

Essex Land Trust May. 25, 2011 Russell Brenneman

Kitchen Table Conservation: How to Start Saving the World

It is nice to be back in Essex, here with all my co-conspirators, friends and former neighbors and might-have-been neighbors. As one who was present at your founding, I am truly astonished by all that you have accomplished so I am here to thank you on behalf of all those who had such high hopes for you who are no longer around to celebrate with you.

Among the qualities that you and they share are your generosity and what might be called “civic engagement.”

Several years ago I was asked to write the chapter on Connecticut in a book whose title is Twentieth-Century New England Land Conservation. It's editor and contributor, Charles J. W. Foster is former dean of the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, was briefly president of The Nature Conservancy and served as the first Secretary of Environmental Affairs of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Reaching for a common theme after he had considered the offerings of the six writers from each of the New England states Dr. Foster chose a subtitle: A History of Civic Engagement. For that common quality was shared by the efforts over the years of all land conservation in the region.

For my Connecticut chapter I chose the title: “A Story of Land-Saving Actions.” You Essex land savers have an honored place in that story. Today I delivered copy of the book to your library as a gift from the Cabot foundation. The book, which was published by Harvard Forest, is available from the Connecticut Forest and Park Association and through Amazon and I have bought a few copies from CFPA for sale.

When I saw your truly smashing website it got me thinking of all the things we didn't have or didn't even exist back in 1968 and how wonderful it is, for the most part, that we have them now. So many changes! I also got to thinking about two people you never heard of, “Stubby” Rankin and a high school student named Chloe. And I got thinking about a sub-title for this little talk in addition to the one I thought of when Peggy Tuttle suggested a talk really should have some kind of topic. To “Kitchen Table Conservation” I want to add now as a subtitle: “How to Start Saving the World.”

Among the things we didn't have back in 1968, when Essex Land Trust was founded, were almost any land trusts like this one. You are one of the first half-dozen community based, community organized, community funded, volunteer-operated land trusts in this state and that means anywhere. Of course, large, long established and successful land saving charitable organizations existed at that time. One thinks of The Nature Conservancy and the Trustees of Reservations in Massachusetts right away. But all of these had special interests and missions. Small parcels that are important to their community but not significant otherwise are of no interest to these large, well-heeled and professionally staffed organizations. What of communities that wanted to save a bit of a river, a natural area or a beautiful vista that were significant only to the people who lived there?

To fit that need Connecticut invented the land trust that takes its place along all the other things we Nutmeggers have thought up, like the cotton gin, the can opener and the sewing machine. So, you in Essex can take your place in the company of other distinguished inventors! And the whole country can thank you for it. A few years ago there were something like 1,500 land trusts in the U.S. and eight percent of them are in Connecticut.

In addition to there being hardly any land trusts another thing we did not have to any appreciable extent in 1968 is effective governance over environmental degradation. Our land, water, air, wildlife and the like were up for grabs. That is where Stubby Rankin comes in. I met him in in the sixties when scientists like him were getting concerned about water and wetlands. His complete name is Dr. John R. Rankin, and he was then director of the marine biology laboratory at Noank. I learned that Stubby had grown up in Essex, and one day he really astonished me. We were standing on Steamboat Dock (I think there was a store down there then that sold boat stuff) looking at the river. He said when he was a kid he used to swim off the dock. I was dumbfounded because at that time the river was so filthy if you happened to fall into the water from your boat or whatever your first step was to go to your doctor for the appropriate shot to ward off whatever you had been exposed to. Nobody in his right mind would swim off Steamboat Dock. I think it was Ellsworth Grant who called the lower Connecticut the most beautiful sewer in the world.

Much else was awry at that time, of course. Trash from Essex, as I recall, was burned periodically at a dump near the bank of the river, spewing noxious smoke. Conveniently hidden under ground at

countless sites in the state lurked the accumulated residues of decades of manufacturing. The Naugatuck River below Waterbury notoriously ran in a variety of dismal colors depending upon what was being manufactured that day. I saw all these things. It is good for people like me who have a personal recollection to remind folks of those times because some lawmakers in Hartford seem bent on dismantling the laws and regulations that have protected us and starving the agencies that are charged with administering those laws. They have had no personal experience of just how bad things were. We could quickly lose what we have gained.

