

" NATURE'S LANDLORD "

THE STORY OF THE WORLD'S MOST POWERFUL
ENVIRONMENTAL GROUP, THE NATURE CONSERVANCY

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that is as destructive in its seemingly friendly character as it is in its seldom-seen attacks. This is no errant clumsy puppy we can finally calm. It is a runaway predator that will turn on us in defense of its territory. The Nature Conservancy is the wolf we raised ourselves, the grizzly we fed from the table. The monster we made with indifference. If it is left to go on growing, it will be the master and we the obedient slaves.

BRINGING THE BEAST TO HEEL

FUTURE GENERATIONS SHOULD BE CONCERNED

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Americans who presume to know the subject from national press accounts and even from their personal experience with our 10th largest nonprofit organization will be outraged by such a suggestion. To them, TNC's aims and accomplishments are as obvious in the millions of square miles of forests and wetlands "saved" by TNC as they are in the simple stunning beauty of a single butterfly that might not otherwise exist. Whatever small abuses may have occurred, well-meaning Americans will argue, those are nothing in comparison to what TNC has preserved for future generations.

Yet it is just those future generations we should be concerned about in bringing some accountability to a small group of people with grossly exaggerated power and authority over fundamental elements of a free society.

It is not just the land they own now, or the exorbitant non-taxable wealth they control. It is their intention to make use of such accumulated power in deciding the future for the rest of us that should long ago have sent a

chilling alarm through this nation.

They have set an agenda in America and the world, and they have defined the terms. To even question "them" has become evi-



SNOW GEESE © IRWIN & PEGGY BAUER, TOM STACK & ASSOC.

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dence that you oppose the balance of nature on the planet. "They," The Nature Conservancy especially, presume to hold all the answers to the environment as much as brown shirts and Bolsheviks once presumed to hold the truth to ultimate social order.

No member of TNC, none of its many honorable trustees and boards of governors would acknowledge that as a sensible comparison of their intentions and ideologies. No nationally recognized member of the American media would accept that TNC is somehow ultimately a threat to free speech.

Most of us in America, if we know anything of TNC at all, have been inculcated to believe that the purpose of The Nature Conservancy is not only a noble cause on behalf of the environment, but one which has risen from the grass-roots desires and ideals of the people themselves.

But TNC is a runaway dog, allowed to roam by our indifference to federal government responsibilities that fail our "public" lands, and expected even to forage for itself in ranges where it can hunt and cause fear. We, the people, have absolved our responsibility and our obligation in at least keeping track of our own pet projects.

The Nature Conservancy is not an element of the "left." If anything, the structure of its governing board would suggest the power of the "right" in conservative direction. It isn't a matter of ultimate surrender to some United Nation's agenda or secret Communist plot.

It is simply and obviously a matter of confronting perhaps the boldest grab for arbitrary power in history. It can only be restrained with a statement from the people that they will not be subjected by such tyranny, however disguised it may be, however much it may be something they set loose.

Reexamine TNC's tax-exempt status and eliminate at least part of it. Audit the holdings of the TNC and prosecute profiteers. Halt the illegal collusion between federal agencies and the TNC, at least until open hearings can be conducted.

The national media must get off its lazy ass and tell the truth. Stop accepting every program and land grab of The Nature Conservancy as a "progressive" step on behalf of "future generations." Treat the people, particularly the people in stressed rural areas, with the same respect afforded the well-funded "skills" of TNC. Do the job that the Fourth Estate is meant to do in a free society and stop selling out to such obvious propaganda as TNC produces.

Can we expect that much in bringing this beast to heel? ■



Stillwater Marshes near Fallon, Nevada, on the Pacific Flyway and the reason The Nature Conservancy rode into town to “save the birds.” What they did is attain water rights that left behind lifeless farms unable to support even weeds.

THE BEGINNING

IN LESS THAN HALF A CENTURY, TNC WOULD CONTROL
90 MILLION ACRES WORLDWIDE

George Fell sat all alone at the corner of a long polished table in the Washington D.C. library of the American Nature Study Society. This was the last office left open to him, and his work spilled out from a heavy leather briefcase. It scattered across the table. A hundred separate regions were depicted there. Places where nature alone still strongly held dominance. Fell was determined to save those places, whatever it took, and part of those files held a guidebook on how he might do it—financial records of corporations glutted with wartime profits, federal documents on land

acquisitions, and data on tax shelters for charitable trusts.

Many, but not all of his friends in the Ecologists Union had deserted him, rejecting what they saw as his crass mixture of political pressure with scholastic science. Fell was largely alone, living on the wages of his wife, a medical technician, but he had a plan.

It was 1951. Most of American society, including even the scientific community given new respect since the end of the war, was preoccupied with the gorging opportunities of victory and peace. Korea was troublesome, but the real message was in expanding

wealth and unimaginable advances in public technology. George Fell clanged a different, unharmonious tone, suggesting pause in a period of development, study over pragmatic success, and most of all a step from the towers of scientific academia into the slippery ground of political pressure and subtle extortion as the means to an end.

If even he could have imagined it then, what Fell was about to create could have come from a story line in “The Twilight Zone.” Less than a half century later, it would be by far the most powerful environmental organization in history, capable of manipulating governments, including that of the United States; endowed with assets amounting to nearly \$3 billion, and exempt from taxes. It would be directly in control of some 90 million acres worldwide, with more than 12 million acres, an area the size of Switzerland, in the United States alone. Its private data bank contained unsurpassed information on the

dispersal of plant and animal species in all 50 states and at least one third of the rest of the world. And yet, even with its tentacles reaching into the most influential elements of international power, it remained secretive, virtually untouchable by legal oversight, its motives and its methods only vaguely understood as somehow being associated with science. The green shade of “The Twilight Zone,” or perhaps something more sinister.

As it happened, 1951 was the year Steve McCormick was born. In February 2001, a half century after Fell began forming his cadre at that library table, McCormick stood in the richly appointed Arlington, Virginia, headquarters of The Nature Conservancy and accepted the godfatherly introduction from Anthony P. (Tony) Grassi, the venerable, but seldom-seen chairman of the board of governors of TNC. McCormick, Grassi suggested, was “born for the job” as chief executive officer of the richest environmental organization on earth and the 10th best-funded nonprofit organization in the United States, just behind Stanford and Harvard Universities, and well ahead of U.S. Catholic Charities.

“It’s not enough,” said McCormick.

Firmly set as it was, deep in the foundations of American wealth and power, The Nature Conservancy had teetered just slightly at its highest point when John Sawhill unexpectedly died in 2000 after serving for its 10 most successful years as TNC’s chief executive. Little power struggles had troubled the organization before, all the way back to Fell’s time when others began to catch on to the practicality of his scheme to sustain the organization by using donated funds to buy selected properties, and then sell or trade those properties to the government.

But by the time the eclectic and slightly eccentric-seeming McCormick stood at the precipice of power so long held by old-school ties, the awesome opportunities before him reached deeper and wider into the sources of real wealth in America and the world than anyone could have imagined. Philanthropic foundations based on almost obscene accumulations of mogul wealth from energy, technology, and industrial development still held billions of dollars necessary to be transferred, some say “laundered,” through charities for tax purposes.

As the founders of TNC discovered in the ‘50s, the really “big” money from such charitable foundations as Pew Charitable Trust (Sun Oil), Rockefeller Foundation, Charles Stewart Mott Foundation (GM, sugar, bank-



PHOTO COURTESY THE NATURE CONSERVANCY

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ing), General Motors, The Ford Foundation, and dozens of others had seldom, if ever, gone directly to poor people. It went to work for secondary providers such as research by the Cancer Society or relief by the Red Cross—recipient groups that could show altruistic results without really altering the overbalance of power between the wealthy and the poor. The Nature Conservancy provided a perfectly useful new purpose, not only “saving” stretches of nature, but then transferring the land to the government for “public” purposes that would not challenge the resource holdings behind the foundations themselves. The government might “manage” these new public lands, but the real power of “old money” accumulated in a period of exploitation would remain in their control without new competition.

For TNC, the method established a continuously revolving source of funds—donations-to-government, purchase-to-donations—that only grew larger as those in the organization realized new ways to refine Fell’s concept under the shelter of its tax-exempt status acquired in 1950.

Soon, the governing board of TNC was formed of bankers, investors, and foundation heads themselves. It was disguised somewhat with the creation of boards of trustees set up in eight regions with chapters in every state, and run with the figurehead presence of “trustee members” from government and the media, including Attorney General Janet Reno, Retired General H. Norman Schwarzkopf, and media leviathan Gerald Levin of Time Warner, Inc., among many other prominent names.

Particularly in the 1990s as policies of the Clinton administration and the greens’ “Babe Ruth” Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt cleared the way, The Nature Conservancy could report astonishing growth in its own non-taxable assets. But those millions leading into billions hardly told the story. By then, The Nature Conservancy could tap into almost limitless funds virtually at will. Money was far less important than power.

“We’ve raised a lot of money,” said McCormick. “Well, that, in itself, is not a measure of success. We’ve been growing a lot. That is not a measure of success.”

While he was president of New York University between 1975 and 1979, *The New York Times* credited John Sawhill with creating a “miracle of higher education” in turning around the struggling academic and financial condition of the nation’s largest private university. If that had been a single “miracle” of

The Nature Conservancy, Inc.

Balance Sheet — Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 2001

<u>ASSETS</u>	
Cash & Equivalent	\$ 19,711,117
Accts Receivable	2,865,902
Pledges & Grants Rec'd	97,544,629
Receivables / Other	30,702,166
Inventories for Sale or Use	0
Investments / Securities	878,787,475
Investments / Other	191,416,055
Fixed Assets	1,704,000,308
Other	8,557,160
TOTAL ASSETS	\$ 2,934,584,812
TOTAL LIABILITIES	264,464,022
FUND BALANCE	\$ 2,670,120,790

Source: GuideStar financial website, Nature Conservancy, Inc. Financial Data Information, December 9, 2002. (Editor's Note: TNC's asset total is a million bucks off.)

higher education in the '70s, Sawhill must have found beatitude from his increase of TNC assets by more than five times in the 1990s.

Sawhill was a straight-laced egghead with an eye for opportunity, an academic with degrees in economics but a career interest in energy, serving in cabinet-level jobs in the federal energy offices of Presidents Carter, Nixon and Ford. He was a worldwide consultant on energy resources with a particular interest in nuclear development when he took power over TNC, by then already managed by potent corporate heads familiar to Sawhill’s exclusive Ivy League clubs. With his experience and his

influence, he was hardly more than a tweak away from fine-tuning the nonprofit organization into a uniquely powerful international shadow government, unaccountable to any electorate—not to the people of the United States, and not even to its own one-million-plus membership.

