

OWAA Conference – August 19, Chattanooga, TN
Swimming Against the Tide: A Maniac’s Perspective in Four Acts
A Salute to Lessons Learned

Opening

Good afternoon.

You’re about to hear a story—part travelogue, part political war story, and part confession. It’s a story about swimming against the tide. About making things happen when everyone else said it couldn’t be done.

I call this “A Maniac’s Perspective in Four Acts.”

So, let’s dive in.

Act I: Beginnings – Birdwatching, Tigers, and the Seeds of an Idea

I started out, believe it or not, as a five-year-old birdwatcher. My father was on the board of the National Audubon Society, so I grew up in a house where bird sightings were dinner table conversation.

Years later, at Princeton, I majored in history. My senior thesis? *The Evolution of Radical Black Politics, 1960–1970: From Malcolm X to the Black Panthers*. Not exactly a natural springboard for a conservation career, right? But hindsight has taught me something: the political turbulence of the Black Power era isn’t all that different from what I would later see in environmental politics—strong personalities, noble goals, and devolving to, a taste for self-defeating drama.

My first field job was in 1973 at Tiger Tops Lodge in Chitwan National Park, Nepal. There, I tracked rhinos and tigers with Andrew Laurie, one of George Schaller’s students.



In photo shown: Amos on elephant in Chitwan

My supervisor, Frank Poppleton, was the kind of character who seemed ripped from a Hemingway novel. He'd founded the Wildlife Training School in Arusha, Tanzania—and yes, he was the guy who literally pulled Hemingway out of his crashed plane in Uganda.

Poppleton gave me an assignment: *“Trek the Langtang Valley in the Himalayas. Evaluate it for potential national park designation.”*

So I did, with two Sherpas who did not speak English - through the worst storm in a century. And the park was created a year later.

From the Chitwan lowlands, I moved on to Kenya, learning at the knees of David Western of the New York Zoological Society, who was integrating the Maasai into Amboseli National Park's management to curb elephant and rhino poaching.

This was years before anyone coined the term *community-based conservation*, but the lesson stuck: **if you exclude local people, you fail. If you include them, you win.**

Act II: Washington's Corridors of Power – When Leadership Could Still Move Mountains

Back in the U.S., I joined Assistant Secretary of the Interior Nat Reed during the Nixon and Ford administrations. My job was simple on paper, but never in practice: sit in every meeting, keep track of every policy portfolio, and when Nat said *“Make it happen”*—I made the bureaucracy move.

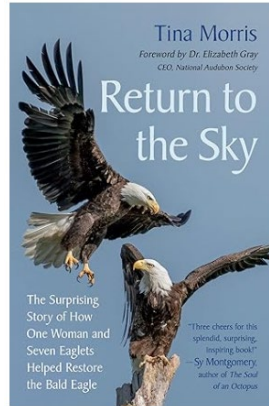
1974 was a historic year. We were just beginning to implement the Endangered Species Act.

I spent a weekend at Assateague Island trapping peregrines with Major Scot Ward of the U.S. Army. Later that fall, I sat in Nat Reed's office with George Archibald from the International Crane Foundation. Out of those two moments came two critical decisions:

- **Transfer peregrines from Patuxent Wildlife Research Center to Tom Cade at Cornell.**
- **Transfer whooping cranes to George Archibald's Crane Foundation.**

Those simple steps led to thriving reintroduction programs for both species.

Want a case study? [Tina Morris' book *Return to the Sky*](#) shows how one *meeting* sparked the bald eagle's recovery. That's how policy worked back then—when leadership had the power to move mountains, without hyperbole, or at least birds.



Today? That kind of decisive political leadership has largely evaporated. Buried under decadal layers of entrenched bureaucracy.

After leaving Nat Reed in 1976, I crammed a nine-month “quick-and-dirty” master’s at Cornell, then spent 11 months circling the globe.

In Kenya’s Meru National Park, I trapped and tagged the first leopard for a conservation study with Patrick Hamilton. In Australia, I spent a day with Graeme Caughley, one of the leading thinkers on wildlife population dynamics, studying kangaroos. The following year, I wrote the memos preventing the listing of leopards and red kangaroos – the latter of whose population was 6 million- by environmental zealots.

When I came back, I joined John Spinks at the Office of Endangered Species. There, I managed all grant funds for listings and recovery programs. We pushed sea turtle recovery and, most significantly, the California condor.

