

Why Land Trusts are Getting Closer to Their Ends, and How Their Communities Can Help to Prevent the Irreversible

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By Jared Penna

Every day, land trusts strive to support their communities. They work to educate those involved, conserve land for the good of humanity, and create opportunities for the outdoors to live on; it's extremely rewarding work. As Cynthia Henshaw of the East Quabbin Land Trust put it, "It's very satisfying to make a difference to others, even ones we will never meet". A land trust's objective is both to preserve land in perpetuity, as well as educate others about the importance of their work. When a job is done well, there's no feeling quite like it. "I get tremendous joy from seeing land preserved forever. I believe saving land for conservation and then connecting people, especially young people to these places and the nature that can be discovered and enjoyed in these places adds great value to the quality of life for those around these lands" adds Deb Cary of Mass Audubon. Both Deb Cary and Cynthia Henshaw, as well as many others, work tirelessly every day for the benefit of others...that's what makes it so meaningful.



A part of the Ellisville Harbor State Park, which through hard work and dedication was saved by the efforts of Bob Wilber and his coworkers at the time.

Bob Wilber of Mass Audubon has headed more than a handful of his own successful projects, but perhaps none are as inspiring as one story from way back in the 1980s. Armed with perseverance and a never-give-up attitude, Bob was able to turn would parking lots and high-end condos into what's now known as Ellisville Harbor State Park. While working at the State Forests and Parks agency, he and his colleagues were out to establish another state park in Massachusetts. "It had to be at least 100 acres in size. We looked along the entire MA coast", says Bob now, reflecting on the experience. They settled on a piece of land in Plymouth, the perfect spot to complete their new project. It was owned by Four Score Associates at the time, a group of four dentists who were able to get into the real estate game. Bob contacted the group to inquire about purchasing the land only to find that they already had a fully approved subdivision plan to build 110 units of condominiums overlooking the water. "I informed them that we

wanted to purchase it before it was developed – they just said, ‘Make an offer, but you better move fast. You probably won’t be able to afford it’ said Bob. He was tasked to meet with their lawyer in Boston, and he had no intention to mess anything up. He worked tirelessly, realizing that should he fail, this incredible land not only would be developed, but would become available exclusively to the wealthy. The future of the land was on his shoulders, so he practiced his speech in the mirror the entire weekend leading up to his presentation.



“When I contacted them, I learned that they had a fully approved subdivision plan to build this – 110 units of condominiums at the top of the bluff overlooking the water” -Bob Wilber on the plans for what is today Ellsville Harbor State Park.

After a weekend full of work, Bob traveled into Boston for the biggest presentation of his life up until that point. He entered the room to find the lawyer lounging in his office, feet up on the desk. They remained there throughout the presentation, during which Bob offered the full appraisal value of the land, five million dollars. The lawyer, however, wasn’t impressed at all. His response was simply “Come back with a real offer”.

Bob left the office feeling defeated, and this defeat would hang around in his mind for a while. “In the days, weeks and months after that disaster, I was totally crushed, feeling like I had let

everybody down...not just people of today, but those for generations yet to come” said Bob. Keeping his head up and hopes high, though, he was able to recover. He reminded himself that nothing truly ends until it ends for good, and this project hadn’t ended for good. The economy started weakening around that time, and the housing market was softening. Taking all of this into account, the Four Score Associates started to realize they may have made a mistake. Their plan to develop the land no longer made any sense, and to do so would have meant financial disaster. One member was worried enough to leave the group, who then became Par Three Associates. At this point, things really started picking up, and the situation got interesting. Bob explained, saying “They fell behind on their big mortgage payments for the property, then the bank holding the mortgage foreclosed. That Bank was The Bank of New England, which then went out of existence in the Savings & Loan collapse that rolled across the US in the late 1980’s. Things were getting interesting!”.

