

# Partnerships are Key to Stewarding Preserves with Public Access

by Kendall Slee

## WHEN SUDBURY VALLEY TRUSTEES (SVT) (MA)

took on the management of the ailing 315-acre Memorial Forest and Wildlife Sanctuary in 1995, the land trust set out to reverse a pattern of misuse. Off-road vehicles had ravaged stream banks, transforming fish habitat into mud puddles. Leaders of a car theft ring that had operated on the land had been arrested, but the charred shells of more than 150 disassembled vehicles remained. Trucks were sneaking onto the land and dumping construction waste. Gunfire, beer bashes and dirt bike rallies were common.

The landowner, the General Federation of Women's Clubs of Massachusetts, had little funding for stewardship, so SVT jumped in, raising more than \$100,000 for stewardship and restoration, and agreed to take ownership of the 220 acres after managing it for three years. The property is part of 3,000 acres of protected lands with rare sandy pine barrens and wetlands, and well worth the effort, explained former SVT Executive Director Stephen Johnson. "This is a resource of spectacular values, very unusual habitat in our area."

## Enlisting Partners

SVT's first step to combat illegal activities on the land was



Volunteers for the American Chestnut Land Conservancy (MD) clear trash from a preserve.

American Chestnut Land Conservancy

to convince the two cities, and state and federal agencies that owned adjacent open lands to block vehicle entryways. "We felt that if we put together a partnership among the five landowners, we'd have a shot of turning this around," Mr. Johnson said.

The land trust began restoring stream banks, and removed more than 20 tons of trash and debris from the property. SVT hired a part-time employee to patrol the land with a cell phone, including weekends and even some overnight shifts. He developed police contacts from the two cities the sanctuary straddles and enlisted them to arrest dirt bikers who defied verbal warnings and signs forbidding motorized vehicles. But mostly he explained rules to visitors and warned against misuse. "It was a program of constructive

engagement; 95 percent of his job was talking to people," Mr. Johnson said.

While not every publicly accessible preserve experiences the same difficulties as the Memorial Forest and Wildlife Sanctuary, opening natural lands for public use can bring challenges, including conflicts among users, potential accidents and injuries [see the "Law Update" on liability from the Spring 2002 Exchange, page 23], damage from people and pets that litter, stray from a trail, vandalize or engage in other

undesirable activity. And, like SVT, many land trusts rely on a variety of partners—ranging from government agencies, to community groups, to hikers with mobile phones—to help address such difficulties.

By opening all 21 of its parks and preserves to the public, Scenic Hudson (NY) hopes to educate and inspire visitors to embrace conservation, said Land Stewardship Specialist Leathem Mehaffey. To provide the higher level of oversight and management that often comes with public access, Scenic Hudson enlists help in managing its preserves, spread along 315 miles of the Hudson River Corridor. “Due to the size of the region and our limited staff resources, it is critical to form partnerships in the management of our protected land. We simply don’t have the infrastructure to be a regional land management agency,” Mr. Mehaffey said.

The New York State Office of Parks and Department of Environmental Conservation lend trail building machinery and other equipment for projects on Scenic Hudson’s preserves. “They also help us by providing ‘eyes and ears’ on our properties and, when necessary, they can provide an enforcement presence,” Mr. Mehaffey added, explaining that a special state force patrols for unauthorized use of off-road vehicles, jet skis and snowmobiles on public and private land. The superintendent of one state park patrols an adjacent land trust preserve, and the state also manages some lands that Scenic Hudson plans to transfer to it.

In other locations, Scenic Hudson taps local groups such as a chapter of the Audubon Society to regularly monitor a property. Scenic Hudson’s full-time volunteer coordinator works with other staff to recruit thousands of volunteers every year for cleanup, maintenance and restoration projects. Through these events, volunteers gain a sense of ownership in Scenic Hudson’s preserves, and some return regularly to visit the land.

“Organizing volunteer groups and finding volunteer coor-



American Chestnut Land Conservancy

*Hunters volunteer a minimum of 16 hours to hunt in designated areas of American Chestnut Land Conservancy’s preserve and adjacent lands that the land trust manages.*

dinators is a great way to make inroads to a community and develop interest in a property,” Mr. Mehaffey explained. “We want to make communities aware that the property is for their use and enjoyment.”

### Positive Use Keeps Abuse at Bay

Visitors who hike, bird watch and come for other recreational pursuits are often a land trust’s best stewardship allies.