Therein lies a story: the condor recovery effort was *opposed* by major environmental advocates—David Brower, Karl Koford, Sierra Club, Friends of the Earth. They fought it every step of the way. But we persisted, with John Ogden (NAS) and Noel Snyder (FWS), capturing, tagging, and captive breeding condors at LA and San Diego zoos.

When we started, 18 condors remained in the wild. Today? Over 600.

Act III: Congress as a Fulcrum – Outsmarting Watt and Stockman

In 1981, I became Director of Conservation at the National Audubon Society—right in the thick of the Reagan years. Jim Watt was at Interior. David Stockman was slashing budgets at OMB.

Most Republican conservation heavyweights from the Nixon-Ford era—Russ Train, Nat Reed—they all went silent.

I didn't. I engaged.

In response to Watts' tenure, I worked with two of the best outdoor writers—Bill Gilbert and Robert Sullivan—to produce back-to-back ***Sports Illustrated*** cover stories. Watt sealed his own fate when he canceled the Beach Boys concert on the National Mall. Public opinion turned, and he was gone.

To beat Stockman, I went straight to Congress. I worked with Sid Yates in the House, Jim McClure in the Senate, and—critically—Appropriations clerks Neil Simon in the House and Don Knowles, **who was a NASCAR driver** in the Senate. Yes, a guy who loved racing held the keys to millions in restored funding for USFWS, BLM, and the Forest Service.

I even had ***Sports Illustrated*** feature Knowles—because sometimes the best leverage is unexpected.

One day in 1987, after discussions with Chris Servheen, FWS grizzly coordinator, I walked into Ray Arnett's office—Assistant Secretary at Interior—and handed him a blueprint. That blueprint created the **Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee (IGBC)**, bringing NPS, FWS, USFS, BLM and the states of Wyoming, Montana, Idaho, and later Washington into one coordinated management structure to oversee research, on the ground management and law enforcement.

It worked. Grizzlies rebounded from 180 animals to over 1,000.

Two other wins from those years:

- Establishing the **National Wildlife Forensic Lab in Ashland, Oregon** with Terry Grosz (FWS Special Agent in Charge, Denver) and Ken Goddard, who ran the lab for decades, thereby ending UFFWS' failure to substantiate evidence in prosecutions.
- Drafting the legislation for the **National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF)** over a few six-packs with House Merchant Marine and Fisheries clerk Jeff Curtis and Senate EPW clerks Steve Shimberg and Martha Pope.

By the end of Reagan's administration, we'd restored funding for wildlife conservation to historic highs—beating Stockman at his own game.

Act IV: Private Lands – The Next Century of Conservation

In 1986, I publicly confronted National Audubon President Peter A. Berle over financial mismanagement during the annual board meeting, right there in front of everyone—and then, of course, I was promptly fired.

I was changing planes at O'Hare when I got a call from Chip Collins, then the lone CEO and sole employee of the fledgling National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, (hereafter NFWF).

He said, "*Come join me.*"

So I did.

That fall, I designed NFWF's first three major initiatives:

1. **Implementing the North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA)**—\$50M a year, building partnerships with Canadian provinces and U.S. states, with great leadership from state directors Gary Myers (TN) and Doc Timmerman (SC).
2. **Creating the National Leadership Training Center**, (NCTC) later permanently established in Shepherdstown, WV.
3. **Launching Federal Agency Needs Assessments**, leveraging Congressional appropriations to unlock long-term funding, NFWF produced the Needs Assessment for over a decade taking natural resource funding to historic heights.

When I took over as NFWF CEO in late 1989, our grant portfolio grew from zero to \$250M by 1999—when I was, once again, unceremoniously fired by Jamey Clark and Bruce Babbitt.

But in those years, we focused on solving the problems facing USFWS and other agencies, including NMFS and NOAA. We initiated grant programs for:

- **Partners in Flight** for neo-tropical migratory birds.
- **Partners for Wildlife Program**, engaging private landowners.
- Pollinator initiatives, invasive species, main stem dam removals (Edwards on the Kennebec, Presumpscot in Maine, and the Neuse River in NC).
- We implemented with DOJ, "**After the Gavel**"—capturing federal fines and reinvesting them into conservation.
- Fisheries management for NMFS.

Over the years, private land became my focus. It started with Board member Ken Hofmann, a California developer who funded California Waterfowl, who encouraged us to invest with rice farmers to provide habitat in California and Louisiana.

