 and Big Lake. Devil’s Mountain is a rarity in our region – a large block of mostly intact forest close to Puget Sound. This extensive forest serves many purposes including providing a habitat corridor for wildlife between Little Mountain Park, the Pilchuck Tree Farm, and DNR forestlands.

“A working forest ensures a place for these animals,” says Jim, who is an active member of the Washington Farm Forestry Association. “The ground is more likely to stay there if you can profit from a little logging from time to time. The conservation easement is a good start for that.”

Much of our once vast forestlands in western Skagit County have now been replaced with human activities. Skagit’s low elevation forests are called “Forests on the Edge”. These are forests that face risks from escalating housing development and infrastructure. You can see the creep on Blanchard Mountain and along the forested foothills near I-5, Hwy 20, and Hwy-9.

Forests in the Pacific Northwest and Skagit County are one of our most valuable resources. Yet over time as more of our forests “convert to development” there is increasing landscape fragmentation. This interrupts the vital role forests play in

Letter from the Executive Director

Dear Members and Supporters,

I could have never imagined that on the 50th anniversary of Earth Day we would be on month two of a pandemic quarantine. After decades of increased stress on the earth's resources, hubris is the word that comes to mind. But at the same time, I never thought I would see the world social commons be strongly tested – and do so well – in the short space of two months. And there lies our hope for the future as we work to save and heal the planet, locally and globally.

I admit I had lost some hope when I was given a long sheet of what I could and could no longer recycle – the “cannot recycle” side being lengthy – with the reason being “no one takes this anymore –China is full”. I mean, if all those containers I washed out over the years don't actually matter – and needed to go around the globe to be recycled in any case - do my cloth bags matter, does my planting of trees matter or my car choice matter? Does it matter if we work to save thousands of acres locally, if hundreds of thousands of acres are converted to pavement globally each year?

The world's response to COVID-19 has told us yes, very much, what we do does matter. The data coming from most of us reducing our daily impact on the environment are simply amazing.

I am not naïve enough to imagine that the world can or will remain low-emitting communities from this experience. Or that we can fix big issues without addressing poverty, racial and other forms of injustice, or getting in place innovative forward-looking government policies and socio-economic development. But what may stick around is the concept that you and I do make a difference, that science matters, and that having a local and global environment with wildlife thriving, clear air and water is “pretty cool”. And while individuals alone cannot fix the demise of our climate, or stop the loss of farm or forestlands, none of these things can really be addressed without us being involved. As a member of Skagit Land Trust, you are involved. You understand that it is the collective “we” that saves land.

Collective action problems like COVID-19 require individuals stepping up to the plate for the common good. The world locally and globally is doing a pretty good job at this. No one imagined US citizens could be told to stay home and the majority would just do that! It is a tragedy that it took a deadly pandemic that is hurting families, charities, and small and large businesses, but the silver lining of the epidemic may be that the Thousand Grains of Sand concept to healing the earth takes hold.... just a bit more. That “bit more” may give us some greatly needed time or perspective to mitigate climate change, save land for tomorrow and pass on a natural legacy to future generations of people and wildlife. After all, the real message of Earth Day has always been that we are all in this together.

Thank you for doing your part to save and heal the earth, each and every day. — *Molly D.*

What are the main things Skagit Land Trust should focus on?

Climate Change Trails Wildlife Corridors
Diversity Watersheds Clean Water Agriculture
Forests Wildlife Habitat Youth
Conserve Land
Community Engagement
Advocacy Stewardship Education Open Space Riparian Areas
Marine Ecosystems Rivers Reduce Pollution

We Hear You!

This past fall, more than 200 community members completed a survey, sharing their conservation priorities and thoughts of where Skagit Land Trust should focus our efforts in the years ahead. Not surprising, when participants were asked to list the main thing the Trust should focus on, conserving land topped the list. Regarding types of land to prioritize protecting, people listed native forests, wildlife corridors, Puget Sound shorelines, and fresh water rivers as

most important. Close behind were natural places near communities where people of all walks of life could connect with nature. Climate change, habitat loss, and development in sensitive areas topped the list of threats people saw facing the natural lands of the Skagit. Respondents were ready to tackle these challenges, with 75% interested in volunteering for stewardship work on the land. Thank you to everyone who took the time to share your thoughts!