SVT’s restoration of Memorial Forest included building a trailhead, trailhead parking area and four footbridges to make the land more accessible to hikers. “It’s really important that we have folks out there respectfully using our property. It keeps the inappropriate uses at bay,” Mr. Johnson said. “We may get a call from someone in the woods telling us ‘There is a dirt biker now headed to this road! It’s especially helpful that more hikers have mobile phones. If they call while it’s going on, we are more likely to be able to do something about it.’”

The mere presence of hikers or birders can discourage misuse of a property, noted Julie Stoneman, executive director of Southwest Michigan Land Conservancy. “If people are enjoying the wildlife, that helps send a message that this isn’t the place for a party,” she said.

When Jeff Montgomery, superintendent of management of The Trustees of Reservation’s (MA) Charles River Valley

Scenic Hudson



*Visitors take in the views from Scenic Hudson’s (NY) preserve on Mount Beacon.*



*Volunteers construct a boardwalk through a fragile area on American Chestnut Land Conservancy's 800-acre preserve in southeastern Maryland.*

Management Unit, started receiving complaints about speeding mountain bikers on the Noanet Woods preserve near Boston, he knew he needed to befriend some bikers. By bringing them to discussions about other users' complaints and the ecological damage caused by bikes going off trails, he enlisted their participation in a solution.

Those who were concerned about losing their privileges to bike on the land began warning fellow bikers against misuse and organized volunteer days for trail repairs. "When these guys are speeding by us on their bikes, getting word out is almost impossible. Peer pressure does a better job," Mr. Montgomery said.

The Trustees ultimately decided to require permits for mountain bikes on the preserve. Bikers who apply for permits agree to stay on trails and yield to hikers and equestrians. The permit system and a new weekend ranger—partially funded by the permits—have helped reduce problems, Mr. Montgomery noted. The permits cost just \$15 a year (\$5 for land trust members), but those who disagree with the rules tend to go elsewhere rather than bother getting the permit, he said.

### **Recreational Users as Stewards**

The New Jersey Conservation Foundation (NJCF) in 1998 enlisted an unlikely partner to take on management of its 260-acre Diamond Shamrock Preserve after vandalism, fires, off-road vehicles and other misuses became a problem: the New Jersey Off Road Vehicle Park, a nonprofit organization of off-road vehicle enthusiasts.

NJCF approached the off-road vehicle group to discuss the difficulties, and the group offered to manage the entire 260-acre preserve for 10 years in exchange for use of a 26-acre portion of the land that had been heavily mined for gravel. Members of the organization regularly patrol the land, helping to prevent off-road vehicle use outside of the designated area and other prohibited activities. They are also restoring

portions of the land, using a plan written by NJCF. NJCF hopes to transfer the property to the state when the management agreement ends in 2008. At that time, the last remaining trails will be closed, and restoration will have been completed on the entire tract, said Susan Currie, director of acquisition and stewardship.

The American Chestnut Land Conservancy (MD) organized a hunting club to help control the burgeoning deer population on its 800-acre preserve on the Chesapeake Bay and the adjoining 1,790 acres it manages for Maryland's Department of Natural Resources and The Nature Conservancy. In addition to acquiring state hunting licenses, club members must dedicate at least 16 work hours every year to earn permission to hunt on designated portions of the properties. Most far exceed the required hours, and many contribute special skills, said Executive Director Margaret Nyland. Some are carpenters and electricians; others have become adept at spotting invasive plants for removal. "Once they demolished and carted off an old mobile home. That's not something you'd ask of your average volunteer," Ms. Nyland added.

The McDowell Sonoran Land Trust (AZ) doesn't own the 10,406-acre McDowell Sonoran Preserve; the city of Scottsdale does. But the land trust repeatedly led campaigns for the public referenda to buy land for the preserve. The land trust's stewardship presence is also essential, said the city's preserve manager, Claire Miller. Its 52 volunteer land stewards assist the city's three-person land preservation staff in maintaining trails, sharing information about the preserve's rules and natural resources, and spotting problems. Stewards this year will expand their patrol to 16,600 adjacent acres of state trust lands that the land trust is working to add to the preserve. "As the only paid field staff for the preserve, I can't even begin to place a value on the work they do," Ms. Miller said.