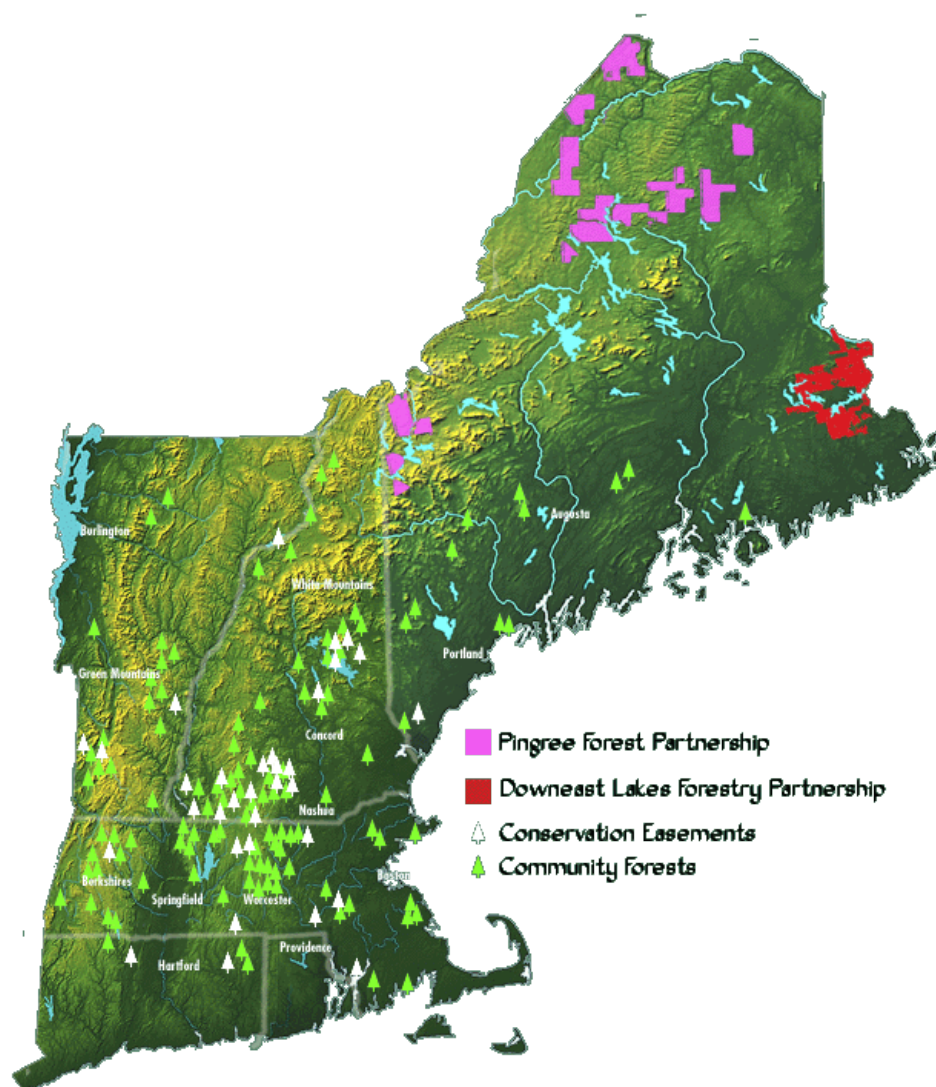
In 1991, we made a \$1.7M grant to Andy Sansom at Texas Parks & Wildlife Department—creating a private lands program at TPWD that now covers over **33+ million acres**.

We funded the Malpais Borderlands Group in Arizona and New Mexico—ranchers doing a better job protecting species than any federal agency.

We funded the Blackfoot River Project, again working with ranchers in Montana.

After leaving NFWF, I spent five years with the New England Forestry Foundation (NEFF) implementing the two largest conservation easements in U.S. history:

- **Pingree Forest Easement (732,000 acres)**
- **Downeast Lakes Easement (460,000 acres)**



