

BY Rose Jenkins

Nuns Protect Mountain Land

In North Carolina an order of Episcopal nuns has protected land that they cherished as a peaceful mountain retreat for over a century—conveying most of the land to the accredited Carolina Mountain Land Conservancy to be used as a teaching and research reserve for local schools and colleges. The Community of the Transfiguration donated a conservation easement on 410 acres and conveyed 368 acres to the land trust. The order, which is based in Ohio, continues to own 42 acres surrounding its retreat house.

The property in Bat Cave, North Carolina, is located along the Broad River and includes habitat for rare species, including green salamanders and tricolored bats. In fact, research on the property by faculty and students from nearby Warren Wilson College may have resulted in the discovery of a salamander species that is new to science, the Hickory Nut Gorge green salamander. The land trust is currently establishing a partnership with a local charter school to use the reserve as an outdoor classroom.



DANIELE ALBERT

From left to right, Sisters Jean Gabriel, Teresa, Eleanor and Anne, of the Community of the Transfiguration, received the Lela McBride Award from Carolina Mountain Land Conservancy.

The land trust presented the Community of the Transfiguration the 2016 Lela McBride Award for its conservation leadership. In accepting the award, Sister Teresa Martin said, “This beautiful and pristine land has been and continues to be a great gift to us. Above all we want to see it protected and gently used in a way that will honor it and will give back a new vision for the larger community.” •

Combatting Sprawl with Affordable Housing



FORTERRA

Estela Ortega of El Centro de La Raza and Gene Duvernoy of Forterra celebrate an agreement to work together on affordable housing.

It’s not enough to just protect a few wild places, according to Forterra, a sustainability nonprofit based in Seattle. To make a difference for whole landscapes, the accredited group wants to help make great cities, too. One of Forterra’s newest initiatives is a campaign to bank urban real estate for affordable housing.

The group’s president, Gene Duvernoy, said in a radio interview with KUOW, “If we want to really save our environment, that means we have to make a place where people really celebrate living, where everyone can lead a life of dignity. Another word for that is cities. So we need to open up our cities and make them inclusive. Otherwise, we sprawl.”

In Seattle, an average one-bedroom apartment rents for over \$1,500 per month. For someone making the area’s median income, that’s an entire paycheck. So people find more affordable homes outside the city and drive in for work. All of that traffic is straining the region’s highways. And long commutes force people to spend hours every day in their cars, which means they have less time for their family and community.

Forterra plans to use its expertise in real estate transactions to buy properties in the city when opportunities arise and then hold on to them until partner organizations, like El Centro de la Raza, can develop them for affordable housing. Among other benefits, these developments will bring more nature into the city, with elements like nature trails or community gardens. •

Expanding AmeriCorps in New England

This year, AmeriCorps placed 36 volunteers with 21 conservation nonprofits in Massachusetts, and they're doing great things. Land trusts in nearby states want to know how they can get in on this influx of volunteer power. The answer? They can't—but that may be about to change.

These volunteers come through a program called Massachusetts Land Initiative for Tomorrow (MassLIFT), which is coordinated by Mount Grace Land Conservation Trust (accredited). AmeriCorps funds conservation programs through competitive grants, which can be either state-specific or multistate. Currently, MassLIFT is just for Massachusetts. The Land Trust Alliance and Mount Grace partnered in 2015 to conduct an evaluation of the MassLIFT program and test the feasibility of scaling the model to serve a broader region. Mount Grace has decided it's time for the program to spin off as an independent nonprofit, TerraCorps, serving multiple New England states. The work in 2015 helped shape the TerraCorps concept and business plan. Mount Grace has raised half of the funds to found the new nonprofit, with the help of a challenge grant from the Stifler Family Foundation.

This would expand what Deputy Director David Graham Wolf calls “a real game changer for community-based conservation capacity.” He says, “Not only does MassLIFT place emerging leaders at community-based organizations, it also trains its AmeriCorps members to use a community conservation approach, which is getting more people and diverse voices involved in land conservation.”



MOUNT GRACE LAND CONSERVATION TRUST

AmeriCorps member Courtland Kelly volunteered as a Service Learning Coordinator in Massachusetts during the 2015-16 service year.

Kestrel Land Trust (accredited) engages up to four MassLIFT members each year and has hired two as staff. Director Kristen DeBoer says, “It’s helped build our capacity through a major growth phase and will help us meet our more ambitious agenda going forward.” Similarly, Sally Loomis of Hilltown Land Trust (accredited), says, “I’m the only staff and I’m part-time. Having someone serve full-time for a year skyrockets our capacity.” •

Community Forest, Community Vision

The Rensselaer Plateau in upstate New York is getting its second community forest. What’s a community forest? Well, it depends on the community. When the Rensselaer Plateau Alliance (RPA) helped create a community forest in the town of Poestenkill, a steering committee of local citizens decided to create trails for hiking and mountain biking. They also created a demonstration forest, offering sustainable forestry workshops and logging safety classes. Income from timber harvests will offset some of the costs to acquire and maintain the property.

Jim Bonesteel, executive director of RPA, says “We’ve been overwhelmed by how the community has responded and how excited the committee members are to be involved, coming up with their own ideas for what to do on the land. Volunteers have come out to build trails on the land—hours and hours of volunteering.