To get back to the title of my talk, what I call kitchen table conservation has always led the way toward sane use of our resources and fixing things up. The first example that comes to mind of is a meeting in Simsbury in 1895 at the home of a local minister. A small group of citizens was concerned about what was happening to Connecticut's forests, which were being destroyed by fires and mindless harvesting. They set in motion actions that not only saved the forest but created the park and forest system that we enjoy today. They founded the Connecticut Forest and Park Association, which probably was the first organization of its kind in the U.S. (although folks from New Hampshire quarrel about that). Another Connecticut kitchen table invention.

Another kitchen table I got involved with personally was in Lyme. A small group of men met literally around Pat Jewett's kitchen table to try to do something about the coastal wetlands. At that time in 1968 Connecticut had lost through draining, filling or channeling roughly half of the tidal wetlands that had existed at the turn of the century. Many of the projects were quite small but collectively their consequences were catastrophic. Somewhat said it was like being nibbled to death by ducks. There was little understanding of the vital role such wetlands play in protecting uplands and providing a myriad of what we call today ecological services. Claimed rights of upland owners reigned supreme. These guys around the kitchen table called themselves the Save the Wetlands Committee. When they asked me to undertake a study of the legal aspects of wetland protection, I remember thinking of that Margaret Mead quotation: She is supposed to have said that we should never doubt that a small group of thoughtful people could change the world, adding: "It's the only thing that ever had." Whether she actually said that or didn't, the truth of that statement has been proved over and over again in the conservation movement. In any event, this particular

“small group” ultimately succeeded in protecting the remaining the tidal wetlands of our state forever when they got the tidal wetlands act passed by the legislature in 1969.

And so it is with your land trust. I was astonished when I opened your website and discovered how many significant preserves you had acquired. My recollection of the earliest days is that right after you were organized nobody knew exactly what you would be doing. There was thought of some kind of education activity in the schools. I had the distinct feeling that you thought it would be a good idea to have a trust because this seemed to be the thing to do but no real notion of where to go from there. But you thought that opportunities might come. The important thing was to be ready – as ready you were...and are! It gives me a lift to see my friend Earl Canfield’s name on one of your largest preserves. You certainly are doing all the right things.

Chloe. Remember her? She is the reason for the subtitle of this talk: How to start changing the world. She is just finishing high school in Westport and is getting ready to go to college next fall. Shake up a bottle of champagne and pop the cork in a torrent of bubbly energy. That’s Chloe, whose sparkle I first encountered in some kind of impromptu performance on the little stage in our church, where she is a member of the youth group. Chloe is really worried about the world that is being left to her: climate change, loss of forests, declining fisheries, dying coral; she has heard all about it in school. Like a lot of us, Chloe feels powerless and downcast in the face of such daunting challenges.

When I think of Chloe, of all people, feeling disheartened it almost breaks my heart because I know that she speaks for many in her generation. What do we say to her?

Her sadness is familiar to me because my students at Trinity College are only a little older than Chloe. Our course is about law and environmental policy so we get our noses pressed up against some pretty tough information. We don’t talk about it much but many of the students care deeply about the environment, and I know some are discouraged.

At our last class this year I passed out the picture that I am now passing out to you. Each student got one, but I don’t have one for each of you so I would appreciate your holding it to ponder for a bit and then passing it on to someone else.

