

Sycamore Land Trust acquisitions good for Hoosiers: www.heraldtimesonline.com

Our opinion
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The announcement last week that the Sycamore Land Trust has acquired 600 acres near Brown County State Park and 1,043 acres adjacent to the Patoka River National Wildlife Refuge west of Jasper should be applauded by all Hoosiers who care anything at all about the environment and maintaining a healthy amount of public lands for everyone to enjoy.

MORE: Large tracts near state park, river acquired by Sycamore Land Trust

It also is another strike for protecting the environment as well as property rights the old-fashioned way — by buying land over which you want control. The land trust now protects about 7,000 acres in 26 Indiana counties, owning about 3,000 acres outright and holding easements on another 4,000.

As Dawn Hewitt's story in Friday's H-T noted, the land trust has purchased nearly \$4 million worth of land this year alone. Conservation easements are agreements between the land trust and a land owner that permanently limits uses of the land to assure protection of its conservation values. Owners can continue to own and use land as specified in the easement.

This growing control by the SLT over land — as directed by Hoosier property owners who want to maintain natural areas — is shape-shifting for the state. SLT Executive Director Christian Freitag is correct when he says: "Indiana will be different in 100 years because of this work."

The Brown County property, which will be called the Hare Preserve at Back Creek, is adjacent to the 1,400-acre Gnaw Bone Camp, which is next to the 18,000-acre Brown County State Park. Its proximity to Morgan-Monroe and Yellowwood state forests and the Hoosier National Forest guarantees a large swath of natural resources in perpetuity for this part of the state.

The land along the Patoka River, Columbia Mine, was owned by Peabody Energy and will link two disjointed tracts of the Patoka River National Wildlife Refuge. The protection of the area creates protection for 5,000 acres of contiguous area. Part of the area was strip mined in the 1990s, and the acreage is home to many endangered and threatened species.

"We couldn't have done it without Sycamore Land Trust," refuge manager Bill McCoy told Hewitt. "SLT made it possible to protect that property in perpetuity for fish and wildlife and recreation."

Preserving public lands the way Sycamore Land Trust does brings together disparate people from across the political spectrum with one thing in common: the desire to protect land. Some people argue that the preserved lands make nearby urban areas more attractive to employers, add jobs of their own and enhance nearby property values. Others focus on the value of lands where people might be able to hike or hunt or otherwise be out in nature. Still others focus on the simple value brought about by natural areas that provide habitat for birds and wildlife. And others want to protect farm lands.

In the end, there are lots of good reasons for protecting land and natural resources for future generations, and Sycamore Land Trust has carved an ever-growing niche to bring people together for that common goal no matter where their interest originates. In these contentious times, that's quite a feat.

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A family of river otters swims in the Columbia Mine property, a recent acquisition of Sycamore Land Trust, east of Jasper. Steve Gifford | courtesy photo