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Left: Looking west, down the Skagit River Valley (Hwy 20) towards the Skagit/Samish Flats, one can see the distinct line between forest lands and development. Photos by Chris Farrow.

Right: The county line between Snohomish and Skagit. Skagit County maintains a good deal of its working forest, but the pressure to develop these lands is strong.

providing abundant water, wildlife habitat, recreational areas and mitigation for climate impacts. As forests fragment, they no longer provide forest-related jobs or products for the local mill. Water quality declines due to increased sediment in creeks, warming waters, and the impacts of septic systems, lawn and garden chemicals.

“There is a lot of talk in Skagit County about not losing our valuable farmland and for good reason,” says Skagit Land Trust’s Conservation Project Manager Kari Odden. “What about our forests? We know people have to live somewhere but are our foothills destined to be covered with houses, lawns, and roads?”

Thanks to the support of our members, partners, local landowners, and the Washington State Recreation and Conservation Office’s Forestland Preservation Program, Skagit Land Trust is working on an alternative vision. We see a county where the forests remain, with new development largely filling in our cities and designated growth areas. Diverse animal and plant life thrive, and water quality is protected. We retain recreational and economic benefits as well as conservation of our native forests and the local harvest of forest products on working forests.

Small to very large forests can remain in private ownership and be conserved, forever. Skagit Land Trust works with interested landowners to help them place a conservation easement on their property. This legal tool permanently limits the amount of development or other uses on a piece of land. Some landowners want the conservation easement to help their forests to become old growth. Others prefer that their forest be available for wood products and timber harvest, along with the myriad of benefits that forests provide. Forest landowners can benefit from either selling or donating their development rights. Forests of all kinds are needed for our future.



Mark Hitchcock examining a tree core sample.

“We need to ramp up tools like working-forest conservation easements not just to protect ecosystem services, but also the economic and community benefits that are produced from forests,” says Board Member and retired forestry consultant Mark Hitchcock.

So far, the Trust holds two working-forest conservation easements. The Owens conservation easement will be the third and will extinguish four development rights and protect wetlands and a creek. It will also ensure that the property continues to be available as a working forest under future ownership.

“Beaver, bear, bobcat, I’ve seen them all,” says Jim. “I liked the idea of the conservation easement keeping the area a forest more than a bunch of houses. That’s what it comes down to. There seems to be more development all of the time. My property is not enough space for a bear or a cougar, but being adjacent to DNR lands is why I see these animals come through the property.”



Cougar captured by Owen’s wildlife camera.



“Foresters don’t just grow trees, most also provide habitat for wildlife and maintain forest health,” says Odden. “Skagit Land Trust believes that more of this type of land conservation – including on very large-scale working forests – can strengthen our local economy and provide healthy and functional natural areas that sustain our communities.”

Owens and Odden on a site visit to his property.

Working with the Community to Steward the Lands of the Skagit

This fall and winter the stewardship department was busy working with volunteers and community partners to restore habitat across the county. The Trust hosted 20 work parties, including an 'Opt Outside' event at Cumberland Creek the day after Thanksgiving. Twenty adults and six children joined us for the event which featured invasive blackberry removal, a scavenger hunt, and nature walk down to the Skagit River. Cumberland Creek has seen a lot of restoration over the years with help from our partners such as Ducks Unlimited, who worked with the Trust to secure a Federal USFWS North American Wetlands Conservation Act grant for restoration on the property.



From Left to Right: Volunteer Land Steward Chris Varela showing student how to remove blackberry roots; Volunteers of all ages helping out during 'Opt Outside Day' at Cumberland Creek Conservation Area.

At Barney Lake, over seven acres of land along the Nookachamps were planted with willow stakes, cottonwoods, dogwoods, and cedar trees by Trust partner Skagit River System Cooperative (SRSC). An EarthCorps Crew joined in for two weeks of their work at Barney Lake. In total, more than 20,000 stakes were planted over the winter.

