

## "We knew we needed permanent protection."

Co-Founder and current Board President John Gilchrist looks back on 30 years of land protection

*How did the Land Trust get started 30 years ago?*

Actually, it started a year or so before 1978. A group of us involved in parks and planning at the county – Anna Jean Cummings, Rick Jahn, Gary Patton, John Brissenden, Ziggy Rendler-Bregman, and others – started getting together because we thought we needed a land trust in Santa Cruz County. I wasn't on the original Board of Trustees, but came on a couple years later. Antonelli Pond was our first project.

*This was right after Measure J was approved – one of the state's strictest and earliest growth control measures. We hear all the time that we don't need to protect land because it's already protected by Measure J, by county ordinances and zoning.*

All of us knew, I think, that zoning and county plans were temporary – that they can be changed by a majority of the Board. We felt we needed a mechanism to provide permanent protection, in addition to zoning. We didn't want land protection to be at the whim of county and city politics.

*When did Anna Jean Cummings get involved?*

She was an early Board member, then became the Executive Director, sometime in the mid-1980s, I think. She was ED for 6 or 7 years before she became ill with cancer. We protected the Byrne Forest during that time. Before then she'd been involved with Save Soquel, which led the battle to save the O'Neill Ranch from development. She was a galvanizing force in that struggle. The Land Trust played a role as well. The park, Anna Jean Cummings Park, up by Soquel High, was named in recognition of her work.

*During the past 30 years the Land Trust has protected a wide variety of lands – Byrne Forest, Circle P Ranch, Glenwood Open Space Preserve, the Sandhills – do you have a favorite or one that you're proudest of?*

I'd have to say Byrne Forest. In my college days we'd go out to do field studies on land with various ecosystems and Byrne Forest has so many of them –

redwood forests, oak/madrone/mixed evergreen forest, shrub chaparral, meadows, riparian corridors. The Sandhills is a rare habitat, but Byrne Forest is just a fantastic diversity of ecosystems in one small place.

*Organizations, like people, go through phases. The Land Trust is entering its second generation now. What kind of major change do you see in the Land Trust over the past 30 years?*

We protected some important lands under Anna Jean [Cummings] and [Executive Director] Laura Perry. Byrne, Moore Creek, Glenwood. What you call first generation land protection, I guess. We only had one or two staff people during those years. Terry [Corwin, the Land Trust's Executive Director for the past 3 years] has really changed things, moved us to a new level. We have an organization now that has a good staff that is doing far-reaching things.

*What do you see as the greatest challenges the Land Trust faces in the next 30 years and beyond?*

I think we're going to have to deal in some way with water availability and water quality issues that are going to dominate the political landscape over the next 20-25 years. I'd like to see us do still more to protect the farmlands of the Pajaro Valley and North Coast. I'd love to have conservation easements on every piece of viable farmland in the county. It's doable. Santa Cruz County isn't that big.

*You've been doing this work, protecting land in a variety of ways, for decades now. What lessons have you learned?*

We don't celebrate success enough. Take our recent work protecting the Sandhills or the protection of Pajaro Valley farmland. That calls for celebration!

Another lesson I learned was from working in the [Santa Cruz County] Planning Department in the 1970s. We had all sorts of wonderful ideas and policies – on erosion control, sensitive habitats, quarries – and we had some successes in protecting the environment and educating people. Still, there is incredible sediment in the San Lorenzo River coming from places it shouldn't. The lesson is that you have to have follow-through and enforcement. It is a constant need. That's why I'm glad to see the Land Trust taking its stewardship responsibilities seriously. We know that follow-through is as important as the first act of protection.

I think the other thing I learned is that change is slow and because of that we don't always see it as change. The county and city of Santa Cruz at one point planned on building 6,000 to 7,000 houses on the North Coast between the city and the landfill. Today that's all greenbelt, including Moore Creek [Bombay property], which the Land Trust helped protect. A tremendous success we need to remember and celebrate.

*You're a restoration ecologist with a deep love of nature. When did you develop your connection with the natural world?*

In college, at U.C. Berkeley, when I got into classes in biology, plant ecology, geology, environmental planning. Before that we had family camping and backpacking trips in the Sierras, but my deep involvement began in college. That's when I understood the intricacies, the connections, the logic of the natural environment. It makes sense! And I did this in the 1960s when the whole environmental movement was taking off. The Sierra Club, the Nature Conservancy, and others were becoming major forces. It was all happening, a cauldron of ideas and change. It was great to be in college then. And it's great to be doing this now.