

Heck, at first it is like finally getting a call back from a rich cousin. Jim Petersen identifies himself as the communications director for The Nature Conservancy and says he is returning my call. Years of calls lost in voice-mail messages, and none of them actually made to Petersen.

Never mind. A communications director for the world's richest "conservation" organization is right there on the other end of the line. Calling me. I figure somebody back in Arlington, Va., might have made a mistake, so I am a little cautious, hoping I won't have to explain too much to get things working.

"Thanks for calling," I say. "Are you familiar with *RANGE*?"

"Ohhh, yeah," he says in a kind of after-breakfast-shove-back-from-the-table. "I know all about *RANGE* and about you."

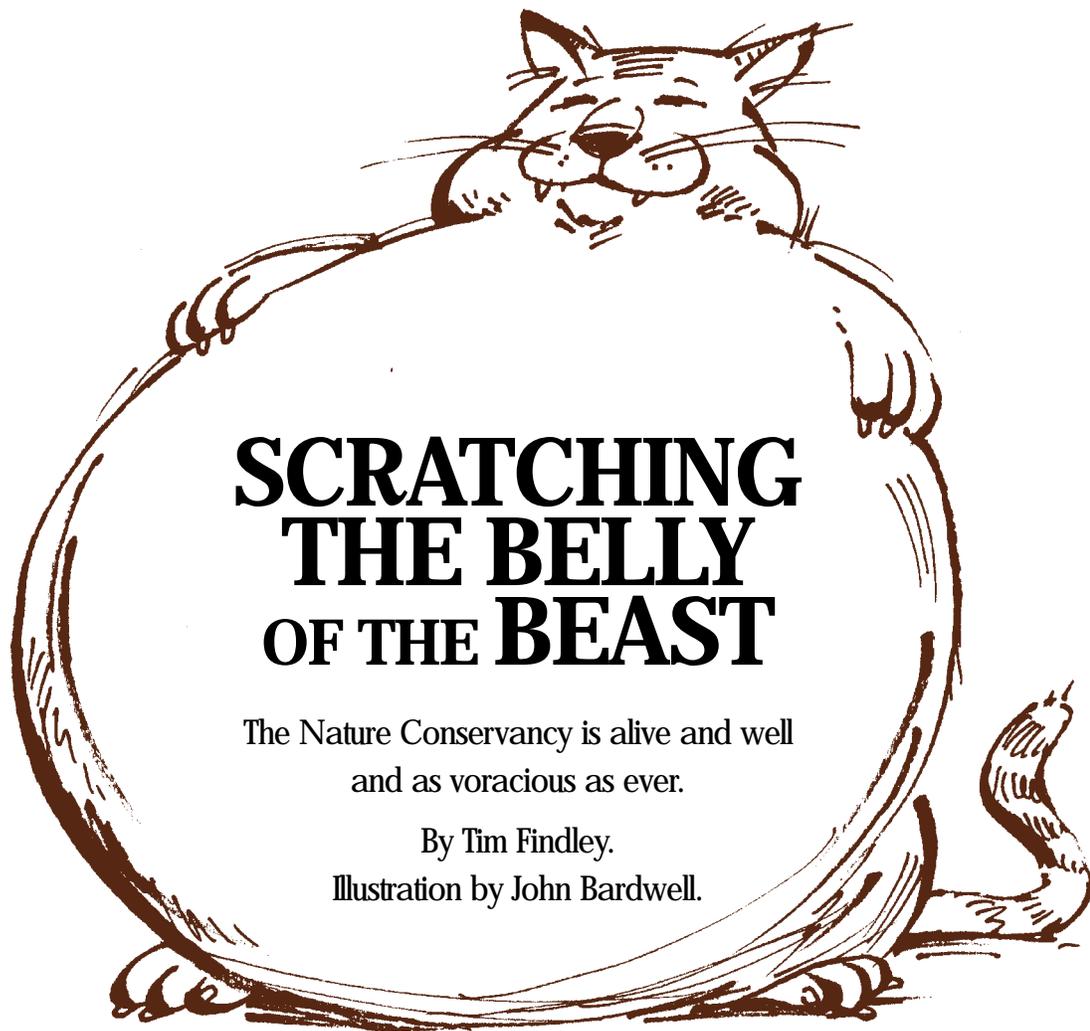
Now, I have to admit that makes me feel a little proud. Even during the double blast in February 2003 from *RANGE* ("Nature's Landlord: The Arrogance of The Nature Conservancy") and, later, *The Washington Post*, on May 4, 5, and 6, 2003, questioning the motives and actions of TNC, the most we ever heard from its D.C.-area headquarters was a crack about the magazine, calling it "*ST*range."

