

## HABITAT CONSERVATION IN THE COMMUNITY

Naturescaping efforts undertaken on your property can teach you a great deal: how to work with nature's processes, rather than against them; how to heal the scars of the earth and prevent further injury; how interconnected life is. Your time and efforts are rewarded with wondrous variety, but you also gain specific knowledge, skills, and experiences that you can share with others.

Before beginning any community-based project, you should read one or more of the following excellent references: *Building an Ark: Tools for the Preservation of Natural Diversity through Land Protection* (Hoose 1981), *Creating Successful Communities* (Mantell, Harper, and Propst 1990), *Making Things Happen: How to Be an Effective Volunteer* (Wolfe 1991), *Land-Saving Action* (Brenneman and Bates 1984), *Organizing for Social Change: A Manual for Activists in the 1990s* (Bobo, Kendall, and Max 1991), *The Simple Act of Planting a Tree: Tree People* (Lipkis 1990), and *How to Save Your Neighborhood, City, or Town* (Lipkis 1993).

The information and suggestions presented below are only an introduction to creative processes. Human, environmental, and financial resources, as well as the political structure, will vary by community. Therefore, every community-based project is unique.

### Making a Difference

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In 1985 an experiment in grassroots conservation began with the initiation of the Community Baboon (howler monkey) Sanctuary along the Belize River in Belize, a small country in Central America. This project was the beginning of community conservation as a movement and as an effective tool for private citizens to begin to become true stewards of their land. In this experiment in grassroots conservation, more than one hundred landowners, mainly subsistence farmers and small ranchers, pledged to manage their lands for the conservation of the Black Howler Monkey. These landowners have since become an inspiration for villagers all over Belize, and the value of what these subsistence farmers have done is beginning to echo throughout the world. But the real magic of this small experiment is that it is a model for any community of landowners to use once they step beyond their own property and join hands with their neighbors to pursue proper management and use of their lands.

Although the Community Baboon Sanctuary targeted the howler monkey for a conservation effort, the complete habitat of the monkey was investigated to determine what was needed to meet the howler's needs in the conservation plan. Since howlers depend on trees for leaves and fruit, the habitat of a wide

variety of birds and other animals that depend on the same type of forest were also protected. One third or more of those birds that benefitted from the conservation plan are Neotropical migrants. They spend most of their time wintering in southern countries and coming from or going to breeding grounds in North America. Research in Central America has shown that the lands of the Belizean farmers in the Community Baboon Sanctuary, which are mainly secondary forests, are especially good for these Neotropical migrants. However, destruction of our temperate forests is having an alarming effect on these migrants. Protecting their wintering grounds is doing only half the job.

Just as some Belizeans have learned to become stewards of their lands, so must we in North America protect our lands. You can start with what you have that is most valuable or that most needs protecting. Do you live in a woods or on a prairie? Do you own wetlands? Do you own an eagle roost or an area where box turtles roam? If you choose to target a species, then you need to educate yourself about it—its foods, breeding areas, roosts, nesting needs, total range, and so forth. If it is a large animal, then a large area may be required to meet its needs, even seasonally. If it is a migratory species, your lands might support that species only during certain seasons, but that season may be crucial for it.

Your next step is to develop a conservation plan for the lands you are concerned with. When considering a plan, you must look at the specific area involved and the way it meets or could meet the species' needs. At this point, it is helpful to get or prepare some maps of the area. Government maps, aerial photos, and vegetation and soil maps can reveal what your land is suitable for and whether it can support the species you have targeted or the habitat you are interested in protecting. Once you are ready to formulate a plan, remember to include maps that delineate all properties that must be included in the plan.

Maps give an overall view of the lands involved. They can be generated by computer programs and GIS (geological inventory survey) systems, but the basic principles can be accomplished in low-tech ways as well. You should map as many characteristics of the area as possible or as needed. If you make all maps to the same scale, you can place vegetation maps and property boundary maps against the window or over a light table to see how the boundaries overlap.

