

Oconee River Land Trust Newsletter

The Oconee River Land Trust: Preserving Land Forever

Summer 2009



ORLT ACHIEVES ACCREDITATION

Before the August ORLT board meeting, champagne corks popped and plastic flutes "clinked" as board members and staff celebrated the news that ORLT had achieved accreditation. That news had been relayed to Executive Director Steffney Thompson by the Land Trust Accreditation Commission, the organization responsible for evaluating each candidate local trust for its ability to meet specified high standards for ethical and effective operation. The process of reaching this goal had been an arduous one, involving more than a year of effort and a period of intense activity in the early spring, led by Thompson and ORLT Board members Dan Hope, John Willis, and Ken Jarrett. Thompson says that the months of internal assessments and discussions followed by weeks of assembly of documentation was a steep hill to climb, but it was worth it.

ORLT now becomes one of only 78 land trusts out of more than 1200 nationwide to be accorded this status. ORLT is now entitled to display the Commission's official seal of accreditation signifying not only that it meets high standards but that it upholds the public trust and is dedicated to continuous improvement. The Commission is based in Saratoga Springs NY and is an independent program of the Land Trust Alliance (LTA). LTA is a national conservation organization that serves as an umbrella to independent local land trusts like ORLT and the Athens Land Trust.

WELLMAN CONSERVATION EASEMENT by Walt Cook

(This is the fourth in a series of articles describing conservation easements held by ORLT).

In 2003, Walter and Susan Wellman donated their first conservation easement to ORLT, seeking to permanently protect a portion of their 400 acre property in Walton County. They protected additional land by a second easement in 2007. Together, these easements protect 165 acres. The Wellman property is located along the Alcovy River near the base of Alcovy Mountain (which rises 300 ft. above the river), in a rapidly developing portion of Walton County. Thirty acres of the easement-protected land consist of the Alcovy River floodplain and contain what may be the northernmost stand of tupelo gum (*Nyssa aquatica*), a "signature species" of southern River swamps.

The floodplain forest also includes many other broadleaf species, such as water oak, white oak, southern red oak, river birch, green ash, and red maple. The important conservation values of this floodplain include flood water storage and high quality habitat for resident wildlife. The annual monitors discovered evidence of beaver and otter living in and on the bank of the river. Also, the tract is a vital link in a continuous riverine habitat for species that use it as a travel corridor. The author came within two steps of colliding with a fast-moving deer during a past monitoring trip.

Much of the easement is in grass species and scattered trees, with some closed woodland, especially in a spring-fed ravine upstream of a 5 acre lake. Walter Wellman is a very conscientious caretaker of his land. He has been reclaiming gullies that formed years ago in the cotton era. He also has kept the forest from occupying the entire area by carefully removing individual trees and encouraging semi-open grassland. He has provided a good interspersed cover, conducive to wildlife. The author saw a flock of a dozen wild turkeys on one visit, and on two occasions, was surprised by the sight of a shiny black-furred fox squirrel.

The Wellmans are landowners committed to making sure that some of Walton County's rural beauty remains untouched. Their foresight and willingness to forgo potentially large monetary returns from their land by permanently restricting development may not be common, but it is much appreciated.



ANNUAL MONITORING DAY A HUGE SUCCESS

As part of its stewardship program, ORLT held its 4th Annual Monitoring Day on January 31. Over 30 volunteers came out to help monitor ORLT's 27 conservation easements. The day started with a brief overview of the land trust and a short tutorial covering the "how and why" of monitoring. Then the volunteers chose their conservation easement and monitoring partners, gathered up a monitoring packet and lunch, and headed out to walk the properties.

With over 2,200 acres to monitor every year, ORLT depends on volunteers like these who are willing to walk easements and fill out a monitoring checklist. According to Walt Cook, ORLT Stewardship Chair, "These volunteers have really done a tremendous job. They are very observant, and do good work, and seem to really enjoy their time outside."

The goal of ORLT's Stewardship Program is to make sure the protected land stays protected. Annual monitoring is the foundation of this effort. If you are interested in helping next January, please call the office or email us at info@orlt.com.

Be sure to mark your calendar

Upcoming Dates: Land Trust Alliance Rally - October 10-13, 2009
Membership Event - November, 2009
Monitoring Day - Jan, 2010

NATURAL LANDS By Hans Neuhauser

The Oconee River Land Trust's mission is to conserve natural lands to protect water quality, preserve wildlife habitat and enhance the quality of our lives and those of future generations. A lofty goal and one worthy of our commitment to achieve, but just what constitutes natural lands? One guide is the Federal Tax Code, which describes the types of land that, if conserved in perpetuity, are eligible for very generous tax deductions (see box). Relevant to ORLT's mission, qualifying lands include open space whose preservation is "pursuant to a clearly delineated [government] conservation policy and will yield a significant public benefit." Still pretty general, you say. Until recently, yes. But earlier this year, the State of Georgia created such a clearly delineated conservation policy when the General Assembly amended the land conservation tax credit program and the Board of Natural Resources adopted implementing Rules.

Natural lands whose donation or bargain sale should qualify for both a Federal tax deduction and a state tax credit now must fit within at least one of the following seven categories: (1) land that protects water quality; (2) land that prevents erosion from steep slopes; (3) land that protects wildlife habitat; (4) lands that are prime farm and forest land; (5) land that allows natural-resource based recreation; (6) land that provides continuity of habitat or recreation such as a greenway or blueway; or (7) land that protects archaeological and historic sites.