At perhaps the peak of its public recognition in 1996, Sawhill and TNC took over much of New York City’s Central Park for a private party celebrating “the world’s last great places” and honoring Ted Turner, their only real competitor in ownership of U.S. land, as the organization’s “Big Fish.” The honorary chairs and masters of ceremonies for the

TNC sold to the United States a parcel of property donated to the nonprofit. Cash return to TNC, after expenses, was estimated at \$877,000.



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exclusive \$750-a-plate event included Peter Jennings, Dan Rather, Diane Sawyer, Paula Zahn, Charlie Rose, Mike Wallace and Charles Osgood—in short, the celebrity cream of national media. It was an awesome display not so much of the lands accumulated in the cause of conservation as it was of the influence clearly held in the name of The Nature Conservancy.

To underscore the obvious bias, CBS commentator Andy Rooney, another “honorary chair” of the party, snarled at a young and skeptical *RANGE* reporter covering the event. “The Conservancy obviously does good work. You need to study journalism.”

Its membership doesn’t elect the board of governors of The Nature Conservancy, and Sawhill really didn’t need to convince anybody of the group’s good works with his elaborate party. By then, Sawhill also held posts in the Clinton administration as an advisor on the Council for Sustainable Development and the Council on Environmental Quality. He wasn’t really looking for new members with thin wallets and big ideals. His successor, Steven McCormick, would make it known he doesn’t even want them.

“Frankly, most politicians don’t pay any attention [to TNC membership] because 1.2 million people are not that many,” McCormick told *The Sacramento Bee*. He wouldn’t waste more effort on mailings trolling for 25-buck members, but would instead fish in the deep water with personal appeals to the real high rollers in American business. “It’s just a greater return,” he said.

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Fell, those 50 years ago, was somewhat limited in his vision by the places he admired most in

the eastern United States. The Ecologists Union had expanded scientific thinking into the interrelationship of species, but there was still a romantic strain of nature-loving Thoreau in the heart of their concept. Not yet, not even after Fell succeeded in winning his first big contribution from Virginia’s Old Dominion Foundation to buy New York’s 700-acre Mianus River Gorge had TNC taken on its own cynical description of itself as “nature’s landlord.”

But McCormick, “born for the job,” in San Francisco, did little else but hone his skills for that concept. After earning an unusual degree from Berkeley in agricultural economics, he went to work for the San Francisco-based California chapter of TNC almost immediately after graduating from law school in 1976, and by 1984 was TNC’s executive director for California.

Sawhill and his predecessor in the national office, Patrick Noonan, were building an empire of ideal illusion, expanding acquisitions and loading its revenue base with huge contributions beginning with \$25 million from the Richard King Mellon Foundation (Mellon National Bank) in 1983 that was up to then the largest such grant ever made for conservation purposes. In 1988, *National Geographic Magazine* devoted a major feature to the organization, and seated National Geo executives among TNC’s figurehead trustees. New inroads were made in Latin America under TNC’s “Parks in Peril” program, offering ready cash along with neglected land and resource surveys to flimsy national governments.

But McCormick by then had his own fish of sorts to fry in California where TNC faced

the good-intentions competition of the older and more established Sierra Club as well as dozens of other eagerly rising environmental groups. He could see the inevitable swing to the West of the movement, and quickly recognized the useful tactic of shifting from the mere acquisition of parcels of land to what he called “Conservation by Design,” spreading both financial and political control over even larger areas in a patient game of property chess that provided “open space” in the right places and brought the California chapter alone \$300 million in private donations that made it easily the most powerful environmental organization contending in the great prize of the Golden State. With some help from Sawhill, McCormick began promoting his “design” as a new strategy for TNC’s international operations.

As mysterious and shaded from view as was the national operation of TNC, McCormick’s work from the West Coast was even less publicly visible or understood. The national organization had relied on the “old money” of the Mellons and the Fords. McCormick found he could delve into newer players, some of them obvious from the high tech industry such as Hewlett Packard, but others aswirl in subsidiaries and fronts and limited corporations that lead to blind alleys in global finance. Almost instinctively, he recognized the politicians most vulnerable to matching their careers with TNC ambitions.

“Steve recognizes that lasting conservation success will ultimately depend on vibrant partnerships among all sectors of society,” said a TNC press release. “He champions innovation and experimentation, and does not shy away from the sort of bold land deals that come with big price tags—and the potential for big results.”

Still, when Sawhill died without naming a successor, McCormick did not immediately step into his place. Sawhill died in May 2000, of complications from diabetes. That same month, McCormick resigned his post as head of the California chapter to become a partner in the Resources Law Group, LLP. That organization described itself as “specializing in representing public and private clients in the development of strategies to conserve natural resources and providing consultation to wealthy individuals on venture philanthropy for land conservation.” McCormick seemed to be striking out on his own. Something in the enigmatic structure of “nature’s real estate agency” had trembled.

Only 3,000 people are on the TNC payroll. Most of them probably wouldn’t know,

and those who did probably wouldn't say, but something was uncertain in the process of choosing Sawhill's successor. "It's really a takeover of an existing organization with great integrity," former TNC Western Regional Director Huey Johnson told *The Sacramento Bee*. "[McCormick] has made TNC a tool of government and companies with questionable environmental records."

Others, however, would say with at least equal alarm that it is the other way around. Building on Sawhill's fund-raising success, McCormick evidently has intentions of making the government and major corporations tools of The Nature Conservancy.

"Our mission speaks to preserving biological diversity, not creating nature preserves," McCormick said in complaint of the budget demands on TNC's own preserves, and in 50-year contrast to Fell's now modest-seeming hopes. "Land acquisition alone will not enable us to work at the scale we have to work at."

Walk any beach on either coast until you find a fence that prevents even the military from disturbing a potential nesting site of the threatened plover. There you will find The Nature Conservancy. Visit western farming regions in Nevada and California especially where family farms are under relentless pressure to become "willing sellers" of their water rights, and you will see some of McCormick's work. Observe the heavy machinery and implications to agriculture from new U.S. Corps of Engineers projects to re-channel western streams and rivers and you will find that the federal agency is being directed under an agreement with The Nature Conservancy. Find the charming nature trail securing the boundaries of the richest suburbs on the West Coast and it will likely have been built with help from TNC. Examine even the most radical environmental approach to shift the human population of the West into controlled core settlements bordering a vast "corridor" of wilderness from the Yucatan to the Yukon, and know that the plan presented by



"What I find interesting is that somebody thinks that \$15,000 is going to make any difference to anybody at CBS or for that matter to The Nature Conservancy. It seems a pretty paltry sum to me," said CBS "Sunday Morning" host Charles Osgood (who's served as an emcee for TNC fundraisers) in response to questions about the network's contributions and relationship with TNC. Former CBS News President Howard Stringer is a TNC Trustee.

Reed Noss and David Foreman was funded by The Nature Conservancy.

Anywhere TNC might be caught in a media spotlight, it ducks into the trees, but it is almost always the unseen "Bigfoot" behind every outrage in the battle over "public" land and private rights.

McCormick stepped into his \$275,000-a-year job and made a tour of his empire, spread largely south into growing dominance over rainforests and wild savannahs, but reaching beyond those particularly useful landscapes into Africa and Asia, even into China. Governments had warmed to TNC and its data bank as potentates and dictators now bowed to McCormick.

In Peru, a deal was cut to absolve about \$14 million of that nation's debt to the United States in return for control by TNC, Conservation International, and the World Wildlife Fund over 27.5 million acres of rainforest—a Peruvian "place" the size of Virginia. Few in

the public of the United States, fewer still in Peru, knew anything of the deal costing the three U.S. environmental groups a cool pocket-pool of cash amounting to \$1.1 million. The land reportedly contains great biological assets, including pink river dolphins and giant water lilies. It also holds vast resources in hardwood timber, oil, gas and fruit, which may be produced only under the supervision of TNC and the other environmentalist overseers.

No wonder McCormick was no longer impressed by TNC's accumulation of little "great places" in the U.S. that still went on at a rate of one new purchase every day.

"Currently," McCormick scoffed, "80 percent of our resources go to a geography, principally the United States, that constitutes less than 20 percent of the world's biodiversity." Time has come, he said, to expand TNC's already astonishing international influence. Change the term "biodiversity" to "resources," and you will hear echoes of the mogul money

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In February 2003, General Motors put up a matching grant totaling nearly half a million dollars to purchase more of the 30,000-acre Parana reserve in southern Brazil.

The reserve was established by a \$10 million grant from GM to The Nature Conservancy in 2000. Utilizing its dominant Earth Foundation data bank, TNC has vast regions and scores of indigenous economies under its control and management. Here are a few examples: a million-and-a-half acres along the border of Panama and Columbia; at least 148,000 acres in Brazil; 260,000 acres in Belize (a fourth of that nation's total land area) TNC says is now protected from conversion to agriculture; a half-million-acre-portion of Guatemala comprising the largest "cloud forest" in Central America and requiring the relocation of indigenous people to a new farm managed by TNC.

at the heart of what is expanding as the world's largest real-estate cartel—or something more sinister. It would not have sold as a "Twilight Zone" script.

Even where TNC itself is not directly at the controls, the replications in land trusts and conservation schemes almost always owe their origins to imitating TNC without directly threatening it. That includes the United Nations-linked Conservation Union and Conservation International (CI) run by Peter Seligmann, who was a director of TNC until 1987 when he formed his mirror organization now covering 30 countries with assets in excess of \$300 million. This year, CI launched a campaign of its own, lightly challenging TNC and McCormick with the celebrity leadership of actor Harri-

son Ford. Whatever the remaining integrity of the environmental movement may be worth, TNC has so far taken little notice of one more mere movie star as worthy of its attention.

So skilled and so experienced is The Nature Conservancy at the methods of disguising revenues in subsidiaries and limited partnerships, nonprofit fronts and federal grants, that perhaps no one really knows the true extent of its financial power. Few, however, would dare challenge it.

On its 50th anniversary, President George W. Bush wrote a congratulatory note to TNC saying, "The Nature Conservancy's accomplishments over the last five decades are remarkable."

