



FOR THE LONG HAUL:

Protecting 'Nature's Stage' in the Pacific Northwest

BY MARINA SCHAUFFLER

The restoration of the Elwha River on Washington's Olympic Peninsula is a story of landscape-scale renewal. A dam removal project of unprecedented scale, from 2011 to 2014, brought about "massive ecosystem recovery," notes Tom Sanford, executive director of the accredited North Olympic Land Trust. Now the focus is on long-term climate resilience which, Sanford says, is really a matter of "building ecosystem strength."

In partnership with the Lower Elwha Klallam Tribe, the land trust has identified sites to conserve along the river's lower stretches that represent the "best of the best salmon habitat," Sanford says, providing ecosystem attributes that could help sustain Chinook salmon—a favored species of the endangered resident orcas in Puget Sound.

Ecological restoration work "has been a focus of local tribes since forever; they're the

experts," Sanford notes. "We're just happy to jump on board, helping to prioritize key riparian parcels and raise funds for their permanent protection."

An Innovative Collaboration

That fundraising effort is getting help from an innovative partnership launched early in 2019, the Pacific Northwest Resilient Landscapes Initiative (the Initiative).

Established by the Land Trust Alliance, Oregon Community Foundation, Seattle Foundation and Idaho Community Foundation, with generous funding from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, this partnership is regranteeing DDCF funds along with matching funds contributed by donors to the three community foundations.

"The idea of interdependence is a big part of this Initiative," says Carlos Garcia, environmental resource officer at Oregon Community Foundation. "This partnership combines the expertise and resources of a national foundation and national conservation organization with the local relationships and expertise of land trusts and community foundations. Collaboration is the *only* way to work on these issues."

The Initiative is also helping land trusts with organizational resilience, allowing them

In the Pacific Northwest, continuing climate disruptions could diminish the resilience of both natural and human communities. As part of the Pacific Northwest Resilient Landscapes Initiative, North Coast Land Conservancy has received a \$500,000 grant from Oregon Community Foundation to help conserve the Rainforest Reserve, pictured.

JUSTIN BAILIE

to maintain momentum during a challenging pandemic. It's been a relief, Sanford says, to have that "additional buoy and lifeline."

The participating land trusts are undertaking ambitious efforts to support the region's rich biodiversity and to "help strengthen the resilience of the human communities they serve," says Owen Wozniak, land transactions program manager for the Land Trust Alliance, "by improving access to clean waters, reducing flooding risks and helping nourish local residents through protection of fishing grounds and farmland."

A Resource-Rich Region Under Pressure

Through the Initiative, land trusts in Idaho, Oregon and Washington are now benefiting from grants targeted for land projects and capacity building that could support climate resilience in a region facing some of the West's most intense development pressures. According to a 2016 study by Conservation Science Partners (cited at disappearingwest.org), these three states

lost more than 1,000 square miles of natural area between 2001 and 2011.

Pressures on the lands and rivers of these states could intensify in coming decades as more refugees from hot and arid settings seek out the Pacific Northwest's relatively moderate climate. Yet the region is not exempt from climate impacts, many of which are already affecting its natural resource-based economy and traditions.

Reduced winter snowpack has increased the risk of water scarcity and wildfires. Warmer ocean temperatures are endangering salmon, a keystone species in riverine ecosystems. Continuing climate disruptions could further threaten wildlife, strain agricultural production and weaken coastal fisheries—diminishing the resilience of both natural and human communities.

Strategies Grounded in Resilience Science

Recognizing the need for landscape-scale planning focused on climate resilience, the Initiative employs recent scientific research by the accredited Nature Conservancy. That

research identifies landscape "features" containing diverse geophysical elements (including elevation, slope aspects, soils and bedrock) that can help ecosystems withstand climate disruptions and continue supporting a diverse—if shifting—array of plants and animals.

The goal of resilience science is to "identify those places that we know are important for conservation today and that we have great confidence will be important in the future," says Bob Unnasch, who recently retired as the Conservancy's Idaho director of science but continues as a consultant on the Pacific Northwest Resilient Landscapes Initiative.

By shifting the focus from protecting particular species to what the Conservancy calls "conserving nature's stage," resilience science highlights the importance of fostering connectivity among protected parcels, particularly ones with the diverse microclimates that could help species adapt as the climate warms.

For Kaniksu Land Trust, a small accredited land trust with a large service area in

River's Edge, a 104-acre farm in the Dungeness River Valley purchased jointly by North Olympic Land Trust and the Jamestown S'Klallam Tribe, will preserve critical habitat along a river that is home to several endangered fish species.



JOHN GUSSMAN

FOR THE LONG HAUL:

Protecting 'Nature's Stage' in the Pacific Northwest



WESTERN PLEASURE GUEST RANCH

Ranch horses at Western Pleasure Guest Ranch outside of Sandpoint, Idaho, where 643 acres of working timber and ranchland are protected through a conservation easement in partnership with Idaho Department of Lands and Kaniksu Land Trust.

Idaho and Montana that stretches from Rocky Mountain summits to fertile river valleys, the Conservancy's data will enable more strategic and thoughtful conservation and help "to elevate the organization's work to the next level," notes Kaniksu's conservation director, Regan Plumb.

With Initiative support, Kaniksu is working with a spatial ecologist at the Heart of the Rockies Initiative (HOTR), a regional conservation collaborative, to develop a strategic conservation plan that will pinpoint areas with notable climate resilience (alongside parameters set by the organization's board of directors). Given that Kaniksu lacks in-house capacity for GIS map development, Plumb is grateful that the Initiative "brought us this opportunity" to collaborate with HOTR, who she notes has been "a wonderful partner to us."