Land that protects wildlife habitat must be defined in Georgia's Wildlife Action Plan. For the Piedmont of Georgia ORLT's focus region these habitats include bottomland hardwood forests and other specific forest types, granite outcrops, rivers and streams.

The new definitions are not as precise as they might be, but they are clearer and more concise than before. To find out if your land might qualify for these tax incentives, contact Steffney Thompson at ORLT: 706-552-3138.

The Oconee River Land Trust is one of 18 organizations recognized by the Georgia Department of Natural Resources as eligible to participate in the state's land conservation tax credit program. To be eligible for the tax credit, the landowner must partner with such a qualified organization or a government entity.

The expanded Federal tax incentives for the donation or bargain sale of conservation land to qualified organizations like ORLT are set to expire at the end of this year unless Congress can be persuaded to make the incentives permanent. You can help by calling your Congressman at 202-224-3121 and urging his support of H.B. 1831.

Get to Know your Board Members

Albert F. Ike Steps Down from the ORLT Board of Directors

Daniel Hope III, Chair ORLT Board of Directors

After many years of public service, a founding member of the Oconee River Land Trust, Al Ike, has decided to resign his membership on the ORLT Board of Directors. Al has helped guide ORLT since it was established in 1993 and I know this was not an easy decision for him.

Trained in forestry and holding a Ph.D. from Cornell in agronomy, Al moved to Athens about 1960 to accept a faculty position at UGA. Most of his tenure at the university was with the Institute of Community and Area Development (ICAD) working to improve the lives of people throughout the state of Georgia. He certainly improved my life by agreeing to serve as my major professor and shepherd me to my masters degree. He not only became a mentor, but he and his wife, Ruth, invited me to live in their home until I could find a place of my own. He retired as Associate Vice President of Public Service and Outreach.

Guided, in part, by his desire to see the Oconee River run clear again, Al has been as involved in serving Athens-Clarke County as in serving the state. He was a founding member of the Sandy Creek Nature Center, the Oconee River Greenway Commission, the Oconee River Land Trust, and the Federation of Neighborhoods and has served at least one term as Chair of each of these organizations. The grant that enabled Athens-Clarke County to acquire some of the first Greenway properties was written by Al and ORLT's Executive Director, Steffney Thompson.

Al also served as a member of the Governor's Advisory Council for Coastal Zone Management in the 1980s and chaired the university's Environmental Ethics Certificate Program in the early 1990s. In 1998, he and Dorinda Dallmeyer edited *Environmental Ethics and the Global Marketplace* for the University of Georgia Press.

When his sons were young, he served as a scoutmaster and is still comfortable in a canoe and knows his way around the woods. His comfort level was tested once when we were paddling in the Okefenokee, though. I was in the bow and heard a sudden, loud slapping sound just before the Canoe began to rock heavily. I turned around and Al was as far back on the end of the canoe as he could get without falling in the water. He thought the large fish in the middle of the boat was a water moccasin that had dropped out of a tree and joined us for a ride.

A poem by Rabindranath Tagore expresses what I feel may be Al Ike's philosophy:

*I slept and dreamed that life was joy,
I awoke and found that life was but service,
I served and discovered that service was joy.*

Al is a consummate public servant and I accept his departure reluctantly. As he left his last meeting of the Board of Directors he walked up to me and said, "Please call me if I can help in any way."

The Dedication of John Seabrook Forest



The Orange Twin Conservation Community dedicated its conservation easement on April 25, 2009. The area was named the John Seawright Forest, after one of Orange Twin's founding members. Over two hundred people attended, including many members of John's family. John's contributions to the community were remembered by various speakers, including John's father and brother, and Coleman Barks who read some of his poetry to the music of Art Rosenbaum. The ceremony and the unveiling of the dedication plaque took place in the heart of the easement area, at a gazebo surrounded by protected forest. ORLT executive director Steffney Thompson and ORLT Board member (and stewardship chair) Walter Cook attended. Walt described the conservation values of this 101 acre woods, while Steffney briefly explained the role of the land trust in this effort, and thanked the "dreamers and doers" of the Orange Twin Community for their efforts and the wonderful result.



The Oconee River Land Trust
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Legacy Giving

Providing a green legacy

The Oconee River Land Trust protects more than 2,200 acres of our region's green spaces, including wetlands, forests, meadows, farm fields and working forests. These landscapes define and enhance our community. Preserving our region's green areas is vital to our well-being, now and in the future. These acres not only provide essential habitat for an incredible diversity of plants and wildlife, but also protect our increasingly important water supply.

We have only been able to carry out this work because of the generosity of dedicated donors who understand that we must act now if we are to protect our landscapes. With your help, ORLT can continue to carry out its mission of ensuring that there will be natural areas for future generations to enjoy. In addition to annual contributions from our members, ORLT also relies on other gifts that can have a significant impact on our program. This type of giving provides benefits to ORLT and also to the donor. With a planned gift, you are ensuring that there will be a green legacy of land for our children and their children.

Possible Types of Planned Giving

- Cash
- Securities
- Bequests by Will
- Charitable Remainder Trust
- Conservation Easements
- Land
- Retained life estate
- Named beneficiary of life insurance, IRA's , annuities