

THE CALIFORNIA NATURE CONSERVANCY: TURNING LAND PROTECTION OPPORTUNITIES INTO ACCOMPLISHMENTS

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Abstract: The Nature Conservancy is a national, private, non-profit, non-political land conservation organization dedicated to the preservation of biological diversity. Efforts at land protection take many forms including outright acquisition, cooperative management agreements, and conservation partnerships. Land protection, whether by purchase, easement, lease, or other agreement, is followed by long-term management and stewardship.

The Nature Conservancy has a good track record in the field of land protection. We have done more of it, over two million acres, than any other private land conservation organization in the United States. The Nature Conservancy is even providing expertise to seven Latin American nations in the field of land protection and preservation of biotic diversity.

This paper will highlight: (1) The Nature Conservancy and how it works, (2) some of our accomplishments in California, and (3) the methods we use to select protection opportunities and how we turn those opportunities into accomplishments.

The Nature Conservancy is a national, private, non-profit, non-political land conservation organization dedicated to the preservation of biological diversity. We do this work by focusing financial, staff, and volunteer resources on protection and stewardship of rare elements: plants, animals, and natural communities. We work on those natural elements that are most rare first. The Nature Conservancy developed a computerized data base which is used on a state-by-state basis as a natural heritage inventory. Our natural heritage approach has been used by state wildlife agencies in over 45 states and is now being adapted to preservation efforts in our international program. In California, the California Natural Diversity Data Base is administered by California Department of Fish and Game with input from The Nature Conservancy. This heritage approach allows each state to track the location and status of rare elements and to rank them in terms of protection needs. This inventory provides The Nature Conservancy (TNC) with the prioritized list we need to approach land protection from an orderly and efficient standpoint.

The process of land protection can take many forms. Outright acquisition, ownership in fee, is TNC's preferred approach. The 324-acre Kaweah Oaks Preserve east of Visalia was purchased in 1983 for \$1,010,000. Some preserves are too large or for other reasons are unable to be purchased outright. Conservation easements offer legal protection to land we do not actually own. Easements permit a landowner to conduct certain activities on the land they retain ownership to but it may preclude specific activities, such as development or cultivation. TNC has several leased properties in California too. The 3280-acre Creighton Ranch Preserve and the smaller Kern Lake Preserve are two sites leased

from the J.G. Boswell Co. Leases can be tailor-made to suit each individual preserve's needs. At Creighton Ranch, for example, the Boswell Co. retains the right to conduct limited waterfowl hunting during the annual waterfowl season. TNC is willing to be creative and flexible when it results in protection of rare natural elements.

Cooperative management agreements (CMA) between TNC and other regulatory agencies such as the Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, California Department of Fish and Game and others are in place to protect our Kern River Preserve, Coachella Valley Preserve, Morongo Preserve, and Northern California Coast Range Preserve. CMA's are the wave of the future in land protection. Certain species and plant communities are distributed in such a way that several entities must combine their talents to achieve preservation. A model of such cooperation is the Coachella Valley Preserve. To protect desert dune systems and the Coachella Valley fringe-toed lizard, local private developers paid into a fund which was part of the overall funding, private and federal dollars included, for this project. The federal and state agencies provide material, patrol and enforcement manpower, and logistical support for this project. They also take part in research and monitoring of rare elements. TNC hires the preserve manager who is responsible for the day-to-day coordination of all aspects of preserve work. Such a cooperative approach is being pursued in the early stages of work to establish a macro-preserve at Carrizo Plains in San Luis Obispo County. A steering committee of energy companies, state and federal agencies, San Luis Obispo County, private property owners, and TNC are working together to establish a preserve which will protect the Soda Lake and its drainage. The goal is to protect 180,000 to 200,000 acres by using a variety of protection methods. All purchases will be from willing sellers only. No condemnation proceedings will take place in order to secure these lands.

TNC also works with private property owners who retain ownership of their land but willingly enter into a conservation partnership with TNC. This voluntary Register of Natural Areas Program enables TNC to work with landowners who recognize the presence of rare natural elements on their property and are committed to the protection of those elements with some guidance from

TNC. Owners are requested to contact us if they plan to change land uses on their property or if they plan to sell. TNC, in exchange, conducts annual monitoring to ensure that the elements are in good shape. An example of this landowner contact program is a 5,000-acre cattle ranch along Dry Creek, east of Visalia, where a population of wintering bald eagles and an endemic Tulare County brodiaea thrive.

Whether land is protected by purchase, easement, lease, CMA, or Landowner Contact, protection is just the first step. Stewardship, the long-term management of the site, is going to be the major responsibility of TNC once the protection phase is complete. Stewardship begins with a site inventory and an assessment of the site's condition. Research at the site may call for revegetation and restoration, exotic species removal, or reintroduction of extirpated species.

When the California Nature Conservancy conducted the California Critical Areas Program in the early 1980's, \$15 million was raised to purchase eleven rare sites in our state. This was an ambitious and successful fundraiser but TNC learned that management money must also be raised up front when land is acquired. Currently, the \$20 million Wild California Program is designed to do that. Under this program, TNC will acquire several key sites to protect plant communities but several localized populations of rare plants and animals will also be targeted for protection. Monies for management and management-oriented research are already ear-marked to ensure that once land is protected, it will be properly managed. The money to fund this program comes entirely from private sources such as individual memberships and contributions, corporate gifts, and donations from wealthy individuals.

As an example of how TNC turns an opportunity into an accomplishment Carrizo Plains provides a model setting. Because of the scope of this project, TNC is one partner in what will be a CMA. The intention, to protect

the entire 180,000 acre drainage of Soda Lake, requires some creative thinking and an awareness of potential problems that may arise so that solutions may be addressed from the beginning. Some land in the Soda Lake area is a Bureau of Land Management Area of Critical Environmental Concern. TNC has an option on some private land but most of the rest of Carrizo Plains is in a small number of large holdings, either cattle ranches or dry-farmed grain land. The energy companies are involved because they may benefit from the establishment of a large nature preserve in the San Luis Obispo/Kern County area. If species such as blunt-nosed leopard lizard, San Joaquin kit fox, San Joaquin antelope squirrel, and giant kangaroo rat could be protected in a macro-preserve to the extent that delisting by state and federal agencies would follow, then the energy companies would be able to reduce their permit paperwork and speed up their drilling timetables.

The Carrizo Plains project offers a number of challenges in the area of stewardship too. Herds of tule elk and pronghorn have already been released in the area. As a growing number of the public makes visits to Carrizo Plains to see large herd animals, Sandhill cranes, or golden eagles, the various management entities will be able to pool their resources, manpower, and talents to properly patrol, and manage this large preserve. The educational opportunities and the increased revenues for local communities and counties are some of the benefits to be expected with increased access to the area. The experience we have gained at Coachella Valley Preserve shows us that TNC can work well with private interests and public agencies to help build viable preserves.

The Nature Conservancy is excited about the opportunities in California and throughout the United States. We look forward to continued partnerships with all the various conservation agencies and with the individual members of the Wildlife Society.