**“He said, ‘Bob, weren’t you interested in that property at
Ellisville Harbor in Plymouth?’”**

A jump in time to 1991, and Bob got a call from an old friend from his college days. His former roommate, who now worked for the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC, a government corporation that provides deposit insurance to depositors in US banks). At the time, the FDIC was selling off real estate that had been owned by banks who went out of business during the Savings and Loans collapse. The call went in a way that even Bob himself might not have dreamed of. Bob recalled the phone call by describing, “He said, ‘Bob, weren’t you interested in that property at Ellisville Harbor in Plymouth?’ When I said yes, he said ‘I thought you’d want to know that it is going up for auction next week’”. He went to that auction and won, buying the land for the price of \$700,000. At the end of it all, they had saved \$4.3 million in purchasing the land. What came

of it was a state park, a property of land that belongs to the entire commonwealth of Massachusetts and those from beyond state lines. Today, the park is accessible to everyone, not just those who would have purchased apartments on the land. It gives people the opportunity to enjoy and interact with the outdoors rather than sit inside and waste time in front of a television. When Bob was sharing this story, he stated, “I want to share a story from early in my career about perseverance, staying positioned, and never giving up” and that’s exactly what he did. He persevered, he stayed positioned, and he kept a positive attitude



A view at Ellisville Harbor State Park that can now be shared by all, not just the wealthy, thanks to the tireless work of Bob Wilber and his colleagues.

Why Do Land Trusts Matter?

The work that land trusts do is essential to every living being on this earth. We as humans rely on our land for a wide variety of wants and needs. There's the recreational aspect of land, when we use it for our pleasure. This can be seen in our parks, museums, stadiums, or other areas that we use for things that aren't essential. It's when land is used for pleasure or enjoyment, which humans do need. There's the agricultural use of land, which takes shape as humans using land to grow crops and raise animals. The importance of this land goes without saying; if nobody is producing food for people then people won't survive. With the world in the state it's in today, humans need rely on this type of land more than their ability to find their own food. While it is by no means a problem, it's not very often that somebody will hunt and scavenge for their three meals per day anymore. Land trusts can help to maintain the reality that we live in today. They prevent farms from being bought and converted into strip malls. They prevent open space from becoming the next local mega-plex cinema, and instead set it aside as a place for people to enjoy the outdoors; the importance of which is not to be overrated.

NPR cited an article from the United Nations published in 2014, which stated that roughly 54% of people lived in urban areas. The same article made a claim that the number will rise, reaching at least 66% by the year 2050. What is also true, though, is that getting outdoors and enjoying time surrounded by real nature, by the greens of trees and grass, the brown of dirt, is essential to our lives as well. Sure, cities can offer more opportunities than we can count, but the outdoors remain an essential part of human existence. It didn't end there, though. In addition, an EPA study confidently states that Americans are spending 90% of their time indoors. The same study says that the concentrations of air pollutants can reach up to 5 times that of the outdoors.

Dr. Qing Li, a native of Japan, explains how these habits can be reversed in his book "Forest Bathing: How Trees Can Help You Find Health and Happiness". The book explains and shows

what forest bathing is, an ancient tradition that involves spending long periods of time outside with trees. The essential information inside, forest bathing reduces stress, depression, anxiety, and anger. The fact of the matter is that spending time with trees can increase energy levels by more than 30% and sleep by 15%, increases somebody's immune system and cardiovascular health, and many other aspects of human life.



Part of a forest in Groton, MA, that was recently cleared by a lumber company. The trees that were taken are replaced every year after harvest season to ensure the health and safety of the forest and the animals living there.

So how is any of that relevant to land trusts? Because land trusts provide the opportunities to engage in these types of activities. Land trusts set aside and protect land so that humans can have the opportunities to get outside and make this kind of impact on their health. They use land to create parks, greenways, and trails that will enable and encourage people to exercise outdoors,

which boosts health in a number of ways. Their land gives people exposure to nature which helps to improve psychological and social health. The land gives children a place to grow and develop, not just sit inside and get hooked on technology all day. Land trusts use land to build or reinforce strong, healthy, and stable communities. The list goes on and on, but the work that these organizations do is unparalleled to that of any other job.

What's the Problem?

