

Hunting for Conservation Solutions



Thanks to a pioneering land partnership model, long-term conservation and sustainable usage can be mutually beneficial even on high-value properties.

Born in the late 19th Century, the conservation movement in North America exists today thanks in large part to hunters. To some, it may seem counter-intuitive to think that the people permanently removing turkey, deer and bear from this world are conservationists, but the truth is that responsible hunters have been conservation's biggest advocates from the beginning. The man who established the US Forest Service and protected 150 National Forests, proclaimed 18 National Monuments and established five National Parks was also an avid hunter. As President, Theodore Roosevelt oversaw the protection of 230 million acres of land, and he also hunted more game than all other presidents combined. At the time, he and other sportsmen and naturalists saw the destruction caused by logging, over-hunting and loss of habitat.

by Monica McQuail, North American Land Trust

Since then, hunters have continued to recognize these same problems and more, and they've consistently acted on them. In 1937, the US firearms and ammunition industry asked Congress to impose an excise tax on their own sales, and what resulted was the Pittman-Robertson Act, today known as Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration. When a hunter or angler purchases hunting- or fishing-related equipment, the taxes that are generated go to state wildlife agencies to help fund conservation projects, wildlife research, hunter education and access to outdoor recreation. Since its passing, this act has generated \$14 billion in such funds in the US and aided the recovery of deer, turkey and non-game species.

Hunters further aid these species and others by keeping populations in check. With more and more development, many of us have witnessed an increase in deer populations that are condensed into smaller open spaces without the threat of predators. More people plus more deer equals more vehicular collisions. Ecologically, this has had detrimental effects on vegetation, because deer are selective eaters, which ultimately changes the dynamics of a forest. The result is often an increase in the suffocating spread of non-native species, an increase in deer ticks, a decrease in songbird populations and a threat to forest health that some scientists believe is more dire than climate change.

Recognizing the many important roles that hunters can play in conservation, North American Land Trust, NALT, has always made an effort to include and partner with hunters on conservation projects. Lee Echols, NALT Director of Conservation Science: "Hunters are hunting sustainably and they are doing it right, and we want to partner with that cause and work with them to achieve the same goals." NALT's conservation easements do not restrict hunting, which is especially important in Georgia and Alabama; Lee says, "if it weren't for hunting, there would hardly be any private land conservation [there]." Several NALT conservation areas have hunting cabins or lodges, including SouthWind Plantation—a wingshooting lodge with plantation-style accommodations, fishing and quail, dove, duck, deer and turkey hunting in Attapulcus, Georgia.

After acquiring an initial 170 acres (69 ha) in 1994, SouthWind founder Tim Smith came to NALT with a vision to create an ultimate hunting experience, so that he could "share the many benefits of Southern living as part of life." And he achieved just that with the help of multiple conservation easements. NALT has worked with Tim to complete six such easements, protecting 1,032 acres (418 ha) of quail habitat.

Tim elaborates: "Growing up, I've witnessed forest land being cleared for farming and developments. Today, people have gotten away from preserving land for our children and their children. [NALT's] Conservation Easement Program enabled me to preserve several great pieces of property for generations to come." As with all conservation projects, the many benefits of these easements extend beyond Tim's legacy.

Lee Echols expands on the benefits of this stewardship: "Quail need open habitats with a diverse herbaceous understory to thrive, so there is a very tight-knit, synergistic relationship between the restoration and preservation of the longleaf pine ecosystem that once dominated the southeastern coastal plain and quail hunting. Easements provide economic and recreational incentives for landowners to restore and preserve one of the most endangered ecosystems in the US." Now Tim is able to continue to better his land so that he and his family may "share our blessing and vision with our

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many friends from all over the world.”



Tim Smith and his family. SouthWind Plantation photo

NALT’s conservation easement strategy is adjustable depending on the landowner’s vision for the land. NALT Stewardship Director Mike Duus explains: “Our easements permit wildlife hunting, wildlife enhancement management, habitat enhancement, rotational burns, food plots and forestry activity. We also allow for ponds and boat docks for fishing.” In most cases, NALT works with the landowner to ensure future generations can have the flexibility they need through established building areas and accessory structures.

