



JOHN LAMMING

*Swan Valley, Montana, now owned by the community as a whole, is protected from development.*

## ENSURING A



Across the country, communities are uniting to protect the forests they hold dear.

— by Jane Braxton Little —

**M**elanie Parker is hunkered down on a moss-covered log at the base of a massive cedar tree. Her long legs stretch toward a tiny ephemeral spring, all but dried up on this warm June afternoon. Just days ago a grizzly bear bedded down in the ferns that tickle Parker's boots. Scat is still strewn about in soft piles. Parker closes her eyes and breathes in the hushed magic.

This enchanted spot in Montana's Swan Valley is one of hundreds that have inspired both dreams and nightmares for Parker, co-founder and executive director of Northwest Connections, an environmental education organization. She has imagined all of these grizzly daybeds gone, the victims of a sequence of irreversible events playing out across America's timberlands. First the surrounding forests are logged and sold. Then they are fenced and gated. Next come houses, garages, barbecue grills, dogs. Now the returning grizzlies are not natives but rather trouble. Soon they are gone – relocated or killed.

Happily for the Swan and its grizzlies, this nightmare won't see the light of day. In a deal as improbable as it is visionary, Parker, The Trust for Public Land and The Nature Conservancy worked with their political representatives to acquire 320,000 acres of timberland in Swan Valley and western Montana. The \$510 million purchase from Plum Creek Timber Company preserves Montana's outdoor legacy by protecting forest ecosystems from development and keeping them available for wildlife and accessible for hunting, fishing and sustainable timber harvesting.

An inspiring and monumental achievement, the Montana transaction demonstrates the power of grassroots coalitions to slow the conversion of forests to houses, parking lots and shopping centers. At a time when America is losing nearly two million acres of timberlands a year, Parker and her partners' bootstrap campaign is a triumph reverberating across the country – proof that despite the odds, the transformation of forests to development is not inevitable.

# TIMBERLAND LEGACY

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*The red-cockaded  
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that depends on  
the forests these  
communities are trying  
to protect.*

The U.S. Forest Service officials expect 44 million acres of timberland to be converted to development by 2030. But the grassroots effort to stem these losses represents much more than protected acreage; it is an awakening. Communities from Maine to California are buying timbered tracts in their own backyards to bolster their local economies and protect the ecosystems that are part of their heritage. More than 3,000 cities and towns in 43 states own woodlands and open space totaling over 4.5 million acres.

Communities are organizing locally, reaching out to new allies and forming partnerships that extend from the county to state and federal levels. This trend promises to gain momentum, protecting precious ecosystems as well as rural economies, says Bob Simpson, vice president of forest programs for the American Forest Foundation. "It's a great beginning – a real opportunity for these communities to gain control of their natural resources."

#### **HOKE COUNTY, NORTH CAROLINA**

One of the most courageous efforts is playing out in rural North Carolina. The state has no grizzly bears but, like western Montana, its fields and forests are under siege. In the rush to divest their forests, industrial timber corporations and family forest owners in America's Southeast racked up the nation's highest-ever rate of land sales. Over 18 million acres have changed hands since 1996, 350,000 acres of which are in North Carolina. When International Paper Company added to the list by selling the last of its 6.8 million acres of forests in 2006, it hit Hoke County in its backyard.

Residents of that rural area and Raeford, the county seat, have been dealing with a decades-long slump in agriculture, historically their economic mainstay. The sale of the International Paper lands came on top of even more daunting challenges posed by Fort Bragg, a sprawling Army base just a mile north of Raeford. In 2005 the Secretary of Defense recommended the 90,000-acre military base for increased responsibilities, including relocating many personnel to Fort Bragg. The results are expected to add 45,000 new residents to the region, which is already one of the state's fastest growing counties.

Local leaders looking at their future did not like what they saw. How could their struggling county conserve natural resources and protect the forests they depended on for recreation and local jobs? Mikki Sager, state director of The Conservation Fund's resourceful communities program, looked at the same challenges and saw opportunity for all involved. If the county could find a way to buy the 532 acres of former International Paper lands adjacent to Raeford, they might pull off a triple win for conservation, the community and the local economy. Sager began meeting with county leaders to explore the possibility of a county-owned forest.