Even he did not dare say frightening. ■

WATER RIGHTS & WRONGS

GRAHAM CHISHOLM'S JOB WAS TO LISTEN FOR THE FRAILTY

Unless there is some other compelling reason, most local newspapers wouldn't report the way the man we'll call Joe died, especially not in the small family-conscious region of rural Nevada where he had spent his entire life and where most who knew him already understood how it happened anyway.

It had begun a fairly nice morning up on what they call the bench overlooking Lahontan Valley to the east. Joe might have had reason to celebrate. Only the day before he had signed the last papers turning over his land and its water rights to the power company under the "willing seller" program to conserve the water of the Truckee River. It was a fair deal, giving Joe enough money to go wherever he wanted, to retire somewhere and forget about it all if he wanted. He walked out onto his back porch and stood watching for a while as the sun warmed the alfalfa fields stretching down the long slope. Then he shot himself.

You couldn't blame Graham Chisholm or The Nature Conservancy for it, although ironically it was just this sort of sudden family tragedy that would have drawn Graham's attention only four or five years earlier when he first arrived in the Lahontan Valley offering neighborly help and understanding in all the confused stress imposed by a new federal "settlement" on use of the Truckee.

Chisholm wasn't much different than dozens of other Nature Conservancy operatives spread out all over the nation as John Sawhill began his confident drive on the "great places" still not in TNC's hands. They were all young and well-educated, but chosen more for their "activist" ambitions and sense of political charm than for any particular scientific knowledge about the environment or endangered species.

Their job was to seek out the weaknesses in private barriers to restoring what TNC saw as vast ecological landscapes shaped back together in some cases one parcel at a time. It required them to become close to the people and their communities—to join their clubs

and volunteer in social programs, and to listen, always listen, for their frailty.

Already, TNC had stumbled over its own ambition at least twice close enough to prompt federal attention. In Indiana, the operatives had taken advantage of a once nationally prominent neurologist then suffering in his last days with Alzheimer's disease. Helpful TNC operatives convinced him to change his will, leaving his entire estate and 95-acre farm to the nonprofit organization. The family was forced into court to win back the property in a trial exposing the cult-like deceit of "nature's landlord." Another case pitted an elderly woman against her step-children in a grab at a Colorado ranch. Still another drew national attention in 1993 when the Illinois state director of TNC, Albert Pyott, so coveted property near the Cypress Creek National Wildlife Refuge that he tried to intimidate the owner with a letter saying, "If your land is not acquired through voluntary negotiation, we will recommend its acquisition through condemnation."

Everywhere land could be put in question by new priorities of the Clinton administration especially, there was The Nature Conservancy. It had become America's 10th-largest nonprofit charity without so much as a tax dollar's accountability to the people of the United States.

"We do work closely with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service," said TNC's William Weeks in 1991. "We buy these properties when they need to be bought, so that at some point we can become willing sellers [to the government]. This helps the government get around the problem of local opposition."

Although no one in the Lahontan Valley knew it then, that was almost precisely Graham Chisholm's job description as he nurtured his own way into influence in the Lahontan Valley, site of the nation's first western reclamation project in 1906, the place Teddy Roosevelt meant when he said he would "make the desert bloom."

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Senator Harry Reid (D-NV) held his own peculiar ambitions in land and power acquisition. Helped with advice from his close friend, Bruce Babbitt, Reid was already adept at swapping land in his own state in exchange for little gems of "great places" like the Virgin River northeast of Las Vegas. Reid was proud of the deal he brokered to "save" several miles of the river shores in trade for a spread of BLM land near the small town of Mesquite on the Arizona border. The site is now a mini-Vegas with casinos and hotels and golf



PLOVER © JOHN GERLACH, TOM STACK & ASSOCIATES

" We buy these properties when they need to be bought, so that at some point we can become willing seller [to the government]," said TNC's William Weeks. " This helps the government get around the problem of local opposition." Although no one in the Lahontan Valley knew it then, that was almost precisely Graham Chisholm's job description.



TNC finds it easier to collect big bucks for glamorous and exotic toucans than simple sparrows (inset). What is objectionable and dangerous about TNC is the arrogance with which they presume to decide what will be destroyed and what will be saved.

courses at the gateway of traffic into Nevada from Arizona. The shores of the Virgin River are safe for coyotes and rattlesnakes.

In the late '80s, Reid set out to accomplish the big political prize that eluded his predecessors in Nevada and even the attempts of President Ronald Reagan in bringing some settlement to the long dispute between California and Nevada over water splitting its course down the eastern and western flanks of the Sierra out of Lake Tahoe itself.

Settlement between the states was a relatively simple matter compared to solving the rubrics of promises made by the federal government 70 years earlier in diverting part of the flow of the Truckee away from landlocked Pyramid Lake into the two-river system of agricultural irrigation established by the landmark Reclamation Act. Reid would later rant in public hearings that the Lahontan farmers had "walked out" on his negotiations, but a congressional study concluded that the farmers had been "scapegoated" from the beginning by the deal Reid quietly set up between Sierra Pacific Power Company, the

Pyramid Lake Tribe, and federal land managers to pick apart the water rights of the farmers. "They never had a chance," the report concluded.

Even then, there was no mention of the part played from the beginning by TNC, which had its eye on the great swamp-like sink of the Carson River at the eastern end of the valley where it simply vanished into the desert. These wetlands, protected first by the farmers themselves in the 1950s as a duck hunting region, needed to be restored by at least 25,000 acres, TNC concluded in declaring them another "great place."

Reid's Settlement Act passed by only a single vote as the last piece of legislation approved in the 101st Congress. Within days, there were already lawsuits and regulatory demands challenging the rights of Lahontan farmers to irrigation supplies.

Maybe it was just country courtesy, or maybe it was because local people thought he was an expert on the environment who would help them find a new solution; maybe it was because some were just afraid of

offending him, but Graham Chisholm slid easily into the kind of respect afforded a visiting dignitary in a respectful small town. He was at the meetings of the Irrigation District and the County Commission; he volunteered his time with the Ag Center's committee testing local wells in the drought. He was there at the melon festival and the county fair, and cheerfully took his turn as the target in the dunking chair. And when the time came that some of the most concerned citizens began organizing a new group to defend local water rights, Graham was among the founding committee. It was always Graham, never "Mr. Chisholm" or "The Nature Conservancy representative." It was, by his preference, always, "Graham," the shyly informed college boy in his neatly pressed blue work shirt and faded jeans or chinos. Right down to what seemed almost a uniform requirement, Graham Chisholm carried out the handbook of TNC "partnership" creation. He knew everybody, shared meals with many of them, played with their kids, listened to their jokes and paid attention to their problems.

He impressed some, perhaps, and maybe scared some others with his description of the number of species visiting the wetlands from the western flyway and the conjecture of scientists that still undiscovered cures to disease might be found among the plant life. But that was the generalized TNC hype on all wetlands. Chisholm could bring a botanist to speak at a meeting on short notice, but he himself was no expert. His graduate thesis in political science at the University of California, Berkeley, had been written on the formation of the radical Green Party in Germany.

Lawsuits and stringent new federal restrictions were taking their toll on the valley. If it was to survive as a viable agricultural community, local leaders agreed there would have to be sacrifices. They were in the depth of a killing seven-year drought that on its own was prompting many to sell just to survive. Under those pressures, there were no willing buyers beyond the government. In order to save what water they could, farmers agreed that other marginal lands would have to be given up in hopes of reaching some compromise. The president of the Irrigation District himself became one of the first willing sellers. After him, the elder leader of the valley's most long-standing family sold his land. Then another, and another whose children saw a better future in the money.

There was never enough, nor would there likely ever be enough in federal wetlands funds to purchase what TNC had imposed as the goal of Reid's law. That was another reason Graham was there. Virtually none of the marginal lands sold for "appraised value" had any direct relationship to the actual wetlands. What was really purchased was the water rights that would be drained away, leaving ghost farms and pale, lifeless fields of laser-leveled ground unable even to support the growth of weeds.

The tragedy of one older and well-known family was in the bitter failure of a son's marriage. Only in 1990 had he completed construction on land his father gave him of the sprawling split-level home with its large warm windows posing a view out to the Stillwater Mountains and the wild refuge of the sink. It had been meant for a long new future but it ended too soon in broken hearts, and Graham was there with his sympathy.

Senator Harry Reid's success at land swaps to help make possible the astonishing sprawl of America's fastest-growing city, Las Vegas, was accomplished in large part with financial backing of the Arizona corporation that had built Bugsy Siegel's first hotel, the

EXCERPT FROM TNC LETTER SENT RECENTLY TO RANGE PUBLISHER, C. J. HADLEY

**"Dear Investor:
Please let me quickly explain why I am forwarding the enclosed Nature Conservancy Notepad.**

You see, I want to introduce you to a certain bug-eyed bird who's ogling you with undisguised bad temper. He has a point. He's a native American sandhill crane and you may be sitting on top of one of his nesting sites.

From his point of view every time our human species has drained, plowed or built a city on a marsh, since 1492 or so—there went the neighborhood. It's enough to make you both edgy.

So give us \$10 for his nest egg, and we'll see that a nice, soggy spot—just the kind he and his mate need to fashion a nest and put an egg in—is reserved for the two of them, undisturbed, for keeps. Only \$10.... Then the crane can relax and so can you. A bit.

How will we reserve that incubator with your \$10? With good ethics and sound business:

We'll just BUY the nesting ground...."

Donna ChereI, Vice President of Membership, TNC

Ms. Hadley, your FREE Personalized Address Labels Are Enclosed!



AUTO



You don't have to be human to know the pain of a broken home. . .

