

Conserving Land for American Indians

Mission

The Trust for Public Land has led the conservation community in protecting sites of significance to Native Americans. At the request of tribes, TPL works to preserve and promote the unique land-based culture of American Indians. By protecting sites of traditional value, ensuring tribal access to the land, and often placing property directly under tribal stewardship, TPL helps native communities preserve their spiritual, cultural and economic relationship to the land.

Restoring a Land-Based Culture

Perhaps more than any other culture in the United States, Native Americans hold a special reverence for the land. Native communities continue to depend on the land for physical and spiritual sustenance. The land harbors foods and medicines, provide places and objects essential to practicing religious beliefs and contains native history, stories and ancestral remains. The diversity of the landscape created unique imprints on individual tribal identity casting differences in cultural languages and customs that exist to this day. Yet the history of the American Indian has largely involved loss of land on a catastrophic scale. The 1887 Dawes Act alone was responsible for the loss of more than 90 million acres of Indian land, almost two-thirds of the tribal land base.

The attrition of the Indian land base continues to this day. Rarely does a week pass without a newspaper report of looting of Indian gravesites on private lands, the development of vacation homes on historic fishing grounds, or the loss of wildlife habitat on traditional hunting lands to subdivisions or timber harvesting.

Acquisition

Occasionally litigation can halt these activities, but usually only temporarily. Acquisition, however, with ultimate ownership by tribal or other government agencies (with mandates to manage for tribal values) can permanently prevent destruction activities such as residential development, ensure tribal access, and apply the protection of federal laws to graves and other important sites.

The Trust for Public Land--through its legal and real estate expertise, access to financial capital, and relationships with many of the private owners of traditional Indian Lands--has negotiated difficult transactions to protect thousands of acres important to Native Americans. In the Northwest alone, TPL has acquired twenty such properties totaling over 32,000 acres and valued at over \$27 million. Other projects recently protected or under negotiation will benefit tribes including the Nez Perce, Umatilla, Warm Springs, Yakama and Klamath. TPL does more than simply protect land, however.

Public Funding

Funds TPL has accessed for tribal lands include the federal Land and Water Conservation fund; mitigation funds provided by private utilities and power authorities; in-lieu funds from Army Corps of Engineer appropriations; and funding from obscure Department of Agriculture programs. TPL leads the nonprofit community in creatively seeking out new sources of funding that can be devoted to the restoration of tribal lands.

Public Focus

By placing key properties under option, and thereby establishing a deadline for action beyond which the property (and opportunity) will be lost, TPL also brings a sense of urgency and focus to agencies whose mitigation programs, for example, have been marked more by inertia than accomplishments. Optioned projects also give tribes and the general public specific properties around which to rally support.

Intangible Benefits

The purchase and protection of tribal lands also bring less tangible, but equally important, benefits. For example, the widespread publicity from TPL's Hetewisniix Wetes (Precious Land) project with the Nez Perce inspired a community-wide discussion in nearby Enterprise, Oregon that resulted in the removal of an offensive Indian caricature from athletic uniforms. In addition, a scholarship fund (now at \$17,000) was created for the education of Nez Perce children in wildlife management.

TPL is committed to meeting the land conservation and cultural heritage preservation objectives of American Indians. Because of Native Americans' traditional land-based culture, to save the land is to build communities, with outcomes that are socially, economically, and environmentally just.

The Trust for Public Land

TPL is a private, nonprofit conservation group that works nationwide to conserve land for people. Founded in 1972, TPL specializes in conservation real estate, applying its expertise in negotiation, public finance, and law to protect land for public use. Working with private landowners, communities, and government agencies, TPL has helped protect more than 1.2 million acres nationwide for people to enjoy as parks, playgrounds, community gardens, recreation areas, historic landmarks, and wildness lands.

TPL's Tribal Lands Program is guided and supported by a Tribal Lands Advisory Council composed of Indian Leaders, joined by other Americans committed to the protection and restoration of tribal lands and culture. For more information or help in protecting tribal lands, call Alvin Warren, director of the Tribal Lands Program at 503-988-5922, or by e-mail at Alvin.Warren@tpl.org. Visit our web site at www.tpl.org.