As more people are learning about it, people are getting really excited and involved.”

RPA acquired the 350-acre property in 2014—in part, through a grant from the U.S. Forest Service’s Community Forest Program. This federal program funds projects that benefit the local community, provide public access and involve community members in management decisions. Additional support came from private donations, Callanan Industries, The Conservation Fund (accredited) and the Land Trust Alliance’s New York Conservation Partnership Program.

This year, RPA got a Forest Service grant for another community forest on 315 acres in the Village of East Nassau, Town of Nassau and Town of Stephentown. Again, community members will decide what kind of recreational and educational benefits they want to see. For example, Bonesteel says, this community may want to create equestrian-friendly trails. •

Pasta Pellets



KEVIN HODAN

Sagebrush at The Nature Conservancy's Moses Coulee Preserve in Washington.

It's not easy restoring sagebrush once nonnative grasses start taking over—but it helps to have a gourmet pasta maker. Scientists working with The Nature Conservancy (accredited) are using noodle-making equipment from Italy to make pellets of the perfect “dough” to surround sagebrush seeds, giving them a head start in life. A video on the Conservancy's blog (<http://blog.nature.org>) shows how scientists mix seeds, soil and additives and then crank this mix through the pasta maker to form pellets. The pellets are easy to sow across large landscapes, on foot or from the air.

The pellets provide protection and ideal germination conditions for sagebrush seeds. They absorb and retain water and even swell when wet, which helps break up the soil. Lauren Svejcar, a researcher with Oregon State University, says, “When we put them out into the field they emerge quickly, and then are prepared—and they're not tiny little seedlings so they can survive through the drought.” Compared to scattered seeds, the pellets give sagebrush a 70% greater chance of survival. That's good for ranchers, since sagebrush can prevent erosion and reduce wildfires, and for sage grouse, which rely on sagebrush to survive. *Buon appetito!* •

High-Tech Way to See a Swamp



COLUMBIA LAND TRUST

Aerial imagery from a UAV flight shows channels created in 2014.

Columbia Land Trust flew a drone over a swamp restoration project and got a lot more information than it could have collected by sending its stewardship staff wading and clambering through the wet terrain. In 2014 the trust took on an ambitious project to recreate Sitka-spruce swamp habitat on the site. Two years later staff wanted to gauge their progress. Were the channels they dug restoring wetland conditions? Were the native species they planted holding out against invasives? Had heavy rains and floods altered the topography?

The 163-acre property was challenging to assess from the ground, but aerial photos or satellite images wouldn't provide the level of detail they needed. And Lidar, an imaging technique using laser pulses from an airplane, is costly. So they tried something new. The accredited land trust partnered with Sitka Technology Group, a Portland-based company specializing in environmental management technology, to fly an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) over the property. The drone took 1,600 high-resolution photographs along with geospatial data, like distance and surface elevation. All of this information was stitched together into a highly detailed, 3-D representation of the landscape.

Ian Sinks, the land trust's stewardship director says, “It's clear that digital terrain models from UAV flights offer an efficient and reasonably accurate way to monitor and measure changes on our lands. It's a brave new world for land stewardship professionals, where today's rapidly evolving technologies are helping restore natural habitats of the presettlement past.”

Read the land trust's blog about the experience at www.columbialandtrust.org/a-new-birds-eye-view. •

New Favorite Subject—Nature!

School doesn't have to mean being stuck inside all day doing lessons. In southern Indiana the Sycamore Land Trust is helping to bring exploration, curiosity and nature play into kids' school days. Shane Gibson, its director of environmental education, comes to schools free of charge to lead hikes, hands-on demonstrations and multi-disciplinary lessons for about 3,000 participants each year.

For example, in some classes they read the book *In the Woods: Who's Been Here?* by Lindsay Barrett George. Then they head out to ask that question for themselves. One day a group of kids saw a hole in a tree oozing sap that looked like honey—so they suggested that it was probably made by a honeybee. "What else could have caused that hole?" Gibson asked. They thought about it and came up with another idea: woodpecker!

The lessons inspire teachers to bring more nature and science into the classroom on a regular basis. And they inspire kids to investigate nature spontaneously when they're playing outdoors. One elementary school teacher, Kathy Boone, says, "If these programs were happening in all of our schools, I think you would see a lot of change. It is really powerful." •



SYCAMORE LAND TRUST



BETTY DAVIS

Inside or outside, Sycamore Land Trust's environmental education program instills a spirit of adventure in schoolchildren.



BETTY DAVIS

Are Student Loan Pressures Costing You Great Staff?

It's hard to work for a nonprofit when you're weighed down with student loans. The average student loan payment for borrowers between the ages of 20 and 30 is \$351 per month—which is a big chunk of many nonprofit staff members' paychecks. Many promising professionals leave the nonprofit sector because of financial pressures—but student loan forgiveness can help nonprofits attract and retain great staff. The federal Public Service Student Loan

Forgiveness Program incentivizes people to pursue careers that give back by forgiving loans for people who work for 10 years in public service jobs, including nonprofit jobs.

In California, CalNonprofits has launched a Nonprofit Student Debt Project to promote policies that benefit the nonprofit workforce, including loan forgiveness.

See www.calnonprofits.org/programs/nonprofit-student-debt-project.