But it is in part the campaign carried out since then by TNC field operatives that is the real basis for my latest calls. Some of our friends and subscribers have been telling us that we ought to lighten up on TNC. "They're nice people," ranchers and others in the West have told us. "They work with the locals and try to help solve the problems. They even save ranches so people won't be threatened by development or government takeover."

We owe the readers of *RANGE* a better perspective on that. Maybe TNC isn't all bad guys trying to amass property and power for what we called "Nature's Landlord." So what I want to propose to Petersen is a chance for me to visit TNC's Arlington headquarters and get a better sense of how it all works. Talk to the decision makers. See what they really want. Spend some time, as I offer him, "in the belly of the beast."

"Not this belly," says Petersen. "We don't want you in here talking to anybody."

The communications director, you need to understand, is what real reporters used to



SCRATCHING THE BELLY OF THE BEAST

The Nature Conservancy is alive and well
and as voracious as ever.

By Tim Findley.

Illustration by John Bardwell.

refer to as the "flack" for TNC. It's a term coming from what World War II bomber pilots called the curtain of exploding steel fragments fired by German anti-aircraft guns.

The Nature Conservancy today is certainly not at all like Germany in the mid-20th century. Or is it? Despite its wide proclamations after 2003 to become a more transparent organization, this most potent of all U.S. nongovernment organizations (NGO) remains as secretive as ever about how its policies are formed or what its ultimate agenda may be. Like good Germans, the one-million-plus members who contribute at least \$25 to TNC have no voice whatsoever in determining the solution for saving the world. That's left vaguely to the nine-to-20 members of the board who mysteriously trade seats among the richest and most powerful bankers and business executives in the world. Musical chairs of big money executives who are not the "good guys" our readers say they've met.

"Thing is," I tell Jim, "some folks think you guys are just too unaccountable. Nobody's watching what you do."

"That's not true," says Petersen. "All our records are available, and as a nonprofit we answer directly to the Internal Revenue Service [I.R.S.] as well as others. Anybody can read about what we do."

Yeah, I was wondering about that, too. Since 2001, the chairman of the board of TNC has been Henry Paulson, the chairman and chief executive of Goldman Sachs Investment Bankers. Paulson probably took a pay cut last summer to accept appointment as President Bush's new secretary of the Treasury. So much for all that I.R.S. oversight. "Say," I ask the flack, "might we talk to Paulson?"

"Are you kidding?" he says goodheartedly.

So I can't just look around in the belly of the beast, and I can't meet the guy who was in charge. Well, how about the guy who has day-to-day responsibility, the chief executive officer of TNC who is always shown in those fresh deodorant-style photos smiling by a stream, Steve McCormick?

"No way are you going to talk to McCormick," and this time, danged if it does-

n't sound like the communications director is growling.

Steve McCormick has spent a lot of time grooming that good green citizen image of his. Though not a charter member of the "old money" cotillion of Goldman Sachs or General Motors or, lately, the Banco Nacional de Mexico who twirl in the big chairs, McCormick seems to be regarded as a bright boy who went to the wrong schools. Maybe that's what keeps his salary down around \$378,000 a year. Even so, you're unlikely to see McCormick at those good-guy grassroots barbecues. He has much bigger fish to fry.

But what does McCormick really do, I wonder aloud to Jim, the flack. Does he get a big pile of photos and reports on his desk and sort through them to see where best to spend TNC's seemingly everlasting \$3.1-billion bank chest? Does he listen to sad stories about ranchers losing their homes to estate taxes and choose those most worthy of rescue with a conservation easement?

