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Partnering with "Horse People" Brings Advantages to Land Trusts

By Karen Briggs

Land conservation includes the ongoing work of finding and encouraging new partners to join your effort. When considering potential partners it is important to look beyond the usual suspects. The most valuable allies can come from places you might not expect, even though you see them every day.

"The thing about conservation is that it's a regional issue," says Tim DeWitt, executive director of the Bluegrass Conservancy in Kentucky. "No one entity can bring it [land preservation] about. It must be a collaborative and an educational process between the government, business and private citizens. Everyone has to decide how best to maintain the local quality of life while being both culturally and environmentally responsible. It just makes sense to avail yourself of every tool in doing so. In the case of the Bluegrass Conservancy, horses are compatible with the conservation movement as well as the tourism industry, which is so important to the preservation of this area."

When people believe strongly in conservation, and open space is threatened, they can move mountains. What makes it even more interesting is the sheer variety of folks such a cause attracts. From businessmen to families, and from farmers to politicians, they all can contribute, including people who own horses. Few urban or suburban types encounter horses up close in today's world, but horse people can be fantastic allies for the cause of a land trust or conservancy.

"Even in Kentucky," DeWitt says, "where horses are practically synonymous with the state, green spaces for breeding, raising and riding horses would be threatened were it not for the dedicated efforts of local horse people to preserve the old family farms." Granted, horses are considered part of Kentucky's cultural heritage, but he says "anywhere in the country has a horse heritage" if you go back a few years.

Across the nation land is rapidly disappearing from many traditionally horse-friendly areas. As a result, horse owners are looking to take an activist role in preserving their landscape and their lifestyle. They are valuable for a number of reasons including their desire for access, their appreciation of green space, and their willingness to contribute time, physical labor and money. Horses are exceptionally compatible with conservation activities.

Wendy McCalvy, president of the Caledonia Conservancy in Racine, Wisconsin, notes, "People who had horses used to be found out in the country, out of everyone's way. But as urban areas have encroached on their rural lives, they're realizing there's really nowhere 'further out' to go. At some point you have to stand and fight to preserve the green space where you are. And I've found that horse people are pretty determined, and pretty motivated, to do that!"

Several of the conservation easements in Oakland County, Michigan, are managed by the members of Metamora Horse Country region, including the venerable Metamora Hunt. Executive Director Donna Folland of the Oakland Land Conservancy says, "The Hunt needs a huge amount of habitat in order to maintain its sport, so they have become an excellent partner to us. They're very much in synch with what we want to preserve."

Folland remarks, "We come at land preservation from a biological and ecological point of



view, so it's very interesting to me to work with horse people, who come at it from a different, more sports-oriented perspective."

PHOTOS

Top: Oak Knoll Equestrian Center
San Gregorio | Photo: Chuck Nile

Middle: Horse | Tassajara Valley
Photo: Matt O'Brien, 1996

Bottom: Brown Ranch | Pleasanton
Photo: Penny Green

ILLUSTRATION

Miwok Stables, Mill Valley | Nick Hamil

Beyond the regional level, land trusts and conservancies can tap into invaluable assistance by contacting the Equestrian Land Conservation Resource (ELCR), a clearinghouse for horse-friendly conservancy information. Founded in 1997, ELCR recognizes that the single greatest threat to all equestrian sports, recreation and industry in North America is the loss of land; the land needed for stabling, raising feed, breeding, enjoying and competing horses. That recognition spawned its mission statement: ELCR advances the conservation of land for horse-related activity.

ELCR's interests encompass everything from access to public lands for horses, zoning for horse properties, access for trail riding, show facilities sites, and conservation easements for properties that would otherwise be eaten up by development. They also provide a crucial support network for groups or individuals who may feel they are toiling away in isolation. "Because of ELCR," says Executive Director Kandee Haertel, "horse people have become more successful at resolving local issues such as those caused by development pressures, trail closures and creating new areas to show and ride their horses."

ELCR, with a diverse, nationwide board of directors and a reputation for activism, has dozens of "success stories" in its short history. Networking and building support for local projects is at the heart of ELCR's day-to-day function.

For example, ELCR President Georgiana McCabe was invited to speak at the Oakland Land Conservancy's annual meeting in Michigan. "It was really useful to have Georgiana here," says Folland, "because I'm not a horse person and I don't always understand or appreciate the issues that are important to them. She was able to engage the local landowners on that level, which was so helpful."

Horse owners are willing participants in the physical aspects of land conservation also. Oakland County riders have mapped the trail system to help preserve the network and develop connectors between green spaces. They use their horses for patrolling and hauling materials out to remote locations. They know the landowners well and know how to interact and maintain relationships.

Involving horse owners enhances the preservation of a green space. Horses can be compatible with traditional conservation practices. Horse owners understand the need for proper trail design and placement, and avoiding sensitive areas. They can have a greater impact educating fellow riders on respecting the natural setting.

Horses can be used as ambassadors for a conservation project. Whether people ride or just look at horses, they are attracted to them. DeWitt reports in Kentucky horses have a major economic impact through tourism. ". . . [People expect to see huge green fields with mares and foals grazing here. It's central to our cultural heritage. Horse farms bring about \$2 billion to the region and another \$1 billion in tourist dollars. It is both culturally and environmentally responsible to prioritize these lands for preservation."

There is a very good reason why mounted police units foster good community feeling towards law enforcement. People are fascinated by and drawn to horses. The chance to touch a velvety soft muzzle is sometimes all it takes to bring down barriers to remind people of the intangible benefits of land stewardship. Horses can provide opportunities for unique special events for fundraising and conservation education.

Tens of thousands of acres of open land are lost every year to commercial and residential development. Many thousands more are conserved with no consideration for horses or riders. In most of these areas there are horse owners. They are part of a club, association or collective interested in preserving their interests and goals. With all of the advantages the horse-owning community has to offer to land trust and conservancy projects, it just makes sense to contact these groups and include them in a partnership for conservation. As a non-equestrian observer remarked, "Whenever we've allied ourselves with horse

owners, we've been rewarded."

Why Partner with Horse People?

1. The network of equestrian landowners can generate donated easements.
2. Horse owners need open land. This makes them strong advocates (and allies) for protecting land.
3. Horse owners often own land that is intermixed with agricultural land. In counties that have the ability to buy agricultural conservation easements, but where farmers may not be able to afford this option, a horse landowner might (can stretch available funding).
4. Many horse properties act as the last barrier to sprawl encroaching on farmland."

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Equestrian Land Conservation Resource's website is www.elcr.org

-Land Trust Alliance 'Exchange' - April 2006 - www.lta.org

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