Land trusts work every day to protect land for these uses above. They use the land they own to build trails, build parks, preserve farms, save drinking water, protect habitats for struggling species...the list goes on and on. With hard work and little pay, the people at these non-profits give and give and give to the earth. They face challenges every single day just to give back, but no challenge is bigger than that of funding. Says Anna Wilkins of the North County Land Trust on the issue, "I think consistency in funding sources is a big challenge. We rely heavily on state and federal grants for our conservation projects which can make the process protracted". While this won't come as a shock to most, funding for a non-profit is difficult work. Unless you're the Green Bay Packers, it will usually be fairly difficult to find consistent and sufficient funding to run operations. Land trusts primarily need to count on donors and the kindness of people who support their cause, but that type of income is unreliable and inconsistent. Relying on this type of income to get productive work done is an incredibly difficult way to run any company or organization. A survey done in 2017 asked 10,000 non-profits about their donors, and the answers were shocking. Only 56% of donors in 2016 returned to donate again in 2017. Even worse, 77% of first time donors in 2016 didn't donate again in 2017. If this is the source of

income that you're most dependent on then you'll have little to no financial success, as is the case for most land trusts.

“Energy is spent finding and soliciting funds to run operations, which in turn reduces money for finding, acquiring, and stewarding land, and running educational programs. This makes our work inefficient”.

A survey that was done in 2015 was able to give some positive news, finding that there was a 5.3% increase in donors from 2014 of the 10,000 organizations that participated. From the increase in total donors, there was a \$4.695 billion increase in 2015 from 2014. These numbers were false hope, though, because there was an underlying problem beneath them. An increase in new donors is still good news, but it's less impactful when the past donors can't keep up their contributions. In the same year, those people who had already donated in 2014 decided to donate less in 2015, and plenty of donations weren't even able to be processed because of insufficient funds. That resulted in a \$4.264 billion loss from the last year, which almost evens out what the new donors had contributed. For every \$100 that the companies were making, they were losing \$91 from other donors. Of that new \$4.695 billion made, there was only an increase of \$433 million, which across 10,000 companies comes out to an added \$43,300 for each company. A good number if the trend were to continue, but it hasn't, and companies don't get more or even the same donations from donors each year. Consistent funding is impossible to come by as a Land Trust, so you're counting on money you don't have to start and finish the projects you set out to complete. Tom Cotton at the Harvard Conservation Trust knows this all too well, telling me that “We (the Harvard Conservation Trust) try to become ‘whole’ on a project, even if we leave some money in it. If we

aren't assured of financial wholeness, the project may not happen". Work can start to feel impossible when projects are forced to be given up on left and right because of a lack of funds. Anna Wilkins adds by saying "Energy is spent finding and soliciting funds to run operations, which in turn reduces money for finding, acquiring, and stewarding land, and running educational programs. This makes our work inefficient". What's important to remember is that acquiring land isn't the only reason these Land Trusts need money. They need to purchase brochures and flyers which will inform the public about local events they're planning to host, which also cost money.

There are always ways to utilize different skill sets that push our mission forward. And if you're volunteering your time, you will learn how important your financial contribution is"

-Cynthia Henshaw showing that there are more ways to help land trust than just donating money

These could include a race, a skiing event, a dog day, a snow shoe race, or other ways to bring the community together. They also need to host meetings and run educational programs, which requires funding to take place. Then after all of this, they still need leftover funds to acquire the land that will help them fulfill their purpose in the most effective, efficient, and immediately impactful way possible. Teaching is a necessity, because without informing others of the necessity of this work, the work won't be done in the future. Action is needed now, but if there's nobody to keep it going in the future, then doing the work now is almost pointless. The land comes second, but it's equally important. Without the land, the education is meaningless. Understanding why land needs to be saved and understanding how to save it means nothing if you aren't truly able to. They go hand in hand, education and action, which makes it incredibly difficult, impossible even, to get productive work done by doing just one. The problem is, funding is usually only sufficient enough to cover one of these expenses. Should funding become more consistent, the work being done by

Land Trusts across Massachusetts would become far more productive, and life would be easier and healthier both for those working at Land Trusts and those who aren't.



A clearing by a trail in Groton, MA. The trail was cleared of brush by volunteers who spent their time to help the North County Land Trust provide places like these for their community.

