

Land For Posterity

A Conservation Group Preserves Choice Sites By Aggressive Tactics

Nature Conservancy Uses Loan Programs to Save Forests, Islands, Marshes

Bargaining for a Lush Valley

By DENNIS FARNEY

Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

MASON NECK, Va. — The Potomac River ice creeks and groans beneath the January sky. Cardinals flit across the beige and white of the snowy cattail marsh, and crows caw from nearby woods of beech and oak. A great blue heron lifts away on three-foot wings.

Mason Neck on a clear, cold morning is placid, unhurried now. But only five years ago this 10,000-acre peninsula was threatened by the relentless spread of suburban Washington. Real estate speculators controlled the land; there were plans for asphalt streets through the woods, subdivisions near the restored mansion of a Colonial planter.

It didn't happen. And the main reason was the quiet work of an increasingly effective conservationist, the Nature Conservancy.

Three years ago, the Conservancy moved in and began buying up more than 3,000 acres here for about \$5.6 million, checkerboarding its holdings to block development of most of the peninsula. It was another successful application of one technique that helps make the Conservancy unique among national conservation groups—unique in what it does as well as what it doesn't do.

Mountains, Prairies and Marshes

The Conservancy isn't the best-known national conservation organization. It rarely makes headlines with dramatic protests or last-ditch lawsuits. It doesn't sponsor wilderness outings and it doesn't publish beautiful books.

It just preserves land, the kind of land that can't be replaced: Virgin woods in New Jersey, islands off the Atlantic Coast, ancient California redwoods, prairies, marshes and mountains. The Conservancy is the only national conservation group that puts its total resources into land preservation. So far, it has preserved into land preservation in 41 states and the Virgin Islands—most of this since it really got rolling in the early 1960s.

The Conservancy traces its lineage to a 1917 committee formed to acquire natural areas for scientific research. Today, however, the Conservancy is interested in outstanding examples of the American environment for other purposes as well. It buys such land itself or lends poses as well. It buys such land itself or lends money to private groups that wish to do so; tax-exempt and nonprofit, it accepts bequests and donations of land or cash. It has helped preserve everything from a 10,500-acre island to off Georgia (now a Federal wildlife refuge) to Ty-Ezell's Cave, the subterranean home of *Typhlodromus Rathbuni*, the Texas blind salamander.

Beating the Bulldozers

Both public and private efforts to preserve natural areas threatened by development often founder for the same reason: A lack of ready cash. By the time a government agency can secure its appropriation or a citizens group can launch a fund-raising drive, the bulldozers have come and gone. The Conservancy is trying to fill this gap with three programs:

—From a revolving fund of more than \$1.1 million, it makes quick loans to private groups, including its own chapters, organized for the purpose of acquiring specific areas. The groups may take up to three years to repay; the loans are interest-free for three months, then bear interest at an annual rate of 6½%.

—A separate endowment fund of about \$800,000 guarantees bank loans to such groups when the revolving fund is being used to capacity.

—Under its newest program, which utilizes a \$6 million line of credit guaranteed by the Ford Foundation, the Conservancy moves in fast to acquire tracts being sought (for parks or wildlife refuges, for example) by Federal, state or local government agencies. It resells the land to the agencies when their appropriations come through.

Requests for help are keeping all three funds busy. A loan to a citizens group, for example, recently helped preserve Clausland Mountain, a wooded rampart on the Hudson River near New York City. The \$237,500 loan clinched offers of more than \$1.1 million in additional money from other sources. Area artists have raised some of the money for repayment with an "Art for the Mountain" benefit.

Broad Support

The program using the Ford-guaranteed credit line has acquired more than 11,000 acres since early 1969, sometimes nailing down tracts that slower-moving government agencies might have lost. A good example is the 3,215 acres of Michigan forest recently acquired for the U.S. Forest Service. The Federal agency turned to the Conservancy because the tract was being marketed by a concern that needed to sell quickly, and it might have taken the Forest Service as long as 18 months to secure the necessary appropriation.

Such successes are winning the Conservancy support from figures as diverse as Laurance Rockefeller, Charles A. Lindbergh, Arthur Godfrey ("Boy, they do a job") and Marshall Field. Says a top Federal conservationist: "They haven't tried to branch out and get involved in all aspects of the environment. They've stuck to land preservation—and they're doing it damned well."

Conservancy officials praise the efforts of such better-known organizations as the Sierra Club, which attempts to rouse public opinion and sometimes hauls developers and polluters into court. But the Conservancy generally avoids such fights. "The measure of our success is not how well we megarandize for or against a given issue," says Thomas W. Richards, president. "It's in those acres, and in the quality of those acres."