Initiative grants are also helping land trusts incorporate resilience science into their existing conservation plans. The accredited Wood River Land Trust, also based in Idaho, is in the process of integrating the Conservancy's data into new maps

due out this fall. Already, says Amy Trujillo, Wood River's deputy director, the mapping exercise has begun to "elevate the conversation around climate resilience within the land trust and the community."

Amplifying Impact

"A terrific part of the model," Trujillo says, is the focus on building the capacity of land trusts, recognizing the need for "resilient organizations in order to have resilient communities." This latest Initiative is an extension of several ongoing conservation collaborations in the region; the Pacific Northwest has done "a really great job, with the Land Trust Alliance's help, at regional alliances," she reflects.

The participation of regional community foundations brings a welcome "new audience," Trujillo adds, helping land trusts reach donors who have not traditionally supported land conservation.

Garcia, at Oregon Community Foundation, is finding donors very receptive to supporting climate resilience, "recognizing this is one of the urgent issues of our time,"

and to projects that "build on shared values people hold around stewardship, land and caring for future generations."

Garcia is optimistic that this unprecedented partnership among the region's community foundations is "laying the groundwork for working together further in the future." This initiative is a "big springboard" for climate resilience work, he says, with the regional foundations "stepping boldly into this and creating new staff capacity."

Feeding Communities and Guarding Against Flooding

By mobilizing a "new source of capital funding," says Hilary Aten, conservation director at the accredited Washington Farmland Trust (formerly PCC Farmland Trust), the Initiative has provided valuable support for ambitious and complicated projects like Reiner Farm—a buy-protect-sell transaction in a rapidly developing floodplain in the Snohomish Valley.

Washington Farmland Trust has welcomed The Nature Conservancy's terrestrial-based data and looks forward to the plans for similar aquatic resiliency data—due out in a few years. Salmon habitat restoration and flood risk reduction are critical drivers of natural resource conservation in the land trust's service area, so having added data helps develop a "finer-grained strategy, ensuring these efforts work in concert," Aten notes. Washington Farmland Trust has augmented the Conservancy's data with data sets on water availability to help project how critical water rights will become in different riparian locations.

The land trust's Reiner Farm project will protect 260 acres of productive farmland, forestland and habitat along a 2-mile stretch of the Skykomish River. The project is part of a local "farm/fish/flood" strategy that seeks to preserve prime farmland and traditional fishing grounds, restore habitat for endangered salmon and provide flood resilience. Through the land trust's partnership with the Tulalip Tribes, who have a longstanding salmon restoration project underway, nearly 80 acres of the property's riparian lands will be permanently protected.



JOHN FINNELL

The Wood River Land Trust in Idaho is using science to elevate the conversation around climate resilience within the land trust and the community. Deputy Director Amy Trujillo identifies the need for resilient organizations in order to have resilient communities.

Reiner Farm parallels with another North Olympic Land Trust project receiving Initiative support—River’s Edge, a 104-acre farm in the Dungeness River Valley purchased jointly with the Jamestown S’Klallam Tribe. Its mix of riparian woodlands and farm fields, which would likely have been subdivided for residential development, will preserve critical habitat along a river that is home to several endangered fish species.

Protecting riverfront, Sanford says, helps waterways plagued by low flows in summer and early fall create pools that can sustain fish. And as climate change creates more intense flood events, conserved riparian parcels can help absorb runoff and reduce flooding downstream. Keeping floodplains in sustainably managed agricultural production also fosters the resilience of local communities. The guiding principle for North Olympic Land Trust, Sanford adds, is “what’s best for the river and what’s best for local food security.”

Sea to Summit

Low waterflows are a particular concern for two small coastal Oregon communities, Arch Cape and Cannon Beach, both of which receive heavy summer visitation—drawing down water levels when they are naturally at their lowest. Both towns rely on small streams for drinking water, explains Katie Voelke, executive director of the accredited North Coast Land Conservancy (NCLC). The watershed for those vulnerable streams lies high inland in the Coast Range.

Support from the Initiative is helping NCLC almost double its total land holdings with a “sea to summit” wildlife corridor that will span from a marine reserve off the coastline to Coast Range peaks topping 3,000 feet. The ecological diversity encompassed in this 3,500-acre “Rainforest Reserve” is impressive, Voelke says; “everything that is on our coast is within that corridor.”

Making Climate Relevant

Participating in the Initiative has helped NCLC reach people who knew the land trust “worked on nature,” Voelke notes, “but couldn’t tie its work to climate change.” A huge benefit of the Initiative, she adds, is “forcing us to articulate how this project affects climate mitigation” and “how riparian rainforest is one of the best ways for Oregon to meet its carbon emissions targets.”

“Climate change can feel overwhelming,” Voelke reflects, and it helps people to realize that local land conservation can be “as tangible as a solar panel on your house” in terms of carbon impacts. Making those linkages “brings a lot of inspiration and power to our message.” Community residents better understand now that “we do really care about the bigger picture and that we’re contributing to that.”

Amy Trujillo of Wood River Land Trust concurs, and is finding that the Initiative’s emphasis on resilience “makes climate adaptation really relevant” to local communities. Its project expanding a riverfront greenway in Hailey, Idaho, will help reconnect the Big Wood River to its floodplain, mitigating floodwaters in neighborhoods that have come to expect some degree of flooding each year. That sort of tangible benefit can transform perceptions, Trujillo says, helping residents understand “how important land conservation is in our everyday lives.” 🍌

MARINA SCHAUFFLER IS AN ENVIRONMENTAL WRITER AND COLUMNIST IN MAINE.

The goal of the Pacific Northwest Resilient Landscapes Initiative is to unite and empower people from across the region to protect their lands and waters so the many benefits can be enjoyed by all people. Visit www.lta.org/pnw-resilient-landscapes-initiative.