"We're trying a new style of planting at Barney Lake," says Brenda Clifton, Senior Restoration Botanist for SRSC, "The property is thick with canary grass. We grouped stakes close together in hopes they will out compete the grass."

Water quality issues have long been an issue for the Nookachamps. The stream suffers from high temperatures and bacteria levels. The goal of the willow stakes is to create shade for the stream, reduce temperatures, and filter out pollutants. Trust staff also maintained recent plantings along Trumpeter Creek, which flows into the Nookachamps. These plants were installed on the recently re-meandered creek near College Way in partnership with the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP)



Emerson Academy students on forest monitoring fieldtrip.

Local students from Emerson Academy also helped with restoration at Barney Lake this past school year. During biweekly Conservation Classrooms visits, students learned to identify and remove invasive species present on the property, monitored the trees around the Nookachamps portion of the property to assess forest health, and learned about the history and ecological importance of this seasonal lake. The class also took part in a Great Blue Heron nest count, assisting the Trust in our citizen science work with herons in Skagit County.

Students from State Street High School in Sedro-Woolley also assisted with stewardship of Trust properties. During their monthly Conservation Classroom field trip in December, the class planted 125 trees on a slope along an old roadbed at our Utopia Conservation Area. The Trust's Outreach AmeriCorps member Abby Weaver and volunteer Fred Burke explained the importance of reestablishing native trees and shrubs on the slope to prevent further erosion and keep Himalayan blackberry out. Utopia is another property where the Trust has worked with partners such as Skagit Fisheries Enhancement Group and SRSC for years to restore habitat for salmon and other wildlife. Like Barney Lake, Utopia Conservation Area provides access to nature just minutes outside of town and is a great example of how nature can thrive near urban environments.



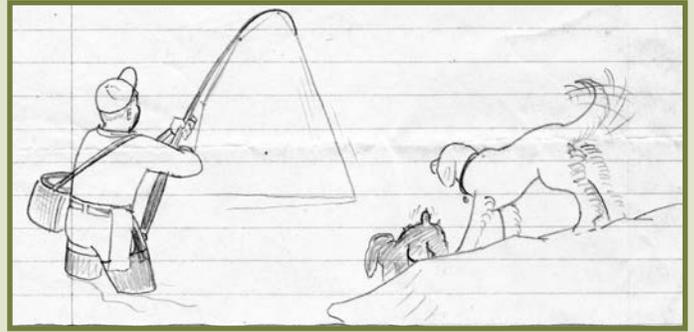
State Street students planting trees at Utopia Conservation Area.

A Lifelong Love of the River

Honoring a father's passion through conservation

John Ward was drawn to the river from an early age. Born and raised in Sedro-Woolley, John marked the seasons by the salmon runs in the Skagit River.

"My father would fish in the Skagit River spring, summer, fall, and even in the winter, during steelhead season," says daughter Nancy Kenney. "My dad told me there was no place he would rather be than fishing on the Skagit River."



A sketch John made in 1938 of his nine-year-old self fishing the Skagit River with his dogs.



John fishing from the shore of the Skagit in 1994.

When John passed away in the spring of 2019, the family wanted to honor John's love of the river. He had long owned a small property near Marblemount. Featuring nearly 500 feet of Skagit River shoreline and an undeveloped understory of native plants and trees, the property was a good fit to be conserved. The family contacted Skagit Land Trust, and early this March the donation was finalized.

"Our father was an avid outdoorsman and he valued having access to the Skagit River," says John's son, Jeff Ward. "We hope this donation will ensure other families have access to the Skagit River to form their own memories and increase their appreciation for it as a unique resource."

The future of a natural Skagit is due in large part to the foresight and generosity of families such as John's, who think about the legacy they want to leave for generations to enjoy. Skagit Land Trust is always honored to work with individuals and families who are thinking of how to leave a lasting gift to support the conservation and stewardship of Skagit County's unique wildlife habitats, forests, farms, rivers and marine shorelines. If you have questions about making a planned gift or conserving your land, please send an email to info@skagitlandtrust.org, call 360-428-7878, or visit the planned giving section of our website.

View of the Skagit River from the property donated by John Ward's family.