One “solution” to this type of income is for land trusts to submit applications to grant programs. The Division of Conservation Services (DCS) Grant Programs provide an extra opportunity for funding for land trusts. An example could be their “LAND Grant Program”, which assists in the purchase of land for conservation and passive recreation purposes in fee simple. There are a few reasons that this “solution” is surrounded by quotation marks, though. The process is far from perfect. When applying, land trusts need to send in an application with a Baseline and Management Plan, as well as outline how the public will be able to access the land. They also

need to send in an appraisal and have an Off-Site Source Recovery Program (OSRP), which basically says that the land doesn't contain any radioactive waste to protect the safety of both the nature and those who engage and interact with the land. The DCS looks for projects that make recreational use accessible to those who are handicapped, projects that are aiming to buy a large piece of land, and projects that have a core habitat and resilient landscape, meaning the land has potential to be around for some time and not lose its value any time soon. The grant gives up to \$400,000 and reimburses 52-70% of the total cost of the project. This sounds like a pretty nice deal if you can put in the hard work to get your Land Trust ready to send in the application...but the work doesn't stop there. Once the application is in you have to wait to hear back, which will typically take around 90-100 days, but varies each year. With land trusts from all across Massachusetts applying, the odds your land trust gets accepted for the program are slim. If the consistency of the donors wasn't bad enough already, this just adds to that problem. Even when it's a significant amount of money, it's not guaranteed. They plan projects based on money that they don't have, and money they realistically won't receive. This doesn't just make the purchase of land of land difficult, but the organization's entire function is thrown off. "We want to ensure that North Central Massachusetts is supported in growing sustainably over time" Anna Wilkins said, adding, "We accomplish our mission by a) Identifying natural resources, working lands, farms and watersheds whose conservation is of the highest priority, b) Conserving land in perpetuity for future generations, and c) Engaging communities to understand and appreciate their natural environment and the importance of conservation".

How to Help

So, the problem is mainly surrounding money, but the opportunities to help go far beyond that of just donating to the cause. For the past few Thursdays, I've been volunteering at the Greater Worcester Land Trust, and I can honestly say it's the most fun I've had in some time. Every other Thursday, volunteers gather at the entrance to Cascading Waters, a piece of land conserved by the land trust. It totals 156.59 acres and serves as a place for passive recreation, with trails spanning across all 156.59 of those acres. It's a wildlife habitat, a vernal pool habitat, riparian habitat, and provides opportunities for people to interact with all of these beautiful features of the earth. For three hours every other Thursday, though, volunteers gather so that more land like this can be protected and preserved. The first time I volunteered, I had a unique experience to say the least. I, an 18-year-old high school senior, showed up to find three other volunteers already on sight. Two were men, both upwards of sixty years old, and one was a woman named Debbie. I felt nervous, as I'd never done anything like this before, and it didn't look like I would have anybody familiar to interact with for the next three hours. They all welcomed me with open arms, though, and Debbie especially. She immediately approached me to introduce herself, telling me all about what was planned for that day how I could start helping out. Our first task was to help clean out the shed. Inside were all the tools that volunteers use to build and paint signs, clear trails, and sometimes even repair a broken chair, but I'll get to that later. Debbie and I went into the shed to start cleaning while Gordon, one of the men, worked with an adze to start the creation of a new sign. Once inside, Debbie immediately asked me to put on safety goggles. I found this odd seeing as the only thing we were doing at the time was picking up and moving around clutter like bikes, trash bins, old toys, and other harmless objects like those. I took the pair from her and put them on, taking them immediately back off the moment I turned around. I went to one end of the shed while Debbie worked towards the other, and we held conversation

for the entire hour we cleaned. An 18-year-old high school student and a 60-year-old woman working side by side and holding conversation for that long might seem strange or forced but it was genuine, interesting conversation. I explained where I was with my school work and my intent to write this paper, and she explained to me that she had just attended a sustainability conference in Devens, where I go to school. Time flew, and before I knew it Colin Novik, the president of the land trust, had showed up. He came into the shed with an energy that might never be matched by another human I meet and told me he had a new job for me. There was a sign where I had parked that morning, but there was an error on it. A red circle represented that “you are here”, but the problem was we weren’t really there. Colin had painted over it once, but as he put it some “you know what, insert expletive here decided to scratch off the paint!”. He then asked me if I wanted to go paint over it again, and I happily obliged.