Ms. Caroline J. Hadley
000 Main Street, USA

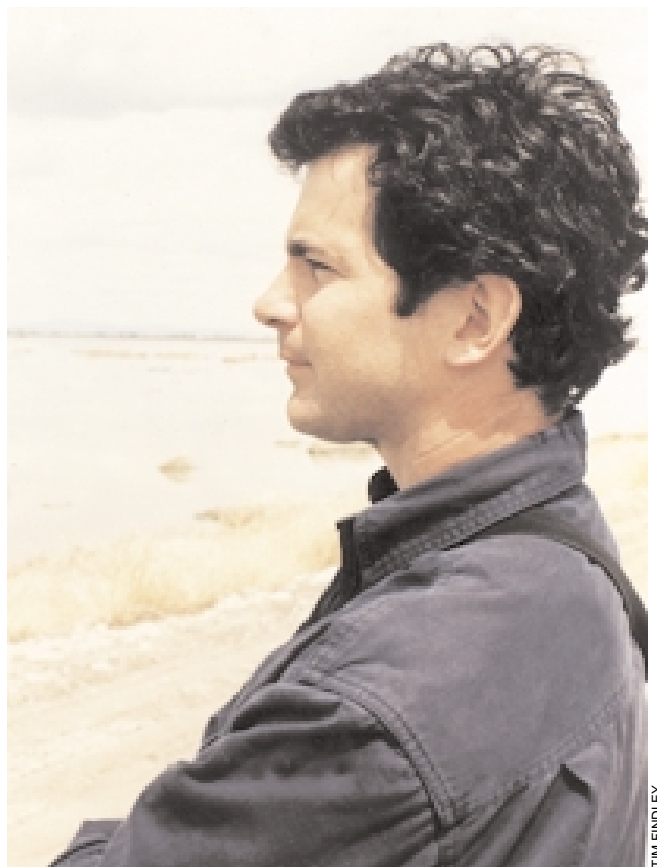


. . . only to fix one.

(Ten dollars will fill the bill.)

"Frankly, most politicians don't pay any attention because 1.2 million people are not that many," TNC Chairman Steve McCormick told *The Sacramento Bee*. He wouldn't waste more effort on mailings trolling for 25-buck members, but would instead fish in the deep water with personal appeals to the real high rollers in American business. "It's just a greater return," he said.

Graham Chisholm wasn't much different than dozens of other Nature Conservancy operatives spread out all over the nation as John Sawhill began his confident drive on the "great places" still not in TNC hands. They were all young and well-educated, but chosen more for their "activist" ambitions and sense of political charm than for any particular scientific knowledge about the environment or endangered species. "It was a choice," Chisholm said. "There was us, or there was the lawyers."



TIM FINDLEY

Flamingo. Questioned for possible mob connections by federal authorities in the 1960s, Del Webb Corporation was by then out of the casino business, but it was still the southwest's biggest builder of retirement communities and it counted among its former consultants Bruce Babbitt.

If there were not enough federal wetlands funds to accomplish the aim in the Lahontan Valley, there was the desire of Del Webb for more land around Las Vegas, and just in case they needed to "get around the problem of local opposition" there was The Nature Conservancy to serve as the clean idealist handler of the deal.

At the end of 1995, Chisholm announced that TNC, with the partnership of Del Webb, had purchased "an old farmhouse" and adjoining property they intended to convert as a "visitor center" for the Stillwater Wetlands. It was actually the empty five-year-old mansion of a broken-hearted young former farmer. Despite Chisholm's promises, it has never been used as a "visitor center."

Well on the other side of the valley, but still with water rights in the system, 75-year-old Georgie Sicking said, "I had no choice really. They bought everything around me, including the irrigation ditch." It was an unusual expression of defeat for the gritty

self-reliant Sicking, a renowned cowboy poet, and perhaps the valley's most beloved character. "I'll be honest; I'm just tired of fighting with 'em," she said. "I feel like running. I never felt that way before." Graham graciously called her the night after she signed the Del Webb papers to ask if she was sure she got enough for the deal.

The county was at last growing tired of Graham and the TNC as well, especially after TNC falsely claimed in its annual report that the city of Fallon had been a \$1,000 contributor to their campaign. That, TNC explained, was the cost of a poster they had produced to show what the restored wetlands should look like, and copies of the poster went to the city.

Only finally, when uncovered federal documents revealed that Chisholm had been a paid consultant to the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service under a "memorandum of understanding" reached before Reid's "negotiations" were finalized did the good-guy Graham at last fade from the scene in the Lahontan Valley.

He too had bigger fish to fry. His boss, Steve McCormick, was about to take over as CEO of The Nature Conservancy. He wanted Graham to take over his job as head of TNC's wealthiest chapter in California. ■

POLITICS

IT MAY BE TAINTED,
"BUT T'AIN'T ENOUGH"

Tip O'Neill made it the most common cliché of the American system in the 20th century: "All politics is local." O'Neill was perhaps the last great giant of Democrat leadership that could trace its power truly to the hearts of common people.

Even contending with the overwhelming issues of the cold war, civil rights struggles and Viet Nam, the Speaker of the House of Representatives always advised that people cared first about whether their neighborhood street was paved.

Democrat politicians used the phrase, but strayed far from understanding it in their hungry plundering for greater campaign contributions beginning in the late 1970s. It was tin-plate-and-button worthless by the time Democrats rose back to real power under the integrity of such men as Bill Clinton and Bruce Babbitt.

As witnessed from campaign stops among logging families in the Northwest followed by indifference to them in office, the cause of the common man, particularly in the West, was no more than a flimsy façade. It was like a Hollywood town disguising the machinery that would tear it down as soon as the shot, or the election, was complete.

Given the unbelievable multimillions of dollars necessary to win a national public office, and sometimes even a local election, it might be said that The Nature Conservancy continues to buy up America at a bargain—\$30 million here, another \$10 million there, hundreds of thousands spread over more spots amounting to a chunk of property bigger than most states, it went on as if sanctioned by the Clinton administration.

Seldom, if ever, could the money be traced to the politicians. By then, in the 1990s, TNC didn't need to buy national candidates. It already owned them.

There is a sense of guilt in the American psyche, made even more apparent by the disparity of wealth in the world since the end of World War II. Common American tradition ran against unearned wealth and historic social abuses. There was a sense of guilt about our own achievements at the price of slavery and, as television brought a greater sense to it, at the price of what some portrayed as the last of Eden itself. Morally, intuitively, Americans held themselves responsible for the fate of the planet.

In 1973, The Nature Conservancy received a gift of 49,000 acres in Virginia's Dismal Swamp from the international paper and box-producing Union Camp Company. One reporter, sounding advanced for the time, questioned whether such a gift from a resource-exploiting corporation might be "tainted." Replied Patrick Noonan, "It may be tainted, but 'taint enough."

The wheels in motion by that time were being turned at TNC by its vice president for science, Robert E. Jenkins. Jenkins, with better scientific credentials than most of TNC's leadership, launched a bold and daring program that could prove to be the richest field of all for TNC. He proposed to produce a biological inventory of the entire United States, cataloging the existence of species and locations of natural communities in all 50 states under the TNC front of The National Heritage Network (now Nature Serve). Offered a database compiled without cost to the national budget, the U.S. government readily conceded to Jenkins' method as the standard for determining

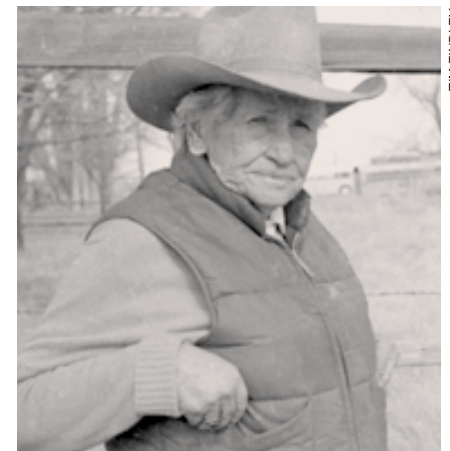


TIM FINDLEY

In Nevada, where 85 percent of the state's land mass is already owned by the federal government, voters rallied against threats of "urbanization" particularly in the Las Vegas area and passed a \$200 million bond issue to protect "public land."

Strapped for revenues like other western states, Nevada can nowhere near match the aim of acquiring more land, most of which is well beyond the still-sprawling Vegas and Clark County region.

The measure was quietly sponsored by The Nature Conservancy, which has its eye on numerous rural areas in Northern Nevada as possible trades to allow growth in the urbanized southern edge of the state.



TIM FINDLEY

Georgie Sicking's ranch (shown at top of page) is now dust and weeds. TNC made her an offer she couldn't refuse—survival.

biodiversity on the continent.

The Nature Conservancy need never have looked back. Noonan was right. What had been “taint enough” was from then on plenty more. Federal land and scientific authorities didn’t question TNC’s findings and data. Congressional hearings hardly bothered to check the credentials of TNC representatives sent to testify on environmental issues.

One could, at an extreme, argue that it amounted to a coup capturing vital elements of the government’s Interior policy. At the very least, it set in motion the powerful effects of the Endangered Species Act, regarded by some as the most powerful law in the nation. And perhaps most importantly, it established a basis of political influence that was very nearly outright extortion. Who would dare question TNC? No wonder major U.S. resource corporations sought their way on to TNC boards. It wasn’t just guilt from past abuses. It was self-defense.

So too did national candidates not seek campaign help from TNC as much as they scrambled to be sure their campaign was on TNC’s side.

To underscore this seeming mandate of national opinion, TNC reminded the political leadership of TNC’s own one-million-plus membership and produced polls paid for by TNC shell companies showing 85 percent of Americans who considered themselves “environmentalists.” The national media easily bought into the idea, and were supplied with gorgeous files of photos, films, and videos



Tip O'Neill advised that people care first about their own neighborhoods. TNC begins there...

providing indisputable proof of the necessity to “save” the planet’s fragile beauty. It was like showing a picture of an abandoned puppy, and it required no checking of sources.

The political credibility afforded TNC’s indirect influence over U.S. Interior policy was not even a good measure of the enormity of its growing power. Financed in part by profits from lands sold to the government itself and able to call at will on funds from foundations and limited corporations almost eager to cover their own cash under an oak leaf logo, TNC rather quickly became the richest environmental organization on earth.

It was no longer merely the 10th largest nonprofit organization in the United States. By the middle of the ’90s it was recognized by what seemed a new term to most Americans—an NGO, or Non-Government Organization. If that meant nothing to farmers and ranchers and rural dwellers beginning to see themselves as anachronisms in the surge of public opinion that TNC represented, it carried a great deal more weight in the “global consciousness” arising particularly after the end of the cold war.

Multinational conferences sponsored by the United Nations or other coalitions of international interests began meeting in places like Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, or Kyoto, Japan, or Johannesburg, South Africa, to discuss the overwhelming issues con-

fronting the planet—global warming, poverty, disease and overpopulation. The United States, in its own national interests, provided little more than ceremonial delegates with official power to the conferences. But the conferences stressed supposed global awareness ahead of national interests. Non-Government Organizations were far more compatible in finding solutions. Among them, clearly the most powerful, was The Nature Conservancy.

In effect, TNC was thus serving as a shadow government of the United States in international forums discussing population



“ I knew the founders of this organization [TNC] on a first-name basis, and they would be turning over in their graves. It would take just one dumb move to destroy the integrity accumulated over 50 years by this organization.”