McCormick probably wouldn't remember that we actually met once in 2003 at a Land Trust Alliance meeting in Sacramento, Calif. He came to assure the LTA members that TNC would handle the negative press, and the big news was that "perpetuity means forever!" Perpetuity as forever is McCormick dragging out an old legal fiction from the Middle Ages when feudal kings avoided taking their subject's land by offering them the right to live there forever—so long as they didn't improve it or sell it to someone who might. It came to be known as "rule by a dead hand."

Landowners today face just such threats from a federal government determined to control land use. But they sometimes don't recognize that it's groups like TNC or the Sierra Club or other adherents to the United Nations' International Union for the Conservation of Nature which are behind the threat in the first place.

You sell it, folks, and it doesn't matter how long the new owners let you stay. They own it, the dead hands of trusts or TNC, or the government they will ultimately bargain with. "Perpetuity means forever," McCormick rallied the Sacramento meeting.

McCormick, by then under some heat from an investigation by the Senate Finance Committee, promised them all to work hard-

er on transparency and public relations.

"Course," as I try to say to Jim, "TNC also went right on acquiring more and more land—more than anybody else in the United States."

"Not true," he corrects me. "There are others. You ever hear of Plum Creek?"

How could I forget the nation's largest timber company with forest holdings reported to be over 7.8 million acres? Plum Creek has been pressured by environmentalists for years, including TNC, to sell off its properties and is now a real estate investment trust—not quite a conservation easement, but open to other investors reported to include the Sierra Club and even TNC.

The Conservancy admits to "protecting" 14 million acres in the United States.

Those guys live in a whole other world than our readers might see. Goldman Sachs, for example, has assets of over \$10 billion. The average salary of its employees is over \$521,000 a year, so I assume TNC board chairman Henry Paulson took a pay cut when he took over as Secretary of the Treasury.

It's another way it's trying to say that it really doesn't "own" anything. It just goes around doing good work. Just since 2005, that has included easements on at least 2.7 million acres in the United States. And we haven't even delved into the additional 100 million acres TNC says it controls elsewhere in the world. It should also be noted that easements also produce an effect on neighboring property, which helps TNC to merrily travel on up the road looking for good deals.

No wonder I'm not welcome in the belly of the beast. People get lost in there. Especially people who are in the way. The Nature Conservancy isn't just accumulating land. It's manipulating indigenous populations to fit its political and economic agenda ["Enemies of Conservations," *RANGE*, Summer 2006, by Mark Dowie].

I know, there are some 5,000 TNC operatives, including 3,200 full-time employees

busy now in offices in every state convincing some of our indigenous friends what good guys TNC people are and coming up with all kinds of clever ways to make things better for all of us. Like taking control of the Corps of Engineers and advising the military on use of its training grounds. Or like promoting even better tax advantages for donating to conservation organizations such as good ol' TNC itself. Nobody elects these guys, you know. Not even their own general membership. And they are accountable only to the I.R.S., where they seem to have, well, connections.

Just by chance, it was on the weekend before my call that I listened to Sen. Joe Biden (D-Del) condemning Bush policy in the Middle East and suggesting that one way to get at the radicals in control of Iran might be for our agents to work more closely with "the NGOs there." In other words, NGOs could prove useful also for subversion.

I don't want to get any of our friends mad at me for this, but I just have trouble imagining all those extremely rich and powerful people behind TNC doing it only for their love of nature by protecting us from ourselves. Wasn't there some kind of organization like that back in the '30s in Germany? Am I the only one who gets the impression that the real power behind TNC caters to us about the same way as Prince John treated the residents of Sherwood Forest?

Most of the media, after all, don't care. It's satisfied with all the nice pictures and hopeful stories churned out by TNC's own printing office. The Grassley Senate Finance Committee and its promised investigation have just faded away on the issue. Nobody is watching TNC. One wonders, in fact, if rather than the election-burdened government keeping an eye on TNC, the unaccountable fat cats at the head of Nature's Landlord aren't pulling the reins on government.

Even so, I must admit that Jim sounds like a nice enough guy. Maybe he can just let me into the front hall in Arlington so I could take a picture? Sort of a souvenir.

"No way. I'm not in Arlington anyway. I'm in Denver, and I'm going on vacation like most people do in August."

"Oh, yeah, sure," I say. "Where you going?" "Out of the country." ■