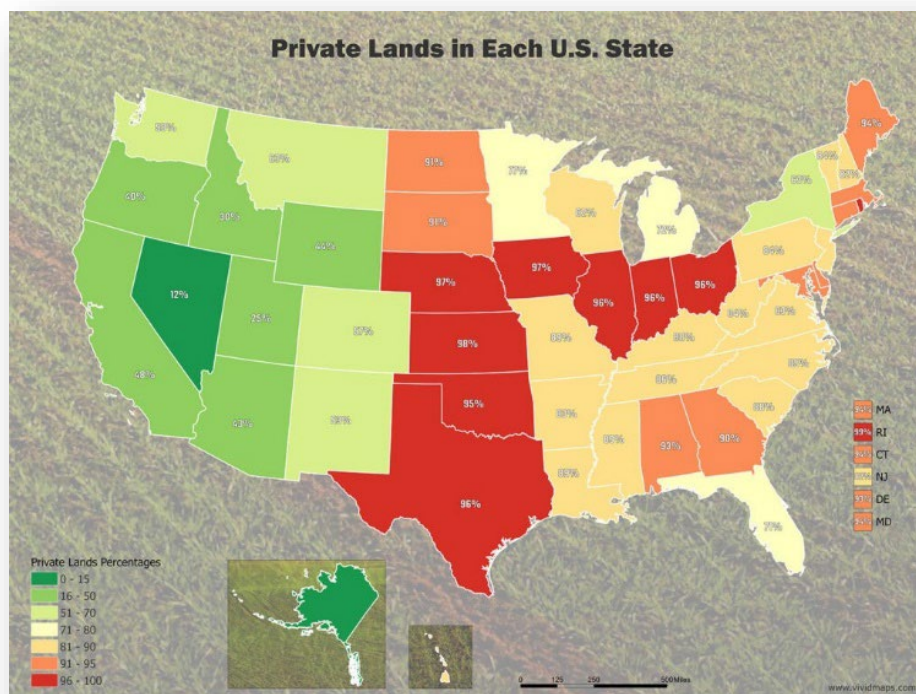
These two easements, completed between 2000 and 2005, conserve one-third of all protected lands in Maine. I worked with Keith on both projects, and they remain conservation gems today.

So why private lands?

The principal progenitors of our federal land estates encompassing NPS, USFS, USFWS, and BLM were President Teddy Roosevelt and his right hand man Gifford Pinchot, first Chief of USFS. I know the history by heart because Gifford was my dad's uncle, his mother was Mary Eno, my great-grandfather's younger sister. Roosevelt and Pinchot acted to restore conservation to forest lands ravaged by the private sector moving east to west and to the despoliation of wildlife species.

That worked fairly well for a century, then bureaucracy and excessive environmental litigation (see Baier on Equal Access to Justice Act) led to stasis, ineffective management, and massive habitat degradation through uncontrolled wildfires across western states and now nationwide from Pinelands of New Jersey to California, Oregon, and other western states.

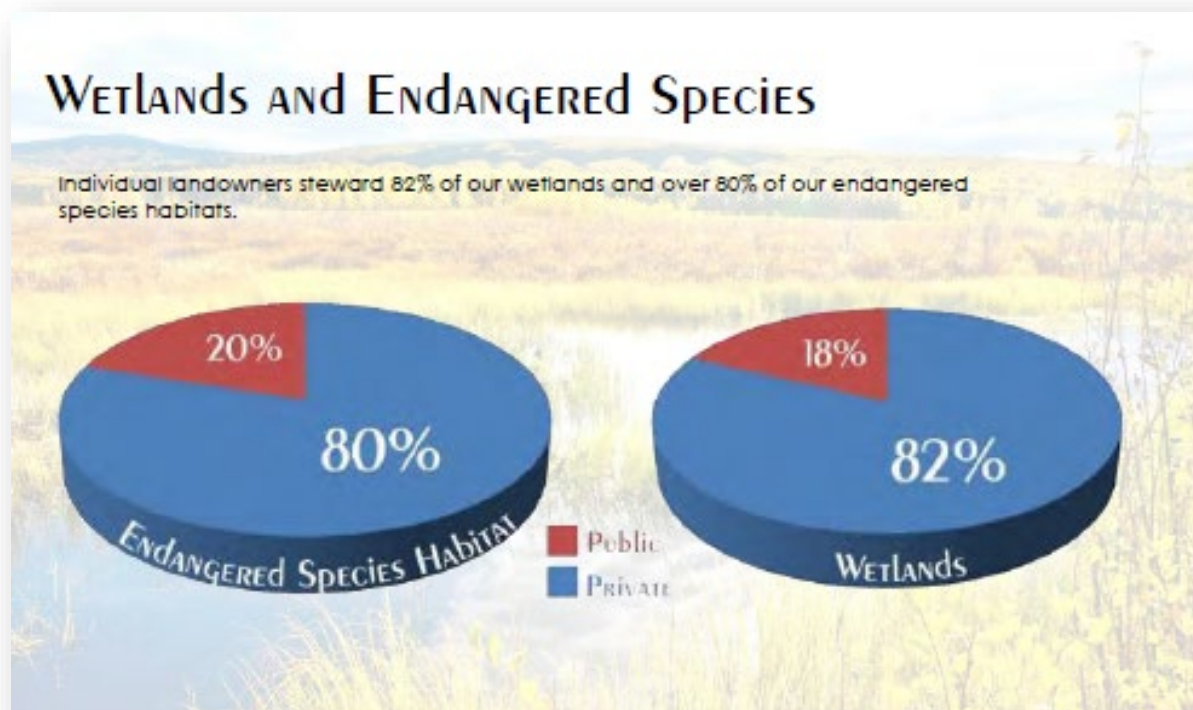
USFWS has only recovered 3% of listed species in 50 years; whole suites of migratory birds are down 43%. An untold story today is the greatest success of the environmental movement is the cultural infusion of environmental sensibilities, and now the tables are turned. Private landowners, ranchers, farmers, forest owners across the nation are largely better land managers than federal government agencies which have calcified, and have more administrative plaque than any elderly heart patient.