—FORMER NATURE CONSERVANCY MANAGER HUEY JOHNSON
ON STEVE MCCORMICK’S “DURABLE CONSERVATION” STRATEGY

control, energy distribution and basic human rights. No one from TNC was officially delegated to represent the United States. There was no official oversight on their actions. Whatever they did was unaccountable to any representative body of the American government. Yet now, when they spoke, it was with international authority that extended Jenkins' data bank on biodiversity over at least a third of the planet.

Almost incredibly, there still exists a Communist Party of the United States, which in its most recent diatribes attacks old American monopolies like DuPont and General Motors as being "the black hand of death to the environment." In the June 2002 newsletter of CPUSA, National Secretary John Bactell rants against such capitalist abuse, then notes in one paragraph about beloved Cuba that, "The Nature Conservancy is working in conjunction with the Chinese government on various projects to preserve regions of rich biodiversity."

You could say that a small group of people holding power over natural resources, agricultural production, and even free speech amounts to communism, but it can just as easily amount to fascism. It does not total up to freedom.

TNC, however, is well aware of American custom that "all politics is local." That is why it patiently sells its position from "the grass roots" up, working to convince even the people it may victimize that they can act for the good of us all. "Partnership" is TNC's favored method of control. Only when that won't produce results quickly enough or largely enough would TNC resort to risking exposure of itself by blatant campaign contributions.

After passage in March 2002 in California of a \$2.6 billion bond measure for state parks, questions were raised about the largest single donor to that initiative campaign and another two years earlier which provided another \$2.1 billion in state park funds. Both measures were sponsored by The Nature Conservancy. Their \$1-million benefactor for campaign funds was identified first only as "Rosebud"

In effect, TNC was serving as a shadow government of the United States in international forums discussing population control, energy distribution and basic human rights. No one from TNC was officially delegated to represent the United States. There was no official oversight on their actions. Whatever they did was unaccountable to any representative body of the American government. Yet now, when they spoke, it was with international authority that extended Jenkins' data bank on biodiversity over at least a third of the planet.

and in the latest campaign as "Wild Rose," but both came evidently from the same mysterious source.

Who was Rosebud? Defying state law, California TNC Director Graham Chisholm refused to say. "We have a very clear relationship of trust with our donors who wish to remain anonymous," said the veteran of Nevada's Lahontan Valley "settlement." "That is fundamental to how we operate."

Both donations traced back to blind alleys of Limited Liability Corporations (LLC) based in Seattle. They financed victories for the two largest park bonds in California history with implications over millions of acres. Curiously coincidental perhaps is the fact that Rosebud is the last word spoken by the dying character of William Randolph Hearst in Orson Wells classic film "Citizen Kane."

As it happens, the Hearst Corporation is currently involved in a land-buyout campaign that could cost taxpayers \$100 million. A chief consultant to the Hearst Corporation is former U.S. Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt. ■



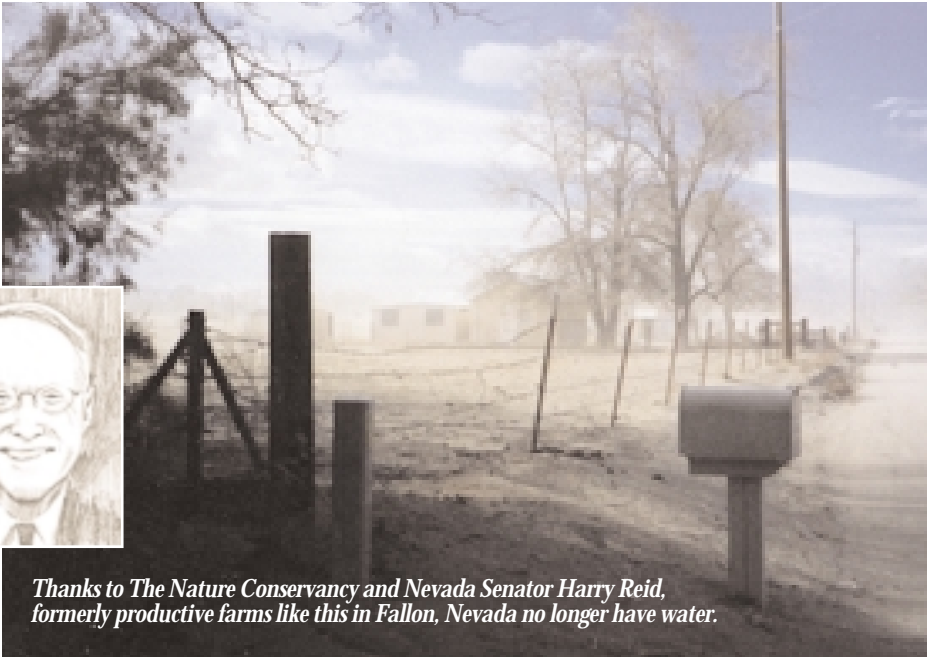
JOHN BARDWELL

THE BOARD

PROBABLY THE MOST POWERFUL REAL ESTATE CARTEL THE WORLD HAS SEEN OUTSIDE OF EMPIRES

The biggest mistake to be made in trying to understand The Nature Conservancy is to think of it as a passionate group of young scientists and scholastics rescuing imperiled landscapes and habitats at virtually the last minute with the help of dollars and dimes from schoolchildren and their liberal parents. It's the error most commonly conveyed by the national media, but that may not be by mistake.

The Nature Conservancy is run by a 39-member self-nominating board of governors who represent some of the wealthiest and most powerful corporations in the United States. Only four of the members present



Thanks to The Nature Conservancy and Nevada Senator Harry Reid, formerly productive farms like this in Fallon, Nevada no longer have water.

NEWLANDS WATER PROTECTIVE ASSN

amount exceeding the gross national product of some countries where it operates. And yet, The Nature Conservancy holds a tax-exempt status identical to a neighborhood library association.

The Chairman of the Board of Governors, Anthony (Tony) P. Grassi is listed by TNC as president of the board of trustees of the New Canaan County, Conn., Country School. That's his retirement job. He was formerly chief financial and executive officer of First Boston, Inc., and head of First Boston's investment banking and management committee, one of the most powerful investment groups in the world. Such big banks are found in more than one case these days at the dead end of tracing funds to TNC from their currently favorite sources of Limited Liability Partnerships (LLP), a legal device making it more difficult to track the transfer of large amounts of money.

The Conservancy's Chief Executive Officer, Steve McCormick, made only a vague but highly grateful reference to one such group, Farallon Capital Management, a Limited Liability Corporation (LLC), in crediting them with the most help in this year's \$31 million purchase of the Baca Ranch in Colorado. Farallon leadership and organization traces back to First Boston and Goldman Sachs, both with convenient places among TNC's board of governors.

Still, though they can't take much credit for it, average donors and members of TNC can easily believe from the richly photographed publications produced by the organization that they are part of a noble aim to save nature. They don't even know how much TNC really controls or how potentially threatening their holdings may be. Since 1988, for example, TNC has held responsibility given the group by the government for management of 25 million acres of military property in the United States. Since 1961, it has expanded on an agreement with the U.S. Bureau of Land Management covering standards on the nation's "public" lands. And in 2001, TNC was granted responsibility for directing the U.S. Corps of Engineers in shifting the channels of American rivers and streams.

The 12 million acres TNC acknowledges it owns in the United States is not half the truth of what it controls.

The first mistake is always in believing that it is an altruistic, nature-loving organization without a profiteer in its midst. How could there be? ■

Less than a half-century later, TNC would be the most powerful environmental organization in history, capable of manipulating governments, including that of the United States; endowed with assets amounting to nearly \$3 billion, and exempt from taxes. It would be directly in control of some 90 million acres worldwide, with more than 12 million acres, an area the size of Switzerland, in the United States alone.

obvious scientific credentials. The majority are presidents, vice presidents, chairmen, and chief operating officers of such mighty international business interests as ConAgra, Cisco Systems, Georgia-Pacific, Goldman Sachs, General Motors, Discovery Communications, Cargill and General Mills, American Electric Power Company, NASDAQ, the Orvis Company and DuPont. Harvard, Stanford, Rockefeller and Columbia Universities all have representative executives on the board.

Together, they represent what is most probably the most powerful real estate cartel the world has ever seen outside the establishment of national empires. It is estimated that The Nature Conservancy continues to expand its holdings by at least one new acquisition every day. It could, for example, be con-

veyed in the manner of weekly newsreels during World War II showing the expansion of military occupation in bleeding globs of color across a map of the world. To imagine that such absorption of land and property is accomplished with donations and dues of even TNC's one-million-plus members is absurd. Even studies by the United States Internal Revenue Service have concluded that such contributions are miniscule in comparison to what the Conservancy accumulates from its own investments, grants (including some from the government), and profits from the sales of its lands—usually back to the government.

The organization reports a total income from fiscal year 2000 of nearly \$787 million, but that seems almost modest in comparison to its total assets of over \$2.8 billion—an

LAND

AS TNC "SAVES" LAND WITH YOUR MONEY, COMMUNITIES PERISH

The Mianus River Gorge between New York and Connecticut remains a richly alluring place, laced with delicate shadows from eastern hemlock and ferns, soft seeming in its power. A place where fables still could easily be born.

Such gentle dreams are not so easily put in motion on the Texas City Prairie Reserve where petroleum pumps go on dipping their beaks and rocking back in rhythm like tasteless toys on the rim of rolling pasture that is home to half of the last 40 Attwater's prairie chickens known to exist on earth.

Concept to cocktail joke, that is the reality in the properties "saved" and preserved by The Nature Conservancy.

Perhaps the greatest secret held in the enigma of "nature's landlord" is that it is not really an environmental organization at all. It is a land acquisition scheme, complex and highly elusive, but dedicated in foremost to its own enrichment of wealth and power. And, as time has revealed, the ambition of the organization is not really for land, but for the ultimate management of human behavior.

For its 50 years of acting on behalf of what TNC itself proclaims to be "the last great places," the organization cannot legitimately claim to have scientifically "saved" anything that was facing certain extinction. It can, however, claim in multimillions of acres an amount of land it has excluded from use by all human beings except those who meet TNC approval and can pay the price. It has preserved "nature" with all-time arrogance in the name of the Conservancy itself.

