



Land Trust planning session,
February 2020

Dear Friends:

In the few short months since our last report to you, the world has changed. We, the Land Trust family, sincerely hope that you and your families are doing as well as can be, given the circumstances.

Despite the times, the Minnesota Land Trust has been working hard to continue to protect and restore our natural world. The past few weeks have demonstrated that we need the remarkable power of the Great Outdoors more than ever. Where there are clear waters flowing and the sound of warblers returning home, there is hope.

Every day we are connecting with people like Mike Larsen and Linda Nelson to help them achieve their vision — the conservation of their land. Their hard work and dedication provide us with hope and inspiration. And thanks to the generosity of our donors and the foresight of voters who passed the Clean Water, Land and Legacy Amendment, the Land Trust has the resources to ensure families can protect and restore the properties that benefit us all.

So, our steady, determined work continues — to make Minnesota a better place for all of us. It's important for us to focus on the mission we have and the work we do — for the long haul. While we face many challenges today, together we will weather them and come out stronger. Much like Mike and Linda who diligently restored a prairie, we also know that the seeds of conservation we plant today can yield beautiful results years from now.

When you're in the "forever" business like us, we have no choice but to remain viable and vigilant in good times, and in bad.

Thanks for all you do,

Kris Larson, Executive Director

Seeds of Inspiration

If you were a bird flying above Minnesota's Driftless Area, looking down you'd see a patchwork landscape. Small farms dot the land, surrounded by patches of verdant forests and rocky bluff prairies. Through it all snake hundreds of small creeks that feed rivers from underground springs. This mosaic with steep bluffs and narrow valleys is the most biologically diverse area in Minnesota. It is ironic, then, that very little of this landscape is protected in public ownership. With less than 5% of land in public hands, the Southeast relies heavily on the actions of private individuals to reconnect wildlife habitat corridors and protect vital water sources.

Growing up in the Albert Lea area, Mike Larsen and Linda Nelson watched as the oak savannas and prairies of southeastern Minnesota were slowly eroded by intensive land uses that disrupted the healthy functioning of the ecosystem. In 2004 they decided to do something about the disappearing habitat by purchasing a 74-acre parcel adjacent to the Whitewater Wildlife Management Area (WMA) with the express purpose of restoring it.



Since that time they've poured their hearts and sweat into the land, painstakingly developing highly diverse seed mixes, fighting invasive species, and bringing back the natural habitat that had been absent for more than 100 years. Mike's eyes light up with excitement when asked about what seems like the most mundane detail of their restoration — picking out seeds.

"We designed custom seed mixes, and planted over 150 different species," says Mike enthusiastically, "We were guided

not only by healing the land but healing our relationship with the land; and it turned out spectacular."

Mike and Linda have every reason to be proud of their land — their steadfast attention to detail and care has rejuvenated a damaged landscape and created a veritable paradise on the prairie. Those 150 plant species aren't just for show, either. Each one helps sustain part of the important ecosystem in the Driftless Area, a region that has the most *Species in Greatest Conservation Need* over any other region in the state. For example, Mike and Linda discovered that their land was home to the endangered and elusive Henslow's sparrow, a small bird with very particular habitat needs. Through their diligent care, the birds have found a long-term home on the prairie.

Mike and Linda started on their conservation journey with the help of government conservation programs. "We started with a program called CREP [Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program]," says Mike. "That enabled us to create the high diversity prairie." This journey more recently led them

to complete a conservation easement with the Minnesota Land Trust to protect their hard-earned restoration investments and all the public benefits it creates. Linda adds, "We learned about the Land Trust and loved their mission. And building a personal relationship with Nick [Bancks] helped us build the trust that enabled us to take the leap and do this easement."

The Land Trust has worked in the Driftless Area since 1993, protecting over 11,000 acres in 75 different projects. Recently, it has doubled-down its restoration and protection goals in the region, thanks to enhanced state funding. And scientific methods make it possible to precisely target properties with the highest conservation value.

"When the Legacy Amendment was ratified by voters over a decade ago, that was a game changer for conservation in the Southeast," says Kris Larson,



WILEY HAHANG

executive director of the Minnesota Land Trust. "Ironically, despite being such a high priority for conservation, the region has historically received less state and federal conservation funding than any region of the state. Our goal is to see that southeastern Minnesota receives the attention and resources it deserves."

Nick Bancks, program manager for the Land Trust in the Southeast concurs, "What this funding has enabled us to do is create partnerships across the region targeting very specific natural features — like cold water trout streams — that we know are vital for the health of the whole ecosystem. In fact, the first project the Land Trust ever completed with funding from the Outdoor Heritage Fund was to protect bluffland along the Root River right in the heart of the Southeast."