One of the last projects the stewardship department was able to complete before shelter-in-place orders went into effect was a live fascine installation at the Sauk-Hidden Valley Ranch Conservation Easement on the Sauk River near Rockport. The steep bank leading down to the river is rapidly eroding. While erosion is a natural process as the river's course and water levels fluctuate, the lack of native trees and shrubs has caused erosion to occur rapidly here. The Trust's Stewardship AmeriCorps member Tori Wood and a crew from Washington Conservation Corps (WCC) worked their way down 500 feet of Sauk River shoreline, creating shallow trenches and filling them with bundles of live willow cuttings. The team secured the bundles in place with erosion fabric and more willow stakes.

We're happy to report that a monitoring visit by stewardship staff in late spring showed the willows taking root and leafing out on the riverbank. You can read more about this project and many others on our website.



Earth Day 2020

This year Earth Day looked a little different. There weren't large groups gathered to plant trees, remove invasive species, or collect garbage. Rather, families and individuals celebrated from their homes. Skagit Land Trust hosted daily stewardship challenges, encouraging people to "Steward in Place". Several families sent in photos of themselves removing invasive plants from their own backyards! We also asked our members what Earth Day means to them. People also sent in beautiful stories about their connection to the environment. We compiled all of the responses into a short video which you can see on our website, skagitlandtrust.org.



"Earth Day is a celebration of all that has been done and an inspiration to keep doing this vital work. It's for the kids, for the planet, for life."
- Carolyn Gastellum

Top Row - Our 'Ivy League,' Restoring Habitat by Removing One Invasive Vine at a Time



BJ Larson



The Kotal Family



Kari Odden



Jane Zillig improving her backyard habitat



Martha Frankel pulling thistle



Mehari Doran-Cline removing Blackberry

Swanrise at Barney Lake

Skagit Land Trust hosted two Swanrise events at our Barney Lake Conservation Area in February. Participants arrived at dawn, just as wildlife was stirring, to witness the takeoff of hundreds of Trumpeter Swans. Barney Lake Land Steward and birder, Tim Manns, shared his knowledge of swans and other birds, and helped the group understand the significance of Barney Lake to the recovery of North American swan populations. The misty mornings also featured a swimming beaver and thousands of waterfowl adding to the dawn chorus. Coyote romped on the other side of the lake and eagles hunted for breakfast. Students from the Mount Vernon High School Science and Earth Clubs joined the treks, and were excited to take in this natural occurrence just minutes from where they go to school each day.



Clockwise starting top left, swans taking flight off of Barney Lake; Trust intern Chris Williams watching take off; Tim Manns, Bob Carey and students from Mount Vernon High School watching through binoculars; Western Washington University student Jeremy Dahl capturing the flight on his phone.

2020 Annual Membership Meeting

Thank you to all of the members who joined us in January for our Annual Membership Meeting. From left to right:

- Russ Dalton presented on his adventures restoring the historic Miners Ridge Lookout in the Glacier Peak Wilderness.
- Jim Johnson received the Blue Heron Award for his years of dedicated volunteering at the Trust's Cumberland Creek Conservation Area and beyond. Kate Stewart and Deborah DeWolfe were honored for their Conservation Easement on Diobsud Creek. Mark Nihart and Miriam Amos Nihart received the Stewardship Award for their volunteer efforts on Trust properties. Anne Winkes received the Outreach & Education Award for her volunteer citizen science work with Great Blue Herons. Trust President Jim Glackin posed center with the night's honorees.



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Skagit Land Trust conserves wildlife habitat, agricultural and forest lands, scenic open space and shorelines for the benefit of our community and as a legacy for future generations.



Elk



Pacific Chorus Frog



Heron Family

Save The Date: Saturday, October 3, 2020
Lands We Love Virtual Auction Celebration

Grab your wildest friends and join us online from your natural habitat!

Featuring:

- A virtual champagne toast
- Special guest speakers
- A live auction with fabulous items, art, and adventures!
- Updates on the conservation work we're doing together

Everyone is welcome, no ticket required. More information coming soon.



Black Bear



Bald Eagle



Beaver