George Fell's first benefactors at the beginning of TNC were associated with the staid and very wealthy Old Dominion College in Virginia. It was not unnatural in those times that their interest in "conservation" might focus on so near a parochial cause as the string of islands off the coast of their own state.

Along Virginia's eastern shore, running from Chesapeake Bay into the Atlantic is a string of 18 barrier islands blessed with a rich and generally unspoiled diversity of shore life and habitat. These beaches, reachable only by boat, and the offshore waters once served as the economic resource for some 45,000 peo-



ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN BARDWELL

Along Virginia's eastern shore is a string of 18 barrier islands blessed with a rich and unspoiled diversity of shore life and habitat. TNC "saved" the place from implied development but it was an economic disaster. Millions were lost in failed investments. Local poverty grew worse. But TNC hardly felt it. By then, "nature's landlord" owned 14 of the 18 islands, each served with opulent showplaces built for rich clients, all unaffordable to the original residents of the eastern shore....

Your Tax Dollars Given to TNC 1995-2000

FROM:

Dept. of Interior, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Serv.	\$16,681,338*
Dept. of Commerce, National Oceanic & Atmospheric Adm.	11,000,000
Dept. of Interior, Bureau of Reclamation	2,904,507
Dept. of Energy	504,245
Dept. of Ag., Nat'l Resource Cons. Serv.	384,600
Dept. of Defense (non-military)	300,000
Dept. of Ag., Forest Service	293,185
Environmental Protection Agency	226,973
Dept. of Interior, BLM	40,000

Total \$32,334,848

*Who Got It? Examples from U.S. F&WS:

TNC San Francisco	\$9,411,957
TNC Hawaii	300,500
TNC Oregon	766,847
TNC Middletown, CT	5,852

SOURCE: GREENWATCH

ple living on Virginia's shores and dependent for their livelihood on seafood and vegetable processing plants. It was what might be called today a "sustainable" system of food production and ecology. But in the 1970s a company known as the Smith Island Development Corporation threatened to build a bridge from the mainland connecting to all the islands.

The Nature Conservancy's bright young man of that time, Patrick Noonan, stepped in with what would become characteristic TNC zeal to "save" such a last great place from the implied development. First to be "rescued" in the nonprofit group's series of purchases was the island and shallow water income base off the eastern shore, now supposedly protected from human intrusion or development. Onshore, poverty deepened, particularly among largely minority labor put out of work when processing plants dependent on the nearby waters shut down. To replace them, there began appearing opulent new homes and duck clubs "compatible" with nature under terms of the Virginia Coast Reserve, the front established by The Nature Conservancy.

In fact, even though locals knew about VCR and resisted the growing power of the non-profit, they were unaware that other parcels purchased by the supposedly independent Offshore Islands Inc. and then "donated" to TNC were also part of the scheme. Offshore Islands Inc. only later admitted it was a shell company for TNC itself.

Twenty years into an economic disaster of their own making, TNC, now headed by Sawhill, vowed to fix it with an infusion of \$2.25 million into the eastern-shore economy for "compatible" development of new business in tourism, craft shops and small real estate under direction of the Virginia Eastern Shore Corporation, another TNC front.

It was an utter and undisguisable failure. Doing it "TNC's way" simply didn't work. Millions were lost in failed investments. Local poverty only grew worse. But TNC hardly felt it. By then, "nature's landlord" owned 14 of the 18 islands, each served with opulent showplaces built for rich clients, all unaffordable to the people of the eastern shore.

"All of us will end up being servants to these Goddamned rich people," one bitter

resident told a reporter. By then, Patrick Noonan himself owned 14 parcels on the eastern shore.

In his book "Trashing the Economy," researcher and writer Ron Arnold reports that no records can be found to establish that the Smith Island Development Corporation, which supposedly prompted TNC's action by its bridge-building plan, ever really existed.

It is not really difficult to uncover outrageous contradictions and sad lies among the holdings of The Nature Conservancy. Given the rate at which they acquire property, it might be surprising not to stumble over abuses. Yet the Conservancy remains untouched by any serious federal challenge to its status. Defectors from the organization wonder at how it has not become even more reckless in its ruthless grab of what it wants.

The poster child of TNC's "partnership" approach to preservation has been the Malpai Borderlands Group on the Arizona/New Mexico line and the Gray Ranch in New Mexico, where TNC wove one of its most complex webs out from a nest of some 360,000 acres "saved" from proposed development by Ted Turner himself. Outmaneuvering Turner, TNC spun their purchase into an unlimited reach over more than a million acres of public and private land captured in the complexities of more façades of organizations and tricky lines of no escape into the ultimate control of what Sawhill called, "models of ecosystem conservation."

It was a place already being eyed by Reed Noss and David Foreman as a "sky island" parcel of what seemed an impossible fantasy plot to remake most of the West into wilderness. Local ranchers, as parochial-minded and naively trusting of the government as any, would catch on only slowly, if at all.

Only now does Judy Keeler make better sense of what vaguely disturbed her that August day in 1990 when she and her husband came across a pickup parked inside the fences on their deeded land. The vehicle belonged to the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, but stuck over the federal emblem was the green leaf logo of The Nature Conservancy. The two BLM employees said they were conducting a survey of flora and fauna for TNC.

"We didn't even know what to ask," said Keeler. "We found out later they were doing the same thing on other adjoining ranches."

The survey would clearly be linked to an attempt to establish an Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC) allowing even more federal authority over the region based

on threatened or endangered species or habitats. Largely unknown to ranchers and property owners, the federal government had already ceded much of its own responsibility in making such judgments to the land-providing TNC under a so-called "cost-share" agreement relying heavily on the nonprofit's own data bank.

Within the next 10 years, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service's long-held desire to establish an "Animas Wildlife Refuge" in the region would converge with TNC's own semisecret plan for an "International Peace Park" designed as a model of management by "nature's landlord." Another nonprofit formed for the purpose, the Animas Foundation, now controls more than half the original Gray Ranch, but is used primarily as a grass bank open to other ranchers to "rest" their own allotments.

There are some 25 other ranchers in the Malpai Borderlands Group formed in 1993 for mutual fire protection. Now they are bound to federal restrictions calling for them to take their cattle off grazing allotments for two years or more in order to allow controlled burns. If the ranchers make use of the grass bank, they are expected to pay it off by agreement to long-term conservation easements on their own property. Only a handful have accepted that deal so far, but pressure remains. The Nature Conservancy is in no hurry. Later more than sooner, perhaps, TNC will have it all. Meanwhile, Malpai is touted as a model of cooperation between government, environment and private interests, doing it the TNC way. Some say it resembles old Chicago.

Judy Keeler continues to ranch independently almost in the center of the one-million-acre Malpai region. She attends meetings, but her questions go unanswered.

"TNC didn't come into our area like friends," she said. "They came in with the attitude that they knew it all and were going to 'educate' us local ignoramuses on how to manage our ranches."

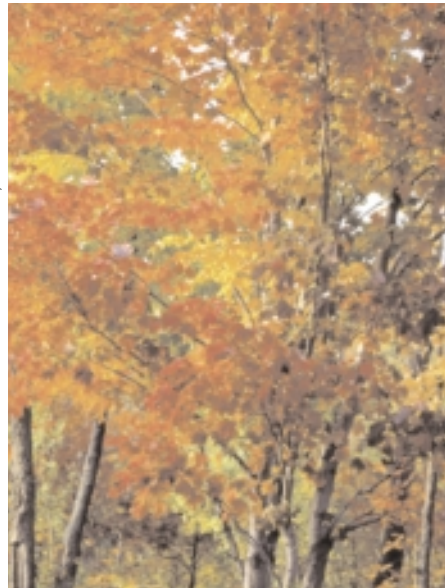
Especially since Bruce Babbitt took power over the Department of Interior in 1992, ranches falling into the hands of The Nature Conservancy have seemed like overripe fruit dropping from a shaken tree. Though it sends many of the properties into its revolving fund with the government, TNC could probably challenge even mighty Simplot in grazing land it has available for use.

In fact, TNC is directly and competitively

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Altruism was part of what prompted Mobil Oil Corporation in 1995 to give TNC a 21,300-acre field of low-producing oil and gas reserves which also turned out to be one of the last known breeding grounds for the endan-

gered Attwater prairie chicken. With gift in hand, TNC did not set out to save the bird. It went to work restoring more oil and gas production on Mobil's forgotten fields, sinking new wells, putting pumps back in operation and grazing "Conservation Beef" among the dipping machinery plunging into the earth. TNC has earned at least \$5.5 million in

royalties so far from the field and there is no evidence that any major expenditure has been put in to "saving" the prairie chicken.

And in New Hampshire, TNC has acquired at least a million acres of

timberland. TNC continues to log most of that land in what it says is "sustainable practice."

in the livestock business, advertising its “Conservation Beef” as the alternative to production on what remaining ranches it has not already offered to buy, or trade, or convince the owners to donate for vague, but funereally rewarding public use.

“Beef with a mission,” advertises TNC. “To save the best of the West for future generations.” In a “Dear Friend” letter TNC Executive Vice President W. William Weeks says, “The Nature Conservancy has worked with western ranch families for four years to help bring you Conservation Beef—a unique way to help preserve key landscapes in the great American West. We’re proud of the results.

“We need only one more partner to make this project work: you.... Your purchase [of

Conservation Beef] will help save great western landscapes for future generations.”

Weeks, the author of TNC’s “Beyond the Ark” book on policy and strategy, is a field marshal for TNC boss Steven McCormick in deal making in all directions. This includes new support for TNC by General Motors, Inc. in exchange for vague research on “climate change,” and the agreement signed in 2001 between the Conservancy and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for managing U.S. water resources in “partnerships” with local interests orchestrated by The Nature Conservancy.

America, as TNC likes to promote it, has been made “environmentally conscious” by the Conservancy’s selfless presence. Such

altruism was part of what prompted Mobil Oil Corporation in 1995 to give TNC a 2,300-acre field of low-producing oil and gas reserves which also turned out to be one of the last known breeding grounds for the endangered Attwater prairie chicken.

All around the site near Houston the evident success of “big oil” hunches in steam-rising refineries and pipelines close to the collateral development of homes and offices that probably squeezed out most of the prairie chicken’s habitat in the first place.

But with the gift in hand, TNC did not set out to save the bird. It went to work restoring more oil and gas production on Mobil’s forgotten field—sinking new wells, putting pumps back in operation and grazing “Conservation Beef” among the dipping machinery plunging into the earth.