As Steve Moore from Unleash Prosperity might declare: *“If you want better habitat management today, try the free market.”*

I started building what is LandCAN in 2000 as a 501(c) (3). We were originally called the Private Landowner Network but rebranded to LandCAN in 2016 when we had 125,000 users annually.

Recall that USFWS has only recovered 3% of listed species. Look at the following pie charts to understand the geography of species recovery.

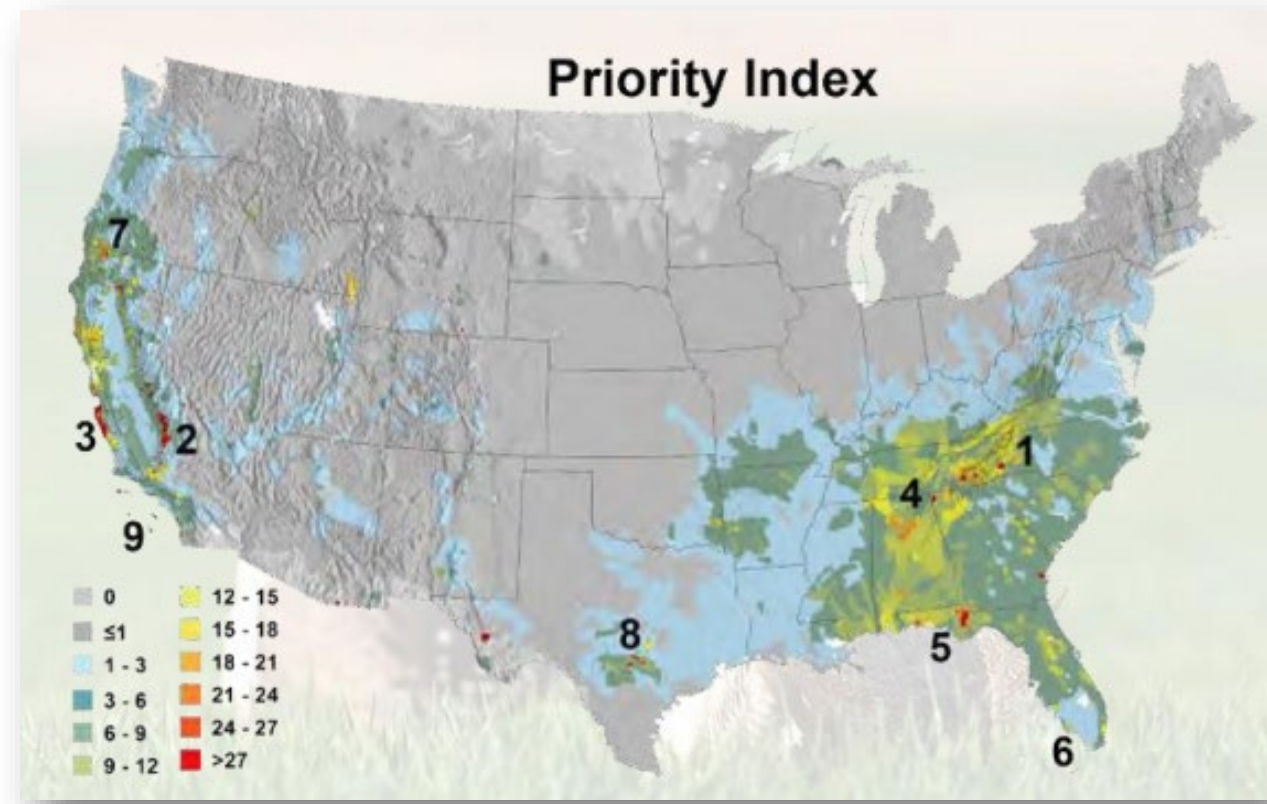


82% of wetlands are found on private land, and 80% of endangered species habitat is on PRIVATE LAND.