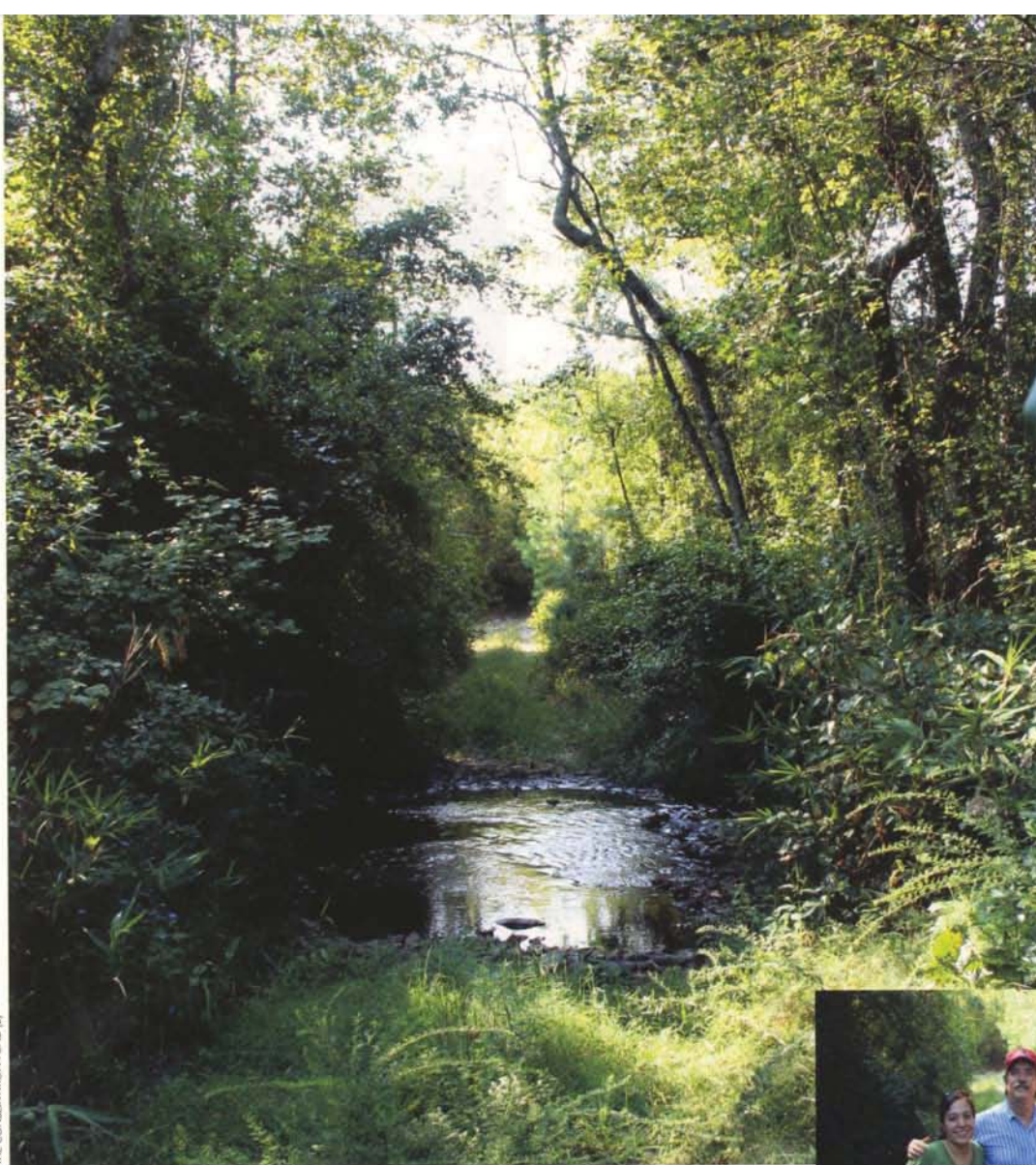
William C. Fields, Hoke County's attorney, was openly skeptical. And he was most suspicious of non-governmental organizations like Sager's Conservation Fund. As industrial timber companies have sold off their forests throughout the Southeast, conservation groups have been waiting in line to buy them. The typical scenario involves private negotiations that transfer ownership to non-profit conservation groups, which pay no local taxes and generally make the lands unavailable for public access.

Fields, the self-described pit bull of Hoke County, did not want that for his community. The Conservation Fund had already paid \$1.3 million for the forest between Raeford and Fort Bragg, part of major acquisitions of International Paper lands by conservation groups. That was the very scenario Fields feared. But when Sager opened discussions with the local community, Fields was willing to listen.

Officials at Fort Bragg had their own reasons to support a county-owned forest. They were under pressure from federal regulations to protect habitat for the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker, part of the longleaf pine ecosystem. They also needed a perimeter of land around the base to buffer its military activities. Noise, weapons training, and enhanced security demands are generally incompatible with residential housing and related development. Fort Bragg officials were eager to avoid those problems, says Mike Lynch, the base's director of plans, training and mobilization.

The idea of a county-owned forest inched forward as Sager continued meeting with local landowners and civic leaders, including Lynch. All agreed that natural resources and the county econ-





Local landowners and civic leaders...all agreed that natural resources and the county economy should have equal protection.