“We believe the opportunity we have in Texas City to raise significant sums of money for conservation is one we cannot pass up, provided we can do this drilling without harming the prairie chickens and their habitat, and we are convinced,” said Texas TNC spokesperson Niki McDaniel.

The nation’s “10th largest charity” has earned at least \$5.5 million in oil and gas royalties so far from the field. There is no evidence that any major expenditure has been put in to “saving” the prairie chicken.

Beneath the Gray Ranch at the center of TNC’s much-heralded Malpai Group, by the way, is what some geologists consider to be a rich field of minerals, gas and oil. The rights to it were donated to TNC by Tenneco Corp. in the 1990s.

In New England, a political distance apart from the “forest wars” of the Pacific Northwest, The Nature Conservancy has acquired at least a million acres of timberland in Maine and New Hampshire put under secondary stress by the environmental campaign in the West. The Nature Conservancy continues to log most of that land in what it says is “sustainable practice.”

The spin-off of TNC, Conservation International, has proudly announced that tropical forests it has acquired in Latin America will continue to produce coffee under exclusive agreements with Starbucks which will use low-impact harvesting methods and pass along the added expense to consumers.

Big game hunting, fishing expeditions, ecotourism and private real estate including farms are all available at the right price from “Nature’s Landlord.” What protects nature is that “common” people can’t afford any of it. ■



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When The Nature Conservancy protects rain forests from human intrusion or development, it can have adverse effects on the indigenous people.

There are few things that infiltrate American landowners more than environmental espionage—the covert collection of environmental data on private property without the landowner’s knowledge or consent. Usually focusing on biodiversity and water quality, the practice was virtually unknown until the 1970s. Since then, it has exploded with the support of state and federal agencies, environmental activists and the land trusts. Especially one land trust.

The Conservancy

The Nature Conservancy is the richest environmental organization in the world. In 2001, it had almost \$3 billion in total assets, income of over \$730 million, and annual expenses of over \$400 million. That money is used for one overriding purpose: to get land. Sometimes called “nature’s real estate agent,” TNC gets land through gifts, exchanges, conservation easements, management agreements, debt-for-nature swaps and outright purchase.

Created in 1951, TNC bought its first piece of land in upstate New York in 1955. By 1996 it operated the world’s largest private system of nature sanctuaries, with over 1,500 preserves in the United States alone. This explosive growth could never have occurred without a unique biodiversity data system known as the Natural Heritage Network, developed by TNC in the 1970s to meet its land acquisition needs and “provide a broader public service.”

The Network
In 1974, the TNC science division began developing a sophisticated, decentralized biodiversity data system that could operate

THE NETWORK

BIG BROTHER, ENVIRONMENTAL ESPIONAGE AND THE NATURE CONSERVANCY. BY JEFF GOODSON

as a unified network. The system, created from scratch, would manage continually updated inventories of biological information using a standardized data collection methodology and electronic data management system. The first Heritage Program data center was installed in South Carolina in 1974. By 1994 it was operational in nearly 300 facilities worldwide, including all 50 states, and known simply as “the Network.”

As the Network matured, the original emphasis on reserve selection and design broadened to include support for land-use planning, environmental-impact assessment

responding to 70,000 information requests a year. These came from federal, state and local natural resource agencies, corporations, environmental organizations, researchers, academics, consultants and individuals.

Collaboration

Network development didn’t come cheap, and the cost wasn’t footed entirely by The Nature Conservancy. The system was nurtured in the early years by grants from the usual suspects—the Mellon, Hewlett and MacArthur foundations, and the Pew Charitable Trusts. These grants “successfully leveraged hundreds of millions of dollars in

public funding, which helped expand the Network across the entire country.”

The federal government played a major role in this growth, with critical support provided by BLM, the Forest Service, Environmental Protection Agency and other federal agencies interested in using the system. Of special note was U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service support through its secretive Land Acquisition Priority System, and support from the National Biological Information Infrastructure (NBII). NBII, the federal program that today manages data on the nation’s biological resources, says that it collaborates closely with TNC to “help provide increased, integrated access to selected data from TNC’s central databases, including their rich geospatial data sets.”

System

Standardization
All Network data centers use a common TNC methodology for system-

Walk any beach on either coast until you find a fence that prevents even the military from disturbing a potential nesting sight of the threatened plover.

There you will find The Nature Conservancy.

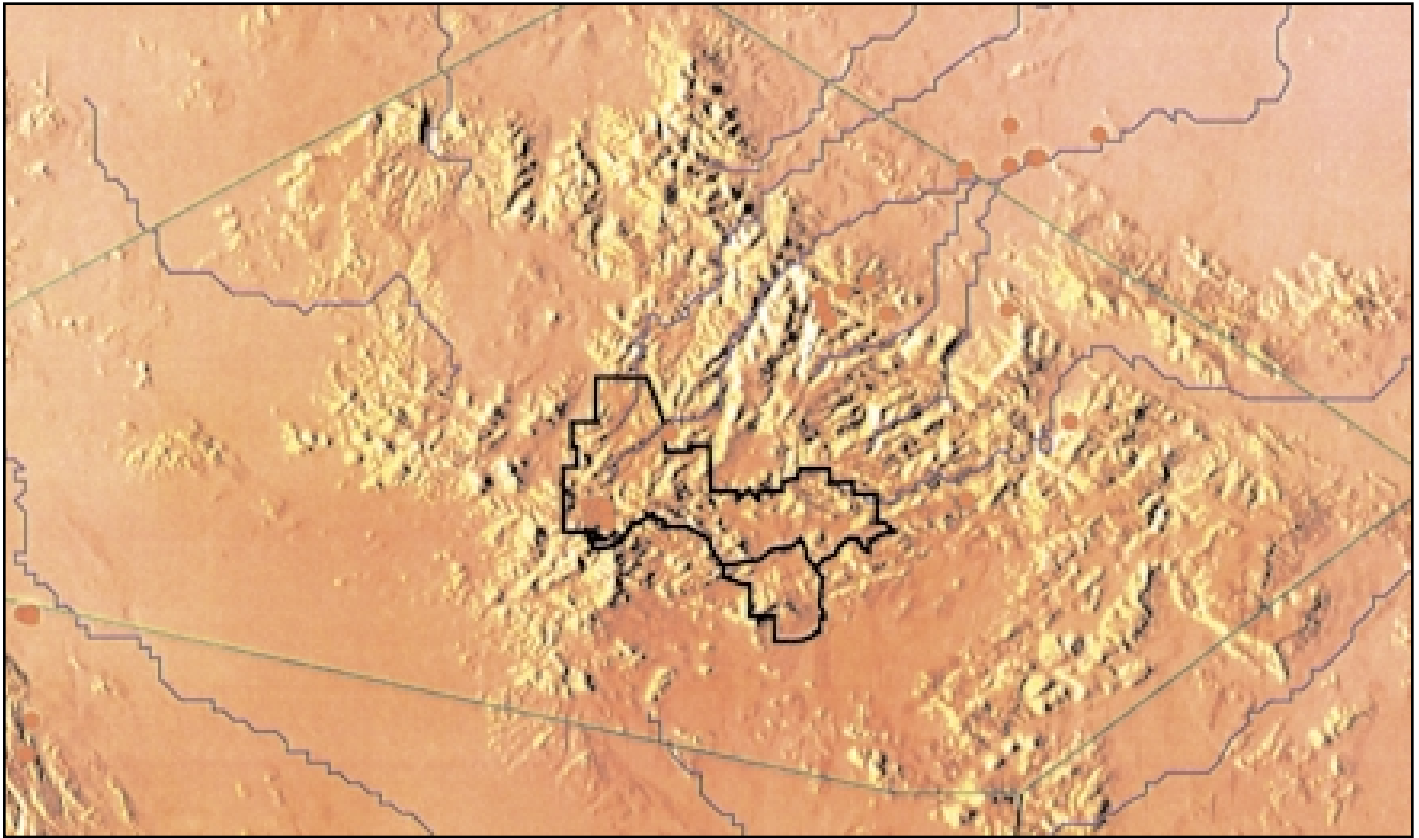
Visit western farming regions in Nevada and

California especially where family farms are under relentless pressure to become “willing sellers” of their water rights, and you will see some of McCormick’s work. Observe the heavy machinery and implications to agriculture from new U.S. Corps of Engineers projects to re-channel western streams and rivers and you will find that the federal agency is being directed under an agreement with The Nature Conservancy.

Find the charming nature trail securing the boundaries of the richest suburbs on the West Coast and it will likely have been built with help from TNC. Examine even the most radical environmental approach to shift the human population of the West into controlled core settlements bordering a vast “corridor” of wilderness

from the Yucatan to the Yukon, and know that the plan presented by Reed Noss and David Foreman was funded by The Nature Conservancy. Anywhere TNC might be caught in a media spotlight, it ducks into the trees, but it is almost always the unseen “Bigfoot”

behind every outrage in the battle over “public” land and private rights.