The Ragin’ Cajun brought Clinton victory with his hallmark declaration: *“It’s the economy, Stupid!”* Well, today the key to conservation goes through the door of **Private Land, Stupid!**

Endangered species and their habitats are not evenly distributed across all 50 states. They are concentrated in the Southeastern states which are all over 80% private land, Texas which is over 95% private land, and California, whose Central Valley and coastal counties are predominately private land.

Key resource featured in both briefings: - Clinton Jenkins (PNAS, March 2015) map: “Priority of Biodiversity: U.S. Protected Areas Mismatch Biodiversity Priorities.” - A quick glance shows the concentration of biodiversity and endangered species listings in Southeastern states, Texas, and California—regions clearly dominated by private land.



That is why LandCAN has built state sites for CA, MS, LA, AR, GA, AL, and VA. Our last state site, Alabama LandCAN, was built at the request of USFWS in 2023. Why? Because Alabama is 93% privately owned and the state has the third-highest level of endangered species after Hawaii and California.

Twentieth century conservation was propelled by public land acquisition, and public lands are overwhelmingly concentrated in western states. Yet even in western states, **private lands are the most important acreages for conservation because they are concentrated in riparian areas and along streams and rivers—where the water is.** John Wesley Powell recognized the importance of our western rivers over a century ago.

Land Conservation in the 21st Century

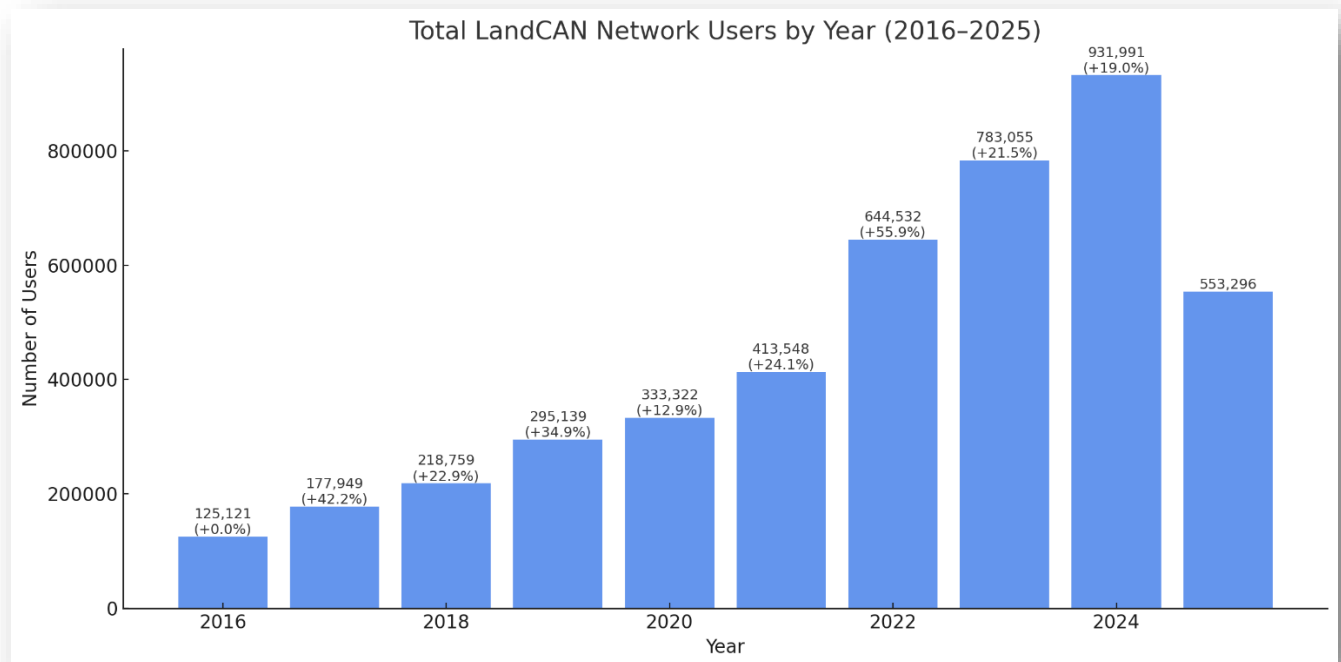


This map highlights the shift from 20th-century conservation focused on public lands (red) to the 21st-century imperative of private land conservation (green), where most endangered species habitat and wetlands are found.