*Left, Nicholson Creek sits within Hoke's new community-owned forest. Below, left to right, are Monica McCann of The Conservation Fund,*

omy should have equal protection. The new coalition tossed around ideas for generating income from the 532 acres. These ideas ranged from restoring the longleaf pine habitat to propagating bees and raising meat goats.

Consensus was not always easy, but the talks continued. According to Fields, it was the open participation Sager encouraged that made Hoke County leaders believe they could actually own and manage their own backyard without corporate or government interference. They bought in. Now they are assembling the \$1.3 million purchase price from a variety of state, federal and private foundation funds. The Conservation Fund is holding the land in trust while the community process evolves.

The still-amorphous plans call for gradual conversion to a longleaf pine forest, which the community will manage for sustainable timber harvests. In the meantime, they plan to rake pine straw for mulch, generating as much as \$100 an acre, says David Jackson, Hoke County Parks and Recreation director. Jackson, whose department will manage the land at least temporarily, is interested in devel-

oping hiking trails for birdwatching, nature interpretive studies, and other passive recreational activities.

"We're starved for passive recreation – a place to just enjoy what's out there," he says.

"The scary thing," says Fields, "and also the great thing, is we don't know what we're going to do with it. It's not static. If meat goats don't work out, we'll try something else."

For most residents, the reality of becoming the first community-owned and managed forest in the Southeast hasn't quite registered, says Jackson. When it does, "People here will stop thinking of themselves as just a small town," he says.

This is a learning process for everyone, says Sager. Conservation groups understand that achieving the goal of protecting working forest landscapes depends on more than local involvement. "We have a moral obligation to help make it happen," she says.



*Jeff Campbell of the Ford Foundation, Wayne Fawbush of the Ford Foundation, and Buck Vaughan of the Conservation Fund.*

“People care desperately about being able to get out on the land,” says Caroline Byrd, the TNC’s western Montana program director. “That, we learned, is a life-blood issue.”

*Top Right: Melanie Parker, left, works closely with Anne Dahl, director of the Swan Ecosystem Center.*



*Above: Grizzlies would be one of the most vulnerable species if Swan Valley were to lose its forests to modern homes like the one at right, which disrupt the natural ecosystem and wildlife habitat.*

### THE MONTANA LEGACY PROJECT

The lands acquired by the Montana project are as starkly different from Hoke County’s forest as the size of what they are protecting. A gorgeous valley flanked by the Swan Range and the Mission Mountains, Swan Valley is home to lynx, moose, wolverines, and bull trout as well as grizzly bears. With the adjacent purchased lands, which include an ecoregion known as the Crown of the Continent, this is one of the most ecologically diverse and intact biological systems remaining in the United States. No animal extinctions have occurred here since Lewis and Clark passed through the area in 1805, says Eric Love, northern Rocky Mountain director for The Trust for Public Land (TPL).

All that was about to change when Plum Creek, the largest industrial forest owner in the Pacific Northwest, began to sell off its land for development. Reorganized in 1999 from a timber company to a real-estate investment trust, Plum Creek’s real-estate revenue tripled during the last five years to more than \$330 million annually. Melanie Parker and her husband Tom, a lifelong Swan Valley outfitter and guide, began finding more and more gates on more and more logging roads.

Since co-founding Northwest Connections to help land managers understand the Swan ecosystem, the Parkers have been working with their neighbors and TPL to keep the forests rural and wild. With TPL’s help the Parkers were using conservation easements and federal forest legacy funds to acquire land that would allow hunting, fishing and sustainable logging but not development.

“We were doing the best we could,” says Melanie Parker. But



they couldn’t keep up with Plum Creek, which was busy selling off 160-acre plots to spin into trophy-home developments.

By the summer of 2005, Parker’s boundless optimism was beginning to wane. Eric Love, her TPL partner, was getting discouraged, too. During a decade of work in Swan Valley, TPL had protected a mere 18,000 acres for a staggering \$70 million. “At that rate we did not have enough time or money to save a place like Swan Valley,” says Love.

Together they convened a Swan summit to discuss the future of the valley they all cared about. By the end of the three-day session they reached a conclusion: “We either go big or go home,” said Parker. Instead of protecting just Swan Valley’s timberlands from trophy-home development, they decided to expand their sights to include all of western Montana.

That decision launched a flurry of meetings from Condon to Missoula to assess the public reaction. The partners met with Lions Clubs, chambers of commerce, county commissioners, church groups – anyone who had a stake in the future of the forests that surrounding them. They found nobody who wanted to sell off timberlands piece by piece. “People care desperately about being able to get out on the land,” says Caroline Byrd, Nature Conservancy’s western



Montana program director. "That, we learned, is a life-blood issue."