So it's no accident that Conservancy headquarters in downtown Washington rather resembles a high-powered real estate agency. It's the kind of place where Mr. Richards may interrupt an enthusiastic description of a contemplated project (enclosing both banks of a portion of the Potomac in a "green sheath," for example), to answer the telephone and bargain for an island, a marsh or a forest. The atmosphere seems a little like that cartoon above the desk of Edward R. Kingman, vice president and treasurer. The cartoon depicts an exasperated executive who bellows: "Whattya mean we don't have any capital. . . . The acquisition's already been approved."

The cartoon notwithstanding, the Conservancy is at home in the world of finance. Mr. Kingman has been a bank vice president, a financial consultant and a real estate broker; Mr. Richards has nine years of experience as an IBM department manager. Other staff members include ex-real estate agents, a NASA administrative assistant and an industrial engineer—all recruited for their management skills.

"Conservation problems today are no longer solved by a guy hiking around in the woods," says Alexander B. Adams, an ex-FBI agent who helped lead the Conservancy through most of the 1960s. "They're solved by guys sitting behind desks, thinking." Agrees Mr. Richards: "To win a land conservation battle today, you've got to use the same skills private industry uses."

Last year, its biggest yet, the Conservancy helped preserve nearly 40,000 acres through 101 projects and donations. The year also marked the ceremonial completion of a major phase of the Conservancy's most spectacular project to date: The addition of about 10,000 acres to Haleakala National Park.

Before the project, Haleakala Park occupied about 14,000 acres atop a long-extinct volcano. Soon the park will contain about 24,000 acres and extend from the mountaintop to the sea, an enlargement that one conservationist

calls a "dream come true." It all began with a 1967 challenge from Laurance Rockefeller. He would donate a \$585,000 piece of shorefront to the park—if the Conservancy could acquire the eight-mile-long Kipahulu Valley between the shore and the mountaintop.

Often veiled in fog or drenched in torrential rainfall, the valley is a lush remnant of Hawaii as it used to be. More than 100 waterfalls roar in a rain forest abundant with wildlife, including a bird species presumed extinct for 80 years. The upper valley is a wilderness scarcely penetrated by modern man. Not surprisingly, the Conservancy took the challenge and went to work.

Hard Bargaining

As negotiator, the Conservancy dispatched Huey Johnson, its western regional director. In two weeks of hectic bargaining, Mr. Johnson reached agreements with the valley's three private landowners, then persuaded the state of Hawaii to donate about 3,000 additional acres it held.

The private owners eventually sold nearly 7,000 acres for \$620,000, donating additional acreage valued at \$300,000 as a tax-deductible contribution. A mail solicitation, three cocktail parties and a luncheon raised the \$620,000, with about \$375,000 coming from a gathering in New York's Pan Am building. Mr. Lindbergh addressed that gathering, and Mr. Godfrey did a persuasive job, too. He describes catching a departing donor in the elevator and emerging at the end of the ride with a pledge of \$100,000.

In January 1969, the Conservancy donated more than 7,000 acres to the National Park Service under an agreement that will preserve the upper valley as wilderness for scientific research and open the remainder of the valley to the public. (The state is in the process of conveying its 3,000 acres to the Park Service.) Then the Conservancy launched the project's second phase: A campaign to raise about \$750,000 to purchase several hundred additional shorefront acres highly vulnerable to development. If this phase succeeds, Gov. John Burns has indicated, he'll work for the donation of additional state land. Says Mr. Richards: "We want to do this thing once and for all, and do it right."

The scope and expertise of the Kipahulu project was a far cry from the Conservancy of 1960. That year the organization preserved only about 4,000 acres, had an operating deficit and only about \$100,000 in its revolving loan fund, and was mired in an ill-planned project that threatened to bankrupt it. Adds Mr. Adams, then president: "We were like practically every other conservation group—trying to do everything at once, and not doing anything as well as we might."

Spurred by Mr. Adams, the Conservancy reorganized. It beefed up its staff with the help of Ford Foundation grants, formed the endowment fund and secured the Ford-guaranteed line of credit. And after what Mr. Adams calls "a long battle within the organization," it phased out activities unrelated to land acquisition.

A Critic's View

This meant leaving public protests to other conservation groups, a decision that still has its critics. One, for example, asserts that "too much concern about what major contributors might think" sometimes inhibits Conservancy activities and was a major factor in the policy change.

This critic is particularly disturbed because in the early 1960s the Conservancy dropped an active role in opposing a controversial pumped storage hydroelectric plant proposed by Consolidated Edison for New York's Storm King Mountain. He maintains, "Many Conservancy backers are stockholders of Con Ed or are interested in other forms of economic development along the Hudson and might have been offended."

Mr. Adams disagrees. "I know of no instance where our policy has been affected by a donor, and I can say that absolutely flatly," he declares. He calls the protest against the Storm King plant "the kind of project that could be much better handled by other groups" and notes that another group did take over after the Conservancy dropped out. The intent, he says, was to "disengage from things other organizations were already doing and concentrate on buying land."

There's no doubt that Conservancy fortunes soared after the reorganization. In 1969, it