

**WILDLANDS PHILANTHROPY:
PRIVATE WEALTH PROTECTING PUBLIC VALUES**

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In March of this year [1998] conservationists cheered one of the most generous conservation gifts in history: The David & Lucile Packard Foundation pledged \$175 million over the next five years for the purchase and protection of underdeveloped lands in California. Packard officials hope that this commitment to land acquisition and preservation in America's most populous state will encourage similar efforts elsewhere.

The gift comes none too soon. California has more listed Endangered and Threatened species than any other state except Hawaii (which is overrun with exotic species), and one of the highest human population growth rates in the United States. In California and most other states and regions, habitat destruction remains the leading cause of biodiversity losses—which losses are now estimated at 50-100 species extinctions each day worldwide. Exotic species invasions and anthropogenic climate change are growing global threats to biodiversity, but these factors only underscore the need for more and greater habitat protection. Topping the long list of the pressing needs of our time is the protection, in large interconnected blocks where possible, of *wild lands*—lands that may tangentially provide recreational and spiritual benefits to humans, but whose primary purpose is to help maintain ecological integrity and provide refuge for wildlife.

Among the surest ways to save wild habitat is for ecologically minded individuals, conservation groups, or public agencies to acquire land and use conservation easements or other legal restrictions to ensure its protection in perpetuity. Indeed, a growing number of us in the conservation community believe that the highest and best use of money is to buy and save land. Supporting the groups and individuals who fight insults to the natural world will remain a major part of the work of environmental grant-makers for the foreseeable future; but these days the most direct way to save land is to outright buy it.

In coming years, three organizing principles will guide more and more of the work of conservationists: North American Wilderness Recovery (The Wildlands Project), Forever Wild (full protection of public lands), and Wildlands Philanthropy (buying and preserving land). Most conservation activists and funders are already familiar with The Wildlands Project and Forever Wild; fewer have thought much about wildlands philanthropy.

This is ironic, given that North America has benefited spectacularly from a lineage of individuals, families, and businesses with the means and the courage to buy imperiled wildlands and ensure their permanent protection through conservation easements or transfer to public ownership. Among the many parks and refuges saved at least in part through wildlands philanthropy are Acadia National Park, Great Smoky

Mountains National Park, Baxter State Park, Adirondack State Park, Grand Teton National Park, Virgin Islands National Park, Redwood National Park, Muir Woods National Monument, and Humboldt Redwoods and Mt. Tamalpais State Parks, as well as countless tracts protected by local, regional, and national land trusts. Likewise, many of the parks and refuges in Central and South America have enjoyed the support of wildlands philanthropists.

Paradoxically wildlands philanthropy can be seen as both a venerable tradition and an unappreciated blessing in the Americas. Very few people in the United States, for instance recognize the great debt we owe to the families and individuals who have used their wealth and influence to protect our natural heritage. Millions of acres have been saved this century through the efforts of wildland philanthropists. (Critics may charge that these philanthropists were spending ill-gotten money. To which may be responded: What money has not been made through exploitation; and once made, should not money be used for protection, rather than further despoliation of the natural world?)

In recent years, the need and the opportunity have grown ever greater, as a few figures from the United States will illustrate. More than two-thirds of US land is owned by individuals or corporations. Very little of this at present enjoys any substantial protection, yet a significant percentage, probably about a billion of these two billion or so privately or corporately owned acres, remain largely undeveloped. In the northeastern United States particularly, millions of acres are or soon will be for sale, at prices generally ranging from \$100 to \$500 an acres. As Northern Appalachian Restoration Project director Jamie Sayen often notes, most of Maine's North Woods could be secured, and made into a world-class National Park for less than the price of two Stealth Bombers. In the Adirondacks, nearly 400,000 acres are now on the market.

All these unprotected acres deserve permanent protection as wildlife habitat. Coincidentally, the United States now has nearly a million millionaires and 200 billionaires—all of whom could individually or collectively save huge areas of wild land. Such individuals, a century hence, would certainly be considered heroic figures in American history: their names would be as familiar to us as Carnegie, Rockefeller, Mellon . . . and their legacy of protected natural areas would be more enduring than any cultural edifice.

Total surplus wealth in the United States—wealth above and beyond what we need to maintain our already excessively high standards of living—is almost certainly more than enough to buy and permanently protect every imperiled acre in the United States (and most any acres in the United States not formally protected will in all probability face ecological degradation sooner or later). In case any forget the need, remember that the United States has lost more than 90% of its original forests, 99% of its tallgrass prairies, and half of its wetlands. Well over 1000 species are currently listed as Threatened or Endangered in this country, and listed species represent only a small fraction of imperiled organisms. Similar opportunities and dangers present themselves in Canada and Mexico, and probably most other countries, too. Wildlands philanthropy is one major way to help stop industrial society's assault on Nature, and help stem the global extinction crisis.