You can then make contact with affected neighbors and provide them with education materials. It is best to begin with neighbors who are most likely to be sympathetic to your plan. With luck, these will be your geographically closest neighbors as well. It makes sense to try to maximize your successes in the beginning by aligning with others who share your views. Once momentum begins, social coercion may encourage others to modify their initial objections to your plan.

If support appears likely, you should begin formalizing management plans for individual properties, making sure that they fit together in an overall plan that will most benefit the species or habitats you are seeking to enhance. Ask initially for things landowners would be willing to concede, then gradually expand your conservation goals.

Your neighbors may eventually express an interest in additional outcomes. The initial village in the Community Baboon Sanctuary was interested in tourism, so we worked to get some publicity for the project toward this end. Publicity can have several advantages. Local publicity can inform other neighbors, who might eventually be part of an expanded program. It might stimulate others to begin community conservation projects. If enough neighbors are involved, you might want to publish a project newsletter to keep them abreast of what is happening with the program. Once a strong neighborhood association is formed around a conservation goal, it might function in other ways to create a stronger, safer neighborhood.

Finally, you need a formal structure to keep the program running. If you want the program to evolve and maintain itself successfully, you need a structure by which it can run without you. This may mean the creation of a nonprofit organization or some legal body with a board of directors. If you apply for grants or hire staff, even temporary or part-time workers, you will need a legal entity that can oversee their work. The success of the effort depends on who is involved, what you are trying to protect or conserve, and how you proceed.

If you live near a natural area or a park, your conservation plan can help form a buffer zone. In this case, it is important to contact the park staff and work directly with them. Existing governmental and nongovernmental conservation groups may seem reluctant to embrace what you are trying to do because the concept is new or you lack formal credentials. Work slowly, but maintain contact with the staff. Once park officials see you have neighborhood support and are trying to complement the park's programs, you should have more success.

Suppose you wanted to create a suburban woodland sanctuary to support songbirds. First, you should find a simple way to monitor the breeding bird species and their numbers, followed by yearly censuses of the area to see how well the plan is succeeding. The project goal would be to help natural forest succession slowly take over the neighborhood. Neighbors could be asked to landscape their yards with only vegetation native to the area. Next, you could plant trees within the lawn expanses, allowing enough room for future tree growth. In many cases you need only transplant and nurture seedlings. As the area becomes more shaded, neighbors could be encouraged to cultivate small areas of native flowers and thick groundcovers. Eventually the lawn would be replaced with

travel or woodchip paths meandering through the growing trees and woodland undergrowth.

The main lesson learned from the Community Baboon Sanctuary is that individuals can make a difference. Individuals who take responsibility for their lands and their neighborhoods can sometimes work more effectively and with more success than large public or private organizations. A carefully developed plan, bolstered by self-education and carried out with flexibility and creativity, can be effective and inspire others. Community conservation is an avenue open to anyone.

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## Land Trusts

Your grand plans for a community migratory bird sanctuary may include properties owned by individuals who do not become involved in the project. They may not have the time or money to invest in naturescaping, they may dislike "group" ventures, or they may simply not share your concern for migratory birds. In such cases (they are bound to arise eventually), your organization should consider the involvement or creation of a land trust.

Today, few North Americans are lucky enough to live close to wilderness. For many people, however, their lives are greatly enhanced by land preserved by land trusts close to home, and at little cost to the public. Land trusts are private, nonprofit (local, regional, or statewide) conservation organizations directly involved in land transactions that protect natural, scenic, recreational, agricultural, historic, or cultural property.

Land trusts can own land or hold conservation easements on it and work for the transfer of lands between other conservation groups or agencies. Land trusts are also responsible for managing lands, educating the public, providing technical assistance, influencing public policy on land conservation issues, acting as intermediaries in land disputes, and researching land use and its effects on the environment.

Several types of land trusts are broadly recognized. Multiresource land trusts have more than one resource goal in protecting land. Agricultural and forest land trusts are primarily focused on the conservation of agricultural and forest lands. Community land trusts advocate shared ownership and use of land and its