The picture is of the strong brown hands of an African woman planting a tree. We should think about it for what it is and also as a

metaphor. I like the simplicity of the picture: two strong brown hands planting one tree on a sunny day in the brown African soil. The mind directing those hands chose to do that this sunny morning instead of staying home worrying about all the things she couldn't do anything about. She had a mind, two hands, a tree and a place to plant it. It doesn't lessen the power of the story to learn that the woman whose hands these are did in fact change the world, or part of it. The picture is Wangari Maathai planting one of the seven trees now in a downtown park in Nairobi. Since then she and thousands of rural women in Africa (with some men) have planted 30 million trees as part of the Green Belt Movement she founded to protect the environment, promote democracy and undergird democratic movements in Africa. She was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004. It all started with her deciding to plant this one tree on that sunny morning.

And so with your founders deciding to start one land trust when the river was still a mess, the trash was being burned, the wetlands being gobbled up, and nobody quite knew what could be done about all that. But they could do this one thing that was close at hand. Something good might come of it. They made a choice to plant their tree.

And so I think what we all might say to Chloe – and all the young people like her and tell ourselves as well-to “plant a tree”, by which I mean figuratively finding something close at hand that our own hands can do and not allow all these mega problems and doomsday predictions to claim our spirits. The tree may mean writing a check, giving some land, writing a letter, giving a talk, casting a vote. As I tell my students, there is always something better to do than nothing.

This conversation would be incomplete if we did not spend some time sharing whatever concerns we have going forward. I would like to start by sharing some of mine.

Environmental protection in Connecticut is under siege in Hartford right now on two fronts, the budget and proposed changes in the laws and regulations that have protected us for generations. We should be very sympathetic toward a governor and lawmakers who are wrestling with a deficit that was not of their making. However, we must be adamant in insisting that environmental agencies not bear a disproportionate share of cutbacks. We should remind our lawmakers that we are not talking about just numbers but about programs.

Equally seriously, we should absolutely insist that our legislators hold the line on keeping in place the laws and regulations

that have cleaned up our rivers and air, protected our wetlands and prevented destructive public projects for decades. A juggernaut of lobbying is making the environment the scapegoat for a stalled economy and the loss of jobs. Get rid of these laws, legislators are being told, and the economy would grow again. If they do not hear other voices right now these laws are very much at risk. While she sometimes disappoints us, You are very fortunate to have Eileen Daily in the Senate and Philip Miller in the House but they need allies and help as they strive to convince their cohorts that a sustainable environment actuality is the cornerstone of a sound and growing economy.

We all are fortunate in Governor Malloy's new commissioner of the newly reorganized Department of Energy and Environmental Protection. In Dan Esty he could not have chosen a better person to develop comprehensive strategies to integrate for the first time energy, environment and economic well being. Get to know him, and you will be pleased.

So one "tree" we all can plant is to make sure we elect the right people, let them know where we stand and give them the support that they need.

If you want to keep your hand in this kind of thing, you can consult the web sites of the Connecticut League of Conservation Voters, ctlc.org and conservationeducation.org. The league may also be found on Facebook and Twitter but I don't have the slightest idea how.

My other concerns are more general. One is making sure that we pass on to succeeding generations the traditions of generosity and volunteerism and "civic engagement" that have characterized prior generations of Americans. We seem to have become incredibly busy at the same time that we have also become more focused more on our personal well being than on the well being of our communities. As you land trust people know, organizations like this do not run themselves or prosper on their own. As I work more generally with non-profits I wonder about how we find the resources and people to keep them thriving.

I am concerned about the war between the artificial world of screens and the real world outside and whether for many young people one is winning out over the other. As we become culturally disconnected from the natural world we become indifferent to what is happening to it. As Earl Canfield would be pleased to hear me say, the opportunities you land trust people and others have created are out there to be enjoyed, to support our health and to provide opportunities

for family recreation away from the isolating screens. You might want to look at a wonderful website called WalkCT for ideas and become acquainted with the No Child Left Inside imitative of DEEP.

As your founders showed us years ago, saving the world starts close at hand in our own communities, with generous, hopeful acts of stewardship. I think we can tell Chloe that and let her youthful imagination take it from there. We could suggest that she put on her refrigerator at home one of those yellow sticky things that say:

I started to save the world today by _____ (fill in the blank). I might just tell her that next time I see her.