Four to eight volunteer stewards are grouped into teams



*Volunteer land stewards maintain trails at McDowell Sonoran Preserve in Scottsdale, AZ. McDowell Sonoran Land Trust trains and coordinates the volunteers.*

that patrol specific sections of the preserve. A volunteer leader coordinates monitoring visits, compiles the team's reports, and serves as the primary liaison with the land trust, which, in turn, coordinates stewardship activities with Ms. Miller and the city.

For four years, the land trust has trained new stewards in a course through Scottsdale Community College. Inspired by a similar program launched by the Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests, the growing curriculum covers desert ecology, local history and geology, first aid, mapping, fire prevention and how to evacuate an area in the event of fire, and "verbal judo" for dealing with confrontational situations. *[A course syllabus, sample stewardship checklist, explanation of stewardship duties and volunteer steward application form are available at [www.LTAnet.org](http://www.LTAnet.org); [click here to view them.](#)]* The popular spring course is limited to 25 participants; and there is usually a waiting list to enroll, said Chet Andrews, chairman of the land trust's stewardship committee.

### **Managing the Partnership**

Whether relying on volunteers, another nonprofit organization or a government agency for stewardship assistance, plan to put time and resources into maintaining good communication.

"We do a lot of informal relationship building, keeping lines of communication open with neighbors and visitors to our preserves," said Ms. Stoneman of the Land Conservancy of West Michigan's three preserves with publicly accessible trails. "We're trying to create more formal 'friends' groups of volunteers to keep an eye on each preserve. We'll track them in a database and send them mail and e-mail about workdays. We have a stewardship coordinator who keeps in touch with them."

"Having volunteers takes time," warned Laura Mattei,

stewardship director for Sudbury Valley Trustees. She is introducing a system to communicate with SVT's volunteer stewards quarterly, and working to provide training about the land trust, its mission and the basics on monitoring and trail maintenance.



*Riders take in the views at the city of Scottsdale's 10,406-acre McDowell Sonoran Preserve.*

## Managing Conflicts that Come with Public Use

Inviting the public onto preserves requires careful planning to strike a balance between access to a property and protecting its natural, archeological or historic resources, advised Lisa Vernegaard, director of planning and ecology for The Trustees of Reservations, which owns 91 preserves throughout Massachusetts.

"You first need to identify the significant resource features on a property, and consider whether the impact from public use is acceptable," Ms. Vernegaard explained. Good site design and ongoing monitoring and planning can often allow users to enjoy a property with fragile resources, she added. "If you have a rare plant species along a trail, you may opt to reroute the trail to go around that area. Or you may temporarily close a trail if there's a bird nesting that you don't want to disturb.

"Second, determine the desired condition of the property," she said. "How much impact are you willing to tolerate? At a property with many rare plant species that are vulnerable to trampling you may tolerate very little recreational use. Once you set this framework, you can decide what kind of management is appropriate."

Determining a property's capacity is more of an intuitive art than a science, Ms. Vernegaard explained: "It's based on how many people can come to the property and still enjoy the experience...If it's a wilderness experience, you don't want your visitor seeing many other visitors. If it's a swimming beach, the visitor experience can still be positive with lots of people surrounding them.

"When you start to hit a critical mass of visitors, the likelihood of conflict seems to go up," she said.

For example, dogs are a point of conflict at some of The Trustees' heavily used preserves. Some visitors complain of dog owners who fail to keep their pets under control. Dogs have also taken an ecological toll. Superintendent of the Charles River Valley Management Unit Jeff Montgomery remembers watching in dismay in recent years as some 40 dogs frolicked in Rocky Woods preserve's three-acre pond.

The land trust placed a moratorium on dog walking on the property in April 2001, and launched a \$500,000 restoration of heavily used portions of the preserve, including transforming an asphalt parking area next to the pond into a field of wildflowers, planting 3,000 native trees and plants, and removing five dilapidated building. The land trust implemented a "Green Dog Program" this April that requires dog owners to purchase a \$60 annual permit—which allows entry for up to two dogs. The program prohibits dogs from the popular pond area, and requires that they be on leash in the parking lot and main access trail. Receptacles were installed for dog waste, and owners are required to clean up after their pets.

