



Sycamore Land Trust

Media Coverage

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Staff expansion reflects Sycamore Land Trust's growth

Sycamore Land Trust, by the numbers

- 1990: The year the land trust began, with a volunteer staff.
- 12: The number of counties served when the land trust began.
- 26: The number of counties where the land trust now operates.
- 2000: The year the land trust hired its first part-time employee, Christian Freitag. He is now the land trust's executive director.
- 9,160: The number of acres of land that have been protected by Sycamore Land Trust in easements and ownership of land.
- 10,010: The additional number of acres the land trust has assisted in protecting.
- 1,068: The current number of people who are members of Sycamore Land Trust.
- 4,121: The number of participants in the land trust's environmental education programs in 2016.
- 16: The number of public nature preserves.
- 32: The miles of trails open to the public in the nature preserves.

What began with a couple dozen volunteers in 1990 is now a land trust covering 26 counties in southern Indiana that just added its seventh full-time employee.

Chris Fox is the newest staff member of Sycamore Land Trust, and is the trust's first land stewardship manager.

Sycamore Land Trust began without an office as a Bloomington nonprofit group that had a goal of acquiring and obtaining conservation easements for land in 12 Indiana counties. It had protected a little more than 3,400 acres by 2000, when Christian Freitag — now the land trust's executive director — became its first part-time employee. Now, the land trust protects 9,160 acres in 103 projects and also has assisted in

protecting another 10,010 acres in various ways, including by contributing money to a conservation project.

“We have over 2 1/2 times more land now,” said John Lawrence, assistant director of Sycamore Land Trust. There are protected lands, some of them open to the public, that stretch from Monroe and Brown counties west to the Vincennes area, south to Evansville and along the Ohio River.

When the property is purchased or placed under the protection of the land trust, that’s just the beginning. “We’ve got to keep a good eye on it forever,” Lawrence said. He is in charge of ensuring each property is visited at least once a year.

Sycamore Land Trust owns nearly 50 separate preserves and almost 35 other properties that have conservation easements. Sixteen of the nature preserves are open to the public, and have a total of 32 miles of trails. Each of these requires maintenance, trail building and trash pickup. The properties often need removal of invasive plant species, which is a continuing process.

The Beanblossom Bottoms Nature Preserve in Monroe County is one of the better-known nature preserves open to the public. Although it’s one preserve, the acquisition of the land was completed through several land purchases, and more may be added in the future. The boardwalk trail around the property, with signs letting visitors know what is there and how the land has been allowed to return to its more natural state, has to be maintained. Some of the more newly acquired land in the nature preserve and in nearby parcels is still farmland that will take active restoration work to help it return to its natural state.

That’s where Fox will be involved. As the land stewardship manager, he will be responsible for ensuring each property is properly maintained, using best practice guidelines. Fox will be the first employee whose job will be solely to focus on taking care of the land.

The first four years of his salary and some related expenses will be paid by a \$200,000 grant given by Darlene Gerster of Milan. Gerster had previously donated some property to Sycamore Land Trust that was sold to generate funds to help the land trust acquire more property. It was Gerster who contacted the land trust to ask how she could help, according to Abby Perfetti Henkel, Sycamore Land Trust communications director.

“It’s so incredibly generous,” Henkel said. “I just think it’s really cool that an individual, who now lives part of the year in New Mexico, has the generosity and vision to fund a new position to help us serve the land better.”

Although Fox is new to Sycamore Land Trust, he’s well-versed in land conservation. For the past five years, Fox had worked for the Franklin County Soil and Water Conservation District, helping private land owners with the conservation of lands in southern Indiana. Fox earned a master’s degree from Indiana University’s School of Public and Environmental Affairs before doing conservation field research with the Smithsonian and then working in Franklin County.

The addition of Fox will also help Sycamore Land Trust as it is applying for Land Trust Alliance accreditation. The accreditation recognizes land trusts that follow the best management practices and accountability, and will give the land trust more recognition as it looks to help conserve more lands across southern Indiana.