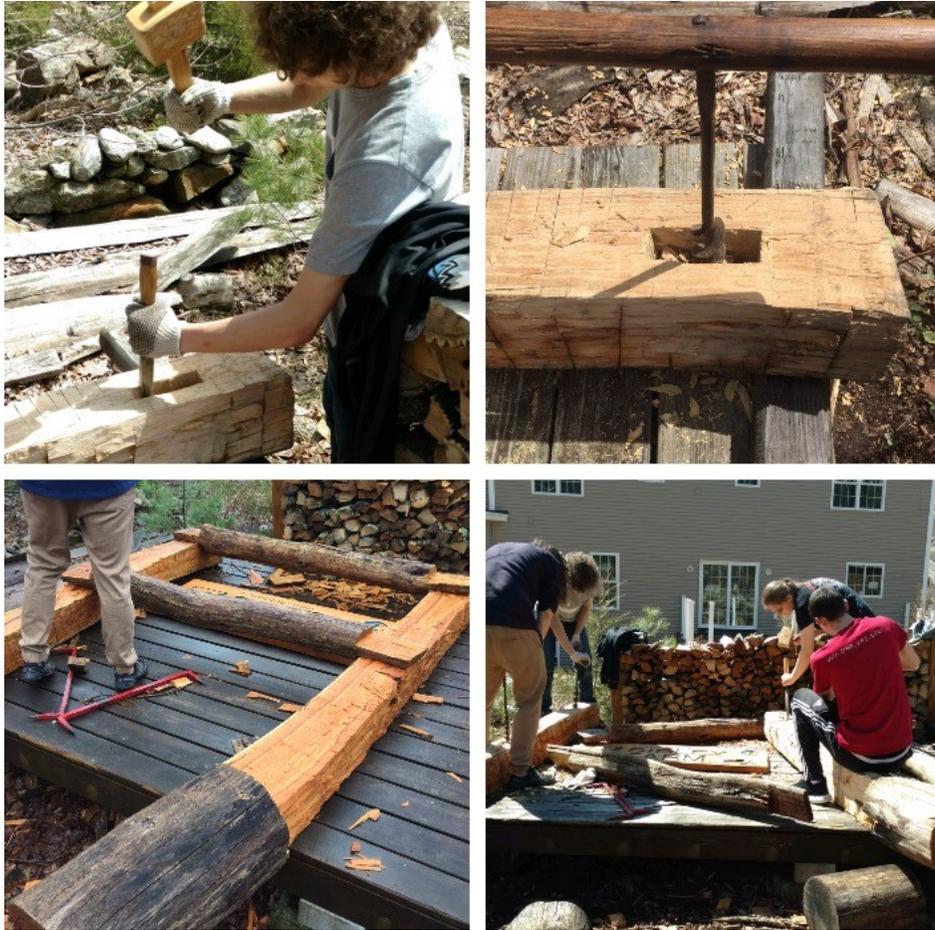


A before and after of the sign that I painted. I used a color that was a close match to the background to mask an incorrect marking on the sign.

After I had painted the sign, it was on to my next task. While I went and painted, Debbie kept cleaning out the shed and found an old, broken chair inside. The seat of the chair had ripped off, but the legs and back were still in perfect condition. Marveling at the beauty of the wood, Debbie said that we had no choice but to fix it, and so Colin put me to work there next, saying “You know this really isn’t the typical day. You’ve been stuck with some really weird, really random projects, I hope you don’t mind”. I responded by telling him I didn’t mind in the slightest, and it was the absolute truth. Instead of spending time in school, or at home in front of the screen of my television or phone, I was spending time outdoors and getting to know these other people. I started to get to work on the chair, measuring and marking where I would need to cut out pieces

of wood to replace the seat of the chair that had fallen off. Getting the opportunity to build and be a part of something felt amazing, and when the chair was finished it felt like a real accomplishment. I hadn't done much, and it didn't look amazing, but it was well received, and people were thankful for the effort I had put in. It felt extremely rewarding to know I was part of something that others truly appreciated.