The twenty-first century market for conservation will be on private lands, and the most important player propelling conservation will not be Interior Department's USFWS, but USDA's NRCS and FSA agencies. Follow the money trail. USFWS budget for endangered species is +/- **\$150 million**. USDA spends **\$3.2 billion annually** through programs like *Working Lands for Wildlife*.

Clearly, because of repeated Farm Bill allocations, the preponderance of funding for species recovery is at USDA, not Interior—a point I have made to Trump 45 leaders and currently to Trump 47 leadership.

Today LandCAN is on pace for its second year of over **900,000 users**. We had **932,000 users in 2024**.



Why LandCAN matters.

If you're a landowner who wants to improve your woods, protect wildlife, or restore habitat, where do you even start? For decades, the only option has been to sift through endless government websites—broken links, outdated programs, no clear direction. Most people give up before they even begin.

LandCAN changes that. It's a simple, one-stop hub that does the hard work for you. You choose the category that best fits your current need, and LandCAN connects you instantly to the programs, professionals, and resources that can help.

Whether it's USDA cost-share programs, state initiatives, nonprofits, or trusted local experts—like consulting foresters, tax advisors, or even pollinator plant nurseries—LandCAN gives you a clear path forward. No guessing. No wasted time.

With 75,000+ listings, it tailors conservation solutions to your land, your community, **your** needs.

It's not theory. It's practical conservation—made simple for you. Learn more below.

What does LandCAN do?

LandCAN is an online, web-based, one stop shop compendium of all conservation services currently available to land owners. LandCAN lists all federal (mostly USDA NRCS and FSA, and FWS' Partners for Wildlife-over 8,000 federal office listings) programs, comparable state programs (see Texas Parks and Wildlife Department's Private Land Program). Nonprofits like Conservation Districts and Land Trusts, and importantly over 57,000 for profit service providers, including 6000 consulting foresters, 5900 tax and estate attorneys, and over 7,500 veterinarians. We have built 11 state sites under our national portal (ME, CA, MS, AR, LA, ID, CO, TX, VA, GA, AL) and an endangered species recovery platform, www.habitatcan.org for sage grouse, lesser prairie chicken, and monarch butterfly.

We are now designing our state sites down to the county level for all listing aggregations because the more localized the information the more uptake in the market.

There is no other conservation organization nor government agency, federal or state, serving the private land owner market with a comprehensive menu of services comparable to LandCAN's services. If you want forestry services to manage your forest, LandCAN has over 13,000 listings, more than American Forest Foundation and US Forest Service combined. If you want milkweed or flowers for your monarch/pollinator garden, we list nurseries to serve you. LandCAN today is over 225,000 pages and over 75,000 listings. We average between 80-90,000 users per month.

Government sites do not work; they are full of broken links; they are not updated, and they are not allowed to list for profit service providers. For two decades NRCS has refused to list technical service providers.

LandCAN did 25,000 listing updates in 2025, 18,000 in 2024. Several years ago USFWS spent millions on a new website; they left off all USFWS offices nationwide. You can find all 157 USFWS offices on LandCAN today. We list all of USDA's NRCS, FSA offices almost 5000. We are the only nationwide service center for private land owners to bring the full array of conservation programs and services to the landowning public. We also host my blog and a library of books for recommended reading.

You might think our huge market penetration—there are only 1.9 million farms and ranches in the USA—and 10 million forest owners, just 3.5% of the total US population- might warrant federal financial support and interest. We did get a modicum of support in Bush 43 from USDA U/S Mark Rey, and we built the website for the President's 2005 White House conference, *Cooperative Conservation America*, which is still online.

However, in January 2009, the Obama administration cancelled all our funding and continued to prevent any financial support for 8 years under the leadership of Mark's successor, Robert Bonnie.

And no surprise, we had the same treatment for 4 years under the Biden administration, and the NRCS bureaucrats even managed to block funding from USDA in Trump 45 for two years.

Finally, Secretary Perdue squeezed funding out of NRCS to build a Georgia site that has averaged 5000 users monthly the last two years. Trump 47 has recently announced a complete reorganization of USDA with the aim of reducing costs, making it more functional and service oriented. New Chief of NRCS Aubrey Bettencourt is intimately acquainted with the dysfunction and lack of service orientation, and befuddled leadership of NRCS and FSA. LandCAN is designed to serve the needs of the private land owning community, not push bureaucratic programs on a reticent public. In coming months, I am hoping the Trump administration recognizes our value proposition.