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To make the most of its 1,000-plus volunteers, Scenic Hudson has a full-time volunteer and outreach coordinator, in addition to an Americorp intern who specializes in volunteer coordination. The land trust has also learned to involve its public agency and nonprofit stewardship partners in developing a preserve's site management plan, rather than assigning them a list of tasks in a management agreement after the plan is developed. By participating in planning, partners will feel more ownership in the plan and its goals, explained Mr. Mehaffey. It also serves as a reality check by encouraging discussion about both partners' capacity to fulfill a plan.

"As we work through the site management plan, we seek to identify the roles and responsibilities of both Scenic Hudson and its partners," Mr. Mehaffey said. "We made the mistake with some properties of listing what was needed to manage them, but not really taking full stock of what Scenic Hudson and the management partner were capable of doing."

Scenic Hudson is moving away from legal management agreements because it prefers to collaborate with partners to

address management difficulties, rather than take legal actions to enforce an agreement, he added. "It's better to sit down around the site management plan, because it is constantly being revised as conditions on the land change. We can take into account changes in capacity of the management partner as well, and keep up the dialogue."

### Costs and Benefits

There is no simple way to calculate the cost of opening land to the public. Scenic Hudson's site management plans detail management actions, itemizing each expense. The land trust bases its stewardship budget on estimates derived from the plan.

On SVT's Memorial Forest and Wildlife Sanctuary, initial restoration costs ranged from a \$10,000 parking area improvement at the trailhead, to \$3,000 for occasional visits by an off-duty police officer, to producing and printing maps and brochures of the property. Predicting replacement costs due to vandalism is particularly difficult, noted Ms. Mattei. On one SVT site, vandals repeatedly damaged the plexiglass covering of an educational kiosk. Eventually, the land trust

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Visitors who buy the permit also receive a family land trust membership. This ensures that dog owners have been briefed on regulations, and that they're familiar with the organization through its newsletters, Mr. Montgomery said.

Ms. Vernegaard recommends these steps for resolving such conflicts:

- Define the problem. "A problem well-defined is half solved. Is it recurring? At what frequency? Where are we getting the complaints or information?"
- Consider many solutions. Talk with property managers from other organizations. Involve your constituents. "When we zero in on a solution, we look at a broad range of potential costs and benefits: resources needed to implement a solution, costs to our image, donor ramifications, benefits to the visitor experience, benefits to resource protection," she said.
- Give plenty of warning before implementing new rules. The Trustees post signs explaining upcoming changes and hold public forums before instituting new rules. (The forum on dog walking at Rocky Woods drew 130 people to discuss the proposed rules.)
- Provide a way for users to give feedback by phone, e-mail or through staff contact. This keeps communications open with users, and may bring out ways that rules should be improved or adjusted.

Basic improvements can help manage public use:

- Many land trusts use barriers to discourage vehicles from entering a preserve, such as posts at a trail entrance or fences along a parking area.
- Signs should clearly state preserve rules. On properties where off-road vehicle use is a problem, Sudbury Valley Trustees (MA) posts signs with large, red lettering that is visible even to a speeding motorist.
- Mark boundaries well. "We have found that some off-road vehicles have entered our preserves from a neighboring property," noted Kim Douglass, Triangle Land Conservancy's (NC) director of stewardship.
- Parking lots can influence traffic on a preserve. When the Land Conservancy of West Michigan opened its 23-acre Minnie Skwarek Nature Preserve in a residential neighborhood, it decided against installing a parking area. "We think it would overrun the preserve," Executive Director Julie Stoneman said. "We want to make sure that we're good neighbors and we're not bringing excessive traffic around homes." Visitors can park at a nearby high school parking lot on weekends or access the preserve from the nearby town of Spring Lake on a bike trail, she noted.

decided to stop shelling out the hundreds of dollars required to replace it, she added.

Even more difficult to calculate are the benefits of providing public access, at the heart of some land trusts' mission. For land trusts that primarily protect private lands that are closed to the public, a few publicly accessible preserves can provide a tangible demonstration of their work.

That's the case for Triangle Land Conservancy (NC), which has publicly accessible preserves in each of the three counties in which it operates, noted Director of Stewardship Kim Douglass. "It helps people know what kind of land we're

working to preserve because they can actually see it. It gives people a sense of ownership that they might not otherwise get," she said.

Land trusts report that their public preserves attract many individual supporters who enjoy visiting and volunteering on the land. "Most of our members join because we have places where they like to go walking," said Ms. Mattei. "There are so many people who enjoy the outdoors." 

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**Kendall Slee** is editor of *Exchange*.