With that mandate, they approached U.S. Senator Max Baucus (D-Montana), chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, and a member of committees on agriculture and the environment. The coalition also began talks with Plum Creek. With its 1.2 million acres of land in western Montana, the company was key to any conservation strategy. Plum Creek officials had not been contemplating a large transfer of their timberlands but were willing to consider one if it made business sense, says Jerry Sorensen, Plum Creek's director of land asset management. "We understood the frustration of community groups – buying a one piece of land at a time and depending on federal funds to do it," he says.

The company agreed to sell 320,000 acres for \$510 million. But it insisted on a commitment to deliver 92 million board-feet of logs to local lumber mills over the next 10 years. According to Sorensen, though, that is less volume than sawmills would have processed under Plum Creek management, it's enough to sustain the current mill capacity.

Senator Baucus, working closely with Plum Creek and the conservation coalition, began crafting a new program in the Farm Bill that would fund bonds to buy lands adjacent to Forest Service ownership. Eventually those lands would be conveyed to the federal agency. Called the Qualified Conservation Forestry Bond measure, it is designed as a tool that can be used for future conservation purchases elsewhere. When the 2008 Farm Bill passed over a presidential veto, it included \$250 million to go toward the \$510 million purchase price from Plum Creek.

Baucus calls the Montana Legacy Project the most significant land-conservation project in state history: "This project is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to protect these lands for our families and future generations. It will keep jobs in Montana, and help maintain our communities and our working forests."

The largest conservation transaction in U.S. history leaves Swan Valley with no Plum Creek lands. "We're no longer a company town," says Parker, still slightly stunned by the implications.

### NEW TOOLS FOR NEW CHALLENGES

The grassroots coalitions in Montana and North Carolina face numerous hurdles as they work toward completing their projects. Hoke County leaders must decide how to govern and manage their 532-acre acquisition. Parker, Love, Byrd and their organizations must shepherd their 320,000 acres of timberlands from conservation-organization ownership into the hands of the Forest Service and state agencies, then monitor the management. Both groups are still seeking funding to complete their purchases.

They have several new financial tools available. In addition to the forest bond measure currently funding

the Montana Legacy project, the 2008 Farm Bill created the Community Forests and Open Space Conservation program. Administered by the Forest Service, it provides grants to help local governments, tribes and non-profit organizations acquire forestland. Communities and family forest owners also have access to several cost-sharing programs that have been promoting conservation on farms now also include timberlands. These provisions should be especially useful to family forest owners, who control 60 percent of America's forests and are most vulnerable to selling out to developers.

Despite these successes, the timberlands that communities are managing to protect from development are dwarfed by the annual two-million-acre loss nationwide. Today's economic climate has slowed land sales and construction, providing a one- to four-year hiatus, says Peter Stein, managing director of Lyme Timber Company, an innovative timber investment management organization. The lull won't last, he says, but it gives grassroots coalitions an opportunity to organize.

Most encouraging is the growing understanding that local communities – even small groups of committed individuals – are competent to protect their forests and their futures. They are reaching out to new partners because they know they have just one shot to maintain the conservation status of their backyards, he says. Once it's gone, it's gone forever.

Parker understands the magnitude of the challenges that lie ahead – in Swan Valley, western Montana and across the country. Today, however, she views them with renewed energy and hope. "Everyone said this couldn't be done," she says, "but guess what..."

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*Jane Braxton Little lives in Plumas County, CA.*

### AMERICAN FORESTS BRINGS LOCAL VOICES TO NATIONAL POLICY DISCUSSION

The leaders of the two community-based efforts in this story to acquire private forestlands are local policy partners of AMERICAN FORESTS.

Melanie Parker of Northwest Connections has been a policy partner for many years, most recently through mutual advocacy work on the 2008 Farm Bill through the Rural Voices for Conservation Coalition (RVCC), which is facilitated by Sustainable Northwest, a regional partner based in Portland, OR.

Mikki Sager of the Conservation Fund recently joined the Communities Committee, a national network of community forestry leaders with which AMERICAN FORESTS has partnered on policy work since the mid 1990s.

These stories of Swan Valley in Montana and Hoke County in North Carolina illustrate how the efforts of local partners are having profound effects on the land and in communities, while our collaborative national policy efforts continue to advance policy changes and federal investments that are helping to address major issues affecting forests and communities. With our local, regional, and national partners, AMERICAN FORESTS currently has a major policy emphasis on developing information about new policies and programs in the 2008 Farm Bill. One of our key initiatives aims to assist the Forest Service in developing rules for implementing the Community Forests and Open Space Conservation Act and to build a coalition to advocate for strong funding of this program through next year's Congressional appropriations process.

—Gerry Gray

*AMERICAN FORESTS' Vice President, Forest Policy*