Our challenge, then, is to use our own financial resources, and convince others to use their financial resources, to ensure that as much wildlife habitat as possible is in safe keeping. Grand role models are out there: the Rockefeller family leaving a monumental

legacy that includes several of the aforementioned US parks, Doug and Kris Tompkins saving 800,000 acres in Chile and Argentina, Ted Turner and Jane Fonda securing a million and a half acres in New Mexico and Montana, Sweet Water Trust protecting thousands of critical acres in New England and the Adirondacks, Charles Fitzgerald saving 10,000 acres of forest in central Maine, Drum Hadley guarding 350,000 acres and the richest range for mammals in the Southwest. . . . These good folks need company.

Equal Opportunity Philanthropy

While it's true that persons with many decimal places in their bank statements will be able to save more wild habitat than those of us of more modest means, let it be emphasized that wildlands philanthropy is not only for the rich. Growing numbers of private landowners are recognizing the importance of using their land, at least in part, to protect ecological values. Similarly, the tremendous growth of the land trust movement is evidence that more and more concerned citizens are expressing their love for their land and community by donating time, money, easements, or acreage to land trusts.

Though conservationists often warn that acquisition priorities must be carefully delineated if we are to establish a viable ecological reserve system before still more of this continent's biodiversity is forever lost, many of us also recognize that every surviving piece of natural habitat deserves to be saved and cherished. Ideally, conservation buyers will focus first on lands identified in ecological reserve designs as potential or actual core, corridor, or buffer zone wildlife habitat: but even the lands outside present ecological reserve designs deserve protection.

Every concerned citizen can do her or his part by contributing to land trusts (call the Land Trust Alliance at 202-638-4730 to find the land trust in your area or locate the resources to start one), wildland conservancies, The Nature Conservancy, The Trust for Public Land, The Conservation Fund, Open Space Institute, etc., or by individually buying as much land as can be afforded and bestowing upon it forever wild conservation easements. Of course, contributions may include time and energy instead of or in addition to money.

Turning opportunistic wildlands philanthropy into a concerted campaign to identify and preserve all undeveloped lands on the market will require considerable research, legal work, and negotiating, as well as money. Yes, acquiring lands leads to consideration of taxes, easements, and other matters normally reserved for lawyers and the like. Be undaunted; conservationists experienced in "doing deals" for land trusts and the like are ready to help you figure out how to guarantee permanent protection, minimize property taxes, convey lands to the public, or otherwise help you eliminate nuisances while protecting the land.

How might a coordinated wildlands philanthropy effort work? The Foundation for Deep Ecology (FDE) and Wild Earth see several possible directions: To begin, key players need to be brought together—wealthy conservationists, representatives of land-buying groups like The Nature Conservancy and land trusts, champions of particular imperiled wildlands, conservation lawyers, environmental grant-makers, and conservation biologists. These people may decide to form a Wildlands Philanthropy Council, which could function like a green real-estate firm or even an international conservancy, or may decide to communicate and cooperate informally. If an international conservancy (global commons conservancy?) is formed, it could function as a large pool of money used purely for buying and preserving land. Wildlands philanthropists could simply donate to the general pool or could earmark gifts for certain

regions, or even for particular parcels of land, which could then be protected in their names. Perhaps conservationists will decide that we need only support and help strengthen The Nature Conservancy's conservation land buyer program, which matches potential conservation buyers with available parcels of ecologically critical land, but is presently active only in the western US.

Meanwhile, FDE will compile success stories and spectacular photographs for a coffee-table book on wildlands philanthropy, for which we are seeking contributors.* Also in the meantime, wilderness benefactors already making conservation purchases should be writing, calling, and urging their fellow philanthropists to help protect wild Nature.

In sum, friends of wilderness and wildlife face both tremendous danger and tremendous opportunity. If we have not only the *generosity of spirit* that Dave Foreman speaks so eloquently of, but also the *generosity of wealth*, we can keep Forever Wild this continent's remaining natural areas and let them grow back into each other until North America is once again whole and healthy.

*In 2005 Tom Butler, a former editor of *Wild Earth*, is writing the book for FDE. It is tentatively titled "Wildlands Philanthropy: An American Tradition."

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