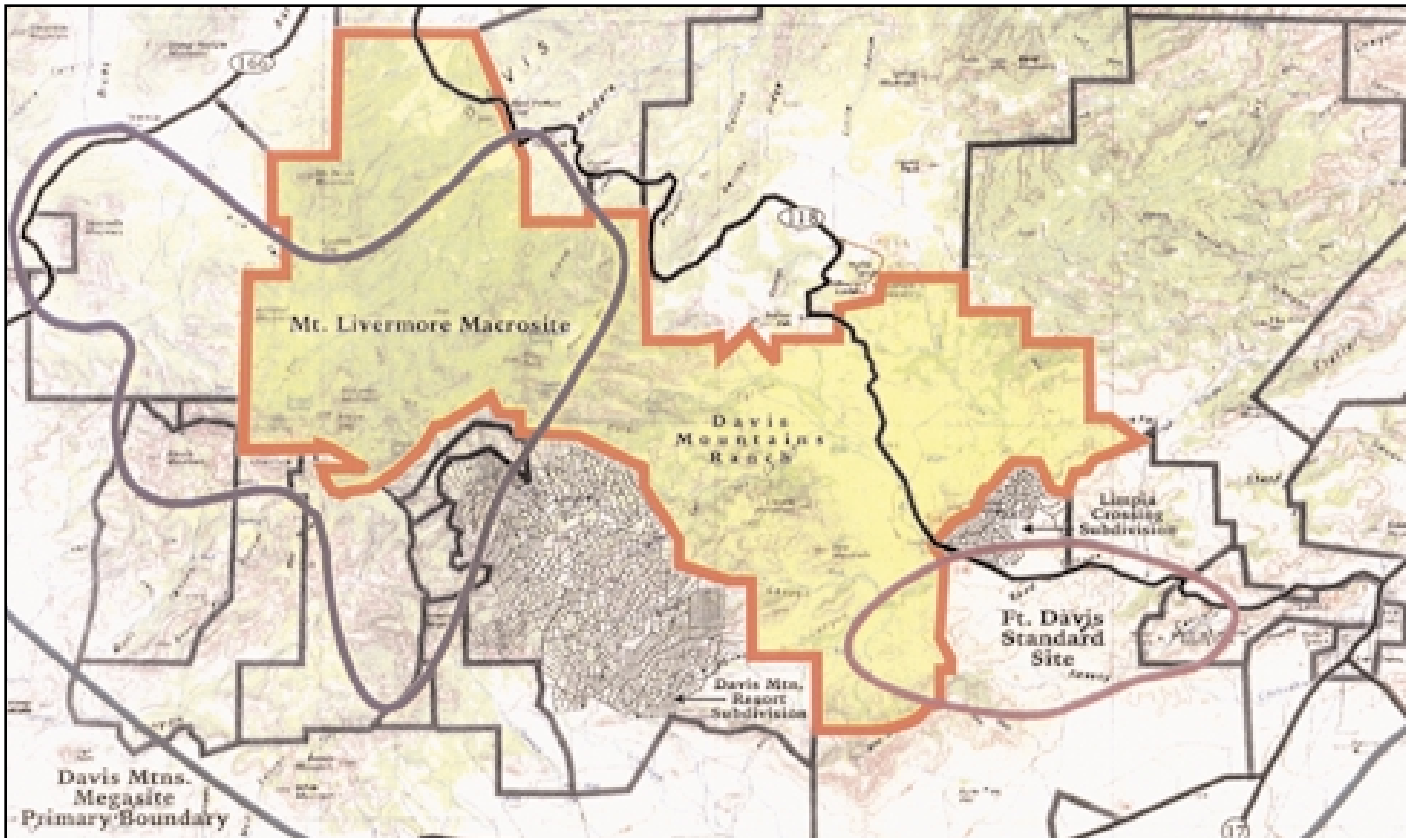
The Network at work in the Davis Mountains, Texas. Using proprietary data on rare plants and animals, The Nature Conservancy zooms in electronically on land they intend to target for acquisition. In the Davis Mountains, most property targeted by TNC is working ranchland. TNC biological data from private property may, or may not, have been collected with the landowner's knowledge and consent.



atically collecting, storing and retrieving biological information, for gathering information on specific tracts of real estate, and for setting land acquisition priorities. Information is continually reviewed and updated, and maintained in each data center. The system software can cross-reference, correlate and structure data, and make it quickly available to users anywhere. New technologies such as geographic information systems, global positioning systems, evolving remote sensing technology, and graphical database software are continuously integrated into the Network, maintaining its operational status at state of the art. Today, Network scientists everywhere “speak the same vocabulary, evaluate their work with the same yardsticks, share their ideas, compare notes, and exchange electronic data. There is an enormous sum of the parts.”

Big Brother

On the ground, the Network is used to develop biodiversity inventories, identify critical areas in need of protection, generate strategic shopping lists, plan site actions, conduct biological and legal monitoring, and track information on specific real estate tracts and transactions. As TNC puts it: “How rare? How threatened? We answer those questions...so we can decide which pieces of land to buy.... Once species are identified and ranked, the areas that shelter critically threat-



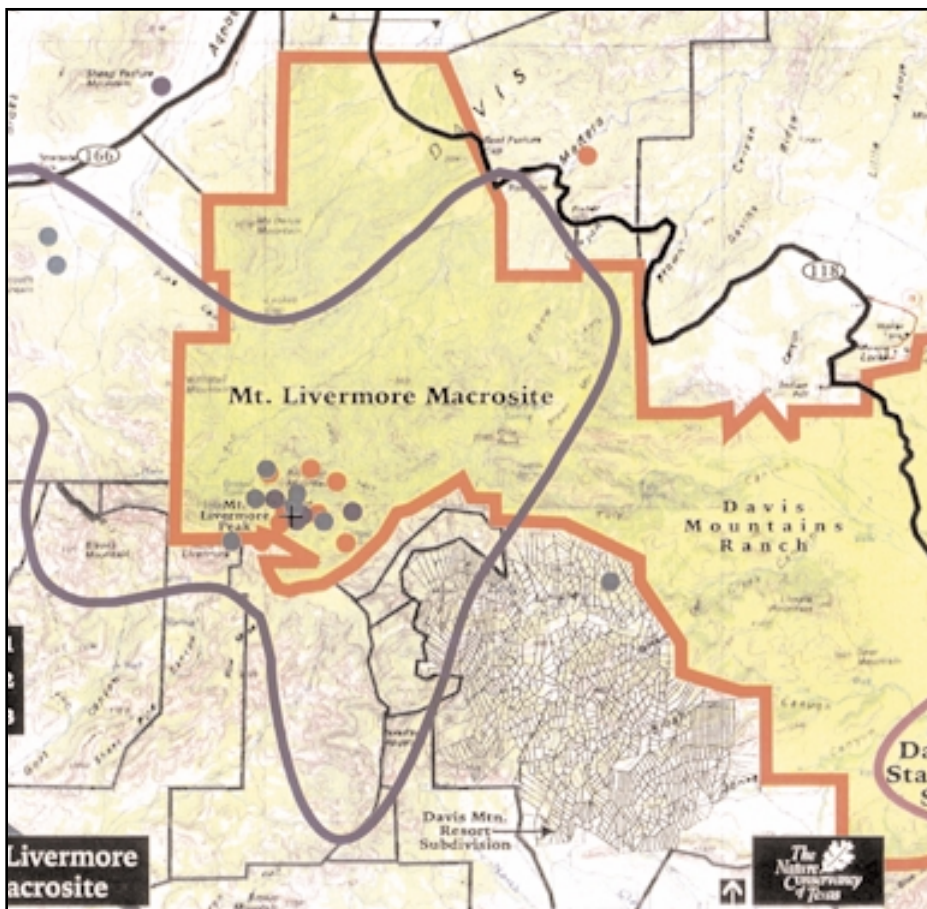
ened species become the target of Conservancy projects.”

The Network focuses on the status and specific locations of plants, animals and ecological communities, and it now contains detailed information on over 50,000 North American species and ecosystems. The system is designed to deal with local biota in extreme detail, and local data centers specialize in gathering raw biological data, conducting field inventories, and carrying out biological assessments. But there is also a centralized version of the Network’s data management system at TNC headquarters in Arlington, Virginia. That system contains hundreds of thousands of species’ records, and is now by far the most comprehensive biodiversity database in the world.

Property Data

Once in the system, biodiversity data are integrated with local real estate information. Networkers can examine voluminous and detailed information about sites of interest, including mappable data on specific land tracts, land transactions and property taxes. Tract information includes data on location, ownership, legal access, outstanding rights and interests, history, value, management, biological importance and intended use. Transaction files include data on land purchases, sales, leases, licenses, management agreements, easements, mortgages, mortgage

The maps above and below show how a TNC target site is developed. The curved line at the bottom of the upper map lassoes a wide “primary” boundary within which ecological “fragmentation” will be minimized. Dots on the lower map indicate the location of “rare” species of plants (10) and snails (2) although as many as 29 plants and 17 animals may be included.



releases and registrations. Tax files include information on legal descriptions, tax types, tax assessments, tax payments, amounts due and exemptions filed.

Outrage

Not surprisingly, the Network infuriates landowners—especially those with property that's targeted for acquisition. Much of that anger evolved from experience with the National Park Service's National Natural Landmarks (NNL) program. NNL set out in 1962 to recognize "outstanding examples of the nation's natural landscape heritage," but evolved in the 1970s into an environmental espionage and land-targeting program. Before it went into moratorium in 1989 in response to landowner outrage, 587 NNLs had been designated nationwide, 3,029 sites had been proposed for designation, and thousands of additional sites, many of them private, had been covertly evaluated.

The National Park Service coordinated the NNL program "closely with those of other natural area programs, such as [that of] The Nature Conservancy." Many of the 363 sites evaluated in Texas, for example, were selected for evaluation precisely because they had already been identified in TNC files. Over 60 percent of all Texas sites were private, and many of them were evaluated without the landowner's knowledge or consent. There are literally dozens of comments in the raw program files about Texas landowners who may be "unreceptive to contact."

As NPS admitted in 1990 in the Federal

Register: "(F)rom 1962 forward...some resource identifications, onsite evaluations, nominations, and designations have been done without appropriate notification and/or consent of the legal landowners... Full sensitivity to landowner interests, including landowner notification and con-



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Perhaps the greatest secret held in the enigma of "nature's landlord" is that it is not really an environmental organiza-

tion at all. It is a land acquisition scheme, complex and highly elusive, but dedicated in foremost to its own enrichment of wealth and power. And, as time has revealed, the ambition of the organization is not really for land, but for the ultimate management of human behavior.

sent, has not always been demonstrated."

The Texas Fix

When the activities of the Texas Natural Heritage Program came to light in 1995, just a few years after the NNL moratorium, Texas landowners came unglued. Two bills were quickly passed and signed into law by then-Governor George W. Bush, requiring the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) to maintain the confidentiality of information collected on private land. One (HB 1212) required TPWD to keep confidential any information pertaining to private property, whether it was collected at the

request of a landowner seeking technical guidance or collected during the course of an investigation incidental to the enforcement of game and fish laws.

The second bill (HB 2133) limited the use of biodiversity information collected on private land to "the purposes of scientific investigations and research," and then only if authorized in writing by the landowner. Today, TPWD may not enter into the Network any data collected during a landowner-authorized investigation, and data cannot be reported or compiled in a way that identifies individual parcels of private property, without written landowner consent.

Epilogue

Spawned by The Nature Conservancy and nurtured with U.S. tax dollars, the Network has grown to jaw-slackening proportions. By the mid-1990s it was described as "the world's only operational example of a wide-

spread, multinode confederation of data centers and scientists engaged in a coordinated biodiversity inventory effort using standardized information management methods and technologies." Today, the Network describes itself as "...a de facto national biological survey in the literal sense."

And so it is.

Landowners across America deserve the same kind of protection that Texas landowners enjoy from this kind of environmental espionage. If ever there were a time for national legislation to protect them, this is it. ■

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