So LandCAN has lived a financially parlous existence for 14 of the last 16 years, all the while listing every USDA office for NRCS, FSA, and every conservation district office nationwide and every USFWS office nationwide.

Might there be hope on the horizon?

The FY2026 Ag Appropriations bill (p.80) contains the following paragraph thanks to Senator Hyde-Smith:

“Private Land Conservation.—The Committee recognizes the importance of providing private land owners with ready access to the many Federal, State, and local government and private resources available to support conservation efforts on private lands. The Committee directs NRCS to implement multi-year cooperative agreements with appropriate funding support to an organization that can make conservation solutions and best practices accessible daily to private landowners.”

Back when I worked for Nat Reed at Interior, I read up on Eugene Odum, the University of Georgia progenitor of ecology. For decades we have been treated to the mantra of science and ecology underpinning conservation.

The greatest success of the environmental movement, largely unacknowledged today, is **broad-scale societal embrace of an environmental ethos of sensitivity**. The result is private forest owners, ranchers, even commercial fishers are more adept than federal agencies at restorative habitat management and species recovery.

What has largely gone ignored for decades is the world of **human ecology**. Ed Feulner, founder of the Heritage Foundation, who died this July, believed: *“People are policy.”*

This brings me back to David Western and making the Maasai the stewards of Amboseli.

I will conclude with two favorite quotes.

First, one cannot give an environmental talk without tipping a hat to Aldo Leopold. In his *River of the Mother of God* essays he wrote:

“The geography of conservation is such that most of the best land will always be held for agricultural production. The bulk of the responsibility for conservation thus necessarily devolves upon the private custodian, especially the farmer.”

And from *Farm Journal* (11 Oct. 2021), Drew Slattery wrote:

“Before they put their boots on in the morning, farmers and ranchers are humans first. If we want to empower our nation’s agricultural system to be more regenerative, sustainable, equitable, and inclusive—then we are talking about empowering them to do so.”

The world is driven by the mechanics of **human ecology, which trumps natural systems.**

So in 53 years, I have come full circle to a focus on the role of people, and **community-based conservation** in today’s lexicon.

For thirty years federal conservation agencies have declined in effectiveness because of over regulation, geriatric bureaucracies, lack of free market applications, and a zealous agenda pushing of climate change and woke policies. Community-based conservation and private landowner contributions have been ignored.

Stories you might consider, or that could have been written:

1. Revisit the spotted owl listing. What if Jerry Franklin and Jack Ward Thomas were wrong, and the key to spotted owl survival was the forest floor, not the tree tops? Amerindians burned NW forests for 5,000 years. The forest floor ecology was grassland when the Conestogas on the Oregon Trail traversed these forests. The barred owl invaded when brush and deciduous trees grew in unmanaged forests.
2. Revisit harnessing the chariot of climate change to impose every conceivable regulation and restriction to our landscapes as the California Air Quality Board has. [A Critical Review of Impacts of Greenhouse Gas Emissions on the U.S. Climate](#)
3. Reconsider Jim Lyons’ NW Forest Plan, which has decimated rural communities and the forest products industry of the NW and brought on the onslaught of wildfires for three decades.

4. Where have all our grassland and shorebirds gone, with 43% reduction cited by USFWS in 2021 with no agency activity in response?
 5. What have been the repercussions of Bruce Babbitt orchestrating the removal of USFWS's entire research division?
 6. Examine the degeneration and loss of effectiveness of USFWS under Jamey Clark and Dan Ashe and their blinkered focus on regulation instead of outreach to partners and private landowners.
 7. How was NCTC turned into a corporate fundraising host for The Conservation Fund and an academy for climate change indoctrination?
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Closing

After five decades swimming against the tide—in Nepal, Kenya, Montana, D.C., and beyond—I've learned this:

Conservation is not a choice between public or private. It is about **understanding where the real leverage is**—and today that leverage is in the hands of private landowners, ranchers, and farmers who live closest to the land.

It's about trust. It's about people. It's about rejecting the sclerosis of bureaucracy and the illusion that Washington alone can solve ecological problems.

The future of conservation will be written not in agency rulebooks, but in the daily decisions of those who own and steward 71% of America's habitat.

Progress **is** possible. I've seen it. And it will happen because of people—just like the Maasai in Amboseli, and Malpais ranchers in NM and AZ, just like the farmers and ranchers across America today—who are trusted to be the stewards of their own land.

Thank you, I welcome questions

Want more stories, insights, and unapologetic takes on conservation? Visit my Substack:
<https://amoseno.substack.com>