From a conservation perspective, quail plantations like SouthWind constitute some of the last remaining and best examples of maintained longleaf pine woodland and savannah in the American South. They are also home to the endangered gopher tortoise, which has been documented there by NALT biologists.

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Through controlled burns and regular management, Tim Smith and his family dedicate themselves to the stewardship of this special habitat so that the gopher tortoise and quail benefit and, in turn, so may the visitors who come to SouthWind.



An active gopher tortoise hole at SouthWind. Lee Echols photo

Responsible hunters have always had a deep connection to the land. They are some of the first to notice when something is wrong, to detect a change in the land or in the species they hunt, making them valued partners in the conservation world.

While Tim Smith and his dedication to the land represent the synergistic relationship between man and animal, hunting has also resulted in negative consequences when it goes unchecked. Such unsustainable hunting nearly drove the Delmarva fox squirrel (*Sciurus niger cinereus*) to extinction in its native habitat, the Delmarva Peninsula between the Chesapeake Bay and the Atlantic Ocean. The US

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Fish and Wildlife Service acted quickly; Cherry Keller, who led the Endangered Species Program Recovery Team, recognized that the most effective way to save the squirrel was to preserve its habitat, so she enlisted NALT's help.

As Cherry explains, "NALT was an important partner in this effort because they were willing to work with landowners and provide easements and conservation benefits that would offset habitat loss." Cherry brought together landowners and NALT to create mitigation easements to protect the fox squirrel. As a result, 592 acres (240 ha) of critical habitat were protected in perpetuity on the peninsula. In December 2015, the Delmarva fox squirrel was officially removed from the Endangered Species List, thanks in part to this conservation effort.

Elsewhere in North America, mountain lion populations had been significantly reduced by habitat loss and by predator control on behalf of livestock. Conservation of the species has been a primary focus, especially in Ventura County, California, home of the 2,668-acre (1,080 ha) Santa Susana Field Laboratory. Owned primarily by the Boeing Company, this land is home to mountain lion, bobcat, deer, bear and 135 bird species, and it is an important link in a regional wildlife corridor that is essential for mountain lion survival. This link will remain intact thanks to a perpetually binding conservation easement held by NALT. Steve Shestag, Boeing Director of Environment: "Our vision is that Santa Susana will continue to be a place where mountain lions roam free, cultural artifacts remain undisturbed and oak woodlands have the opportunity to thrive."

NALT conservation areas benefit people as much as they do wildlife. The Cornelia and Florence Bridge Preserve, in Pike County, Pennsylvania, was land owned by Charles P. Bridge, a man who sold penny candy to children at his gas station. Without any heirs but wishing to preserve the property after he was gone, in 2007 Charles and NALT conserved 300 acres that stretch over Dingman and Milford Townships with an easement. When Charles passed away, a year later, he left substantial unforeseen funds to develop public access to the property. This let the park take shape more quickly than expected and allowed the townships to build an ADA (Americans with Disabilities) certified trail, thus opening up the area to people of all abilities. This collaborative effort involving Charles Bridge, Dingman and Milford Townships and NALT has ensured that future generations will be able to appreciate Charles' vision and enjoy the many natural features of this scenic property.

Land conservation is a powerful tool that landowners, government agencies, businesses and municipalities can use to protect wildlife and biodiversity, to improve habitat and serve the public. North American Land Trust tailors its conservation easements to every landowner's goals, guaranteeing that the land is honored as intended and its unique characteristics are protected forever.

In 1992, Andrew L. Johnson and a group of committed conservationists established North American Land Trust as a 501(c)(3) corporation designed to promote the conservation of land that has ecological, agricultural or historical significance. NALT works with landowners across the US, from the Pacific Northwest to New England. Monica McQuail is NALT's Communications & Stewardship Assistant.

Banner Image: SouthWind Plantation headquarters in Attapulcus, Georgia. SouthWind Plantation photo