My next session of volunteering was a bit more traditional. I showed up to find Mary Caulway, the coordinator of volunteer work at GWLT, explaining the day's task to two college students, while in the distance there again were three older volunteers hard at work on their regular jobs. For us, though, the job was to work on the posts for the sign that Gordon had finished last session. In order to get them ready for the sign, we needed to drill four holes in them, two in each, so that logs could be laid across and connect the posts. When one more volunteer showed up, it meant we could be extremely efficient, as it's not common that more than a handful of folks will show up for a volunteering session. Using hand drills and chisels, we tirelessly worked away at the posts, digging and digging until the job was done. Unfortunately, three had to leave early, so it left just me to finish what I was working on. I drilled and drilled until I made it all the way through, needing to do so three times since the drill wasn't nearly large to get the job done in one go. Once the hole was cleared, I chiseled away at the edges to smoothen out the insides and ensure that the log would fit inside.



***Top Left:** A picture of me chiseling the inside of the hole I dug out of the post. Smoothing out the inside allows the bar to rest inside to post so it can bear the weight of the sign it will hold one day. **Top Right:** An example of the hand saws used to dig out the holes in the sign posts. **Bottom Left:** A rough draft of what the frame supporting the sign will look like when completed. **Bottom Right:** The group of four students working together to finish the new sign for Donker Farm*

At the end of the day, none of the four holes were completely finished. Two of them never made it to the other side of the post, one was never chiseled to hold the bar smoothly, and mine ended up being a little too small for the bar to actually fit properly. Despite having a 0% success rate when it came to achieving the goals we had set for that day, everybody still left feeling satisfied. We had all spend three hours together building and working and bonding, and we all felt like it was time well spent. We learned new skills, we created new friendships, and we made progress. As Deb Cary said, “The point is to come up with ways to connect new people to the work of the local land trust”, and that’s exactly what happened. We were all connected to the work of the

trust, we all understood what we were working towards, and we formed bonds while working towards it.

While these are examples of what I've done to help volunteer, they don't even begin to show the full picture of what volunteering for a land trust can mean. At North County Land Trust, the options include trail maintenance and building, trail monitoring and reporting, carpentry skills, hike leader, administration/office support, tabling at events, special event volunteer, education outreach, photography, and a line for other. They ask for any special skills or passions, so when you volunteer you can help in a way that's interesting to you. If you show an interest, the land trust will find a way for you to help. You can decide which path you want to take, and whether it already exists or not, the land trust will lay down that path in front of you. Deb Cary emphasized that the work being done can be on any scale, including anything as small as "taking brochures and information about the local trust to community events" to something as big as you deciding to "offer to organize a dog day at the new property and invite people to bring their dogs". The possibilities truly are endless, and if you show an interest, you will be rewarded with a way to use that interest.

A Bright Future

Land trusts need help wherever they can get it. They're not helpless, but they are dependent on the community; it's the way that their organizations are set up to be run. They rely on the interest and passion of the people they serve to get their work done, to serve those people. Whether it's an annual donation, a monthly visit to volunteer and lend a hand, or just reaching out to find something else to do, getting involved is the best and only way to help these land trusts. They serve their communities and beyond, and their work should not go unrecognized. They deserve

to be compensated for the work that they do, no matter how it's done. The work that these and all other land trusts are accomplishing is important, and the longer it gets put off, the closer we as a planet get to never being able to turn back. There is a time limit on your opportunity to help, and if the change doesn't start soon, if getting involved gets put off too much longer, then it *will* be too late one day. Making this impact is well worth any time or money you will spend doing so. Fighting for this cause is the greatest thing that anybody can accomplish in their lifetime, because without succeeding in this mission, one day people won't have the opportunity to achieve anything. This world needs to be saved and change needs to happen soon. You have the ability to be and make that change, both on yourself and the world. Now, it's up to you to decide what you'll do with it. Will you sit back and let it be somebody else's problem? Or will you take action, and be the reason behind the protection of the land that's required to save this planet?

Contributors: Bob Wilber, Deborah Cary, Anna Wilkins, Cynthia Henshaw, Tom Cotton, Colin Novik