Mike and Linda's project is the fruit of those partnerships and a clear indication of how much the conservation landscape



has shifted in 10 years. Funded in part with the support of the Outdoor Heritage Fund, the project falls within the boundaries of the Blufflands Protection Program partnership led by The Nature Conservancy, Minnesota Land Trust, and Trust for Public Land. Together the partnership has protected over 2,800 acres in just 5 short years in the surrounding area.

Meanwhile, Mike and Linda continue to build on all they've accomplished so far. "Our hope is that this keeps growing; that it becomes more of what it could be," says Linda. "That the red-headed woodpecker returns, the Henslow's sparrow stays and thrives." Mike and Linda are leading examples of how important the work and dedication of private landowners are to biodiversity and water quality of the Southeast.

Mike concludes, "This land is not just a thing to look at and preserve — but something that will thrive, and eventually, hopefully, inspire others."



Mike and Linda (middle) with
Land Trust staff Nick Bancks
and Gena Setzer

"WE LEARNED ABOUT
THE **LAND TRUST** AND
LOVED THEIR MISSION.
OUR GOAL IS TO SEE
THAT SOUTHEASTERN
MINNESOTA RECEIVES
THE ATTENTION AND
RESOURCES IT
DESERVES."





“OUR GIFT IS DIRECTED SPECIFICALLY TO THE LAND TRUST’S STEWARDSHIP FUND — ITS ENDOWMENT.”

David Knoblach has had a lifelong interest in our conservation and environmental challenges, with a focus on water quality and land restoration. David first approached the Minnesota Land Trust as a volunteer in 2008 and has been a part of the Land Trust family ever since.

“The Land Trust’s work fills a void in Minnesota’s environmental landscape with its unique ability to take a leadership role collaborating with so much of Minnesota’s conservation and environmental community — private and public.”

Recently, David and his wife Suzie decided to leave a planned gift to the Land Trust through their will. By supporting the Land Trust this way, David and Suzie are helping to create a legacy of permanent protection that will live on forever.

“Our gift is directed specifically to the Land Trust’s stewardship fund — its endowment. Nonprofits cannot survive without robust endowments, and the Land Trust especially needs this since it must manage all its easements forever.”

Thanks to the generosity of David and Suzie, the Land Trust will be able to monitor and enforce the easements of protected properties — forever.

Please consider a planned gift to the Minnesota Land Trust. Contact Alex Tsatsoulis, Director of Development and Communications at 651-917-6289 or atsatsoulis@mnland.org

A CONVERSATION WITH DAVID HARTWELL

by Josephine Marcotty

David Hartwell was the founding president of the Minnesota Land Trust in 1991. Today, he is the Chair of the Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council, which makes recommendations to the Legislature on how the State of Minnesota should protect, restore, and enhance wildlife habitat through the Outdoor Heritage Fund. We talked to him about the impact the past decade of the Outdoor Heritage Fund has had on our state, and how it is fueling greatly needed conservation work in the biologically rich southeastern part of Minnesota, where only 5% of land is publicly held.



Q The Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council and other partners are putting a lot of effort into protecting parts of southeastern Minnesota. Why is that?

[Compared to the rest of the state] the Southeast is a different story in terms of what its needs are. There is a general lack of public lands to be sure. There have not been the restoration initiatives that government agencies and nonprofits have focused on in other parts of the state. But you have a topography and a karst (geological) system that allows different things to happen. Pollution gets into the water much faster because there is a pathway for it. You have hills, so agricultural practices have a more immediate impact than they do in other parts of the state. You have more potential for erosion. Because natural fires have been eliminated, cedars have aggressively taken over the hillsides. Open hillsides and bluff prairies have disappeared and so the plants and animals that depended on them have disappeared too.

Q What impact is funding from the Outdoor Heritage Fund having on the work?

It’s just beginning, but it has made a difference. The stream restoration work would never have been done at the scale that has happened without the Outdoor Heritage Fund. The clearing of the cedars and opening of the bluff prairies would likely not have started. And the volume of land protection and conservation easements would not have been done. But it isn’t enough. We need to continue investing in the rich habitats of southeastern Minnesota.

The Outdoor Heritage Fund is the mechanism that recommends funding for the habitat portion of the Legacy Amendment to the Legislature.



2356 University Ave. W #240
Saint Paul, MN 55114

ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED

Updates from the Minnesota Land Trust

NEW STAFF



EMY KENOW
Restoration
Coordinator

AMANDA PLATSON
Finance
Associate

KATHRYN PRINCE
Project
Coordinator

BEV RINKE
Program
Manager

NEW BOARD MEMBERS

LIZ DILLON | Attorney, Lathrop GPM
ELLEN JONES | Committee Chair, Edina Public Schools Board
JANE KINGSTON | Former public member, Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council
TODD REUBOLD | Associate Director, Institute on the Environment, U of M
PETER VORBRICH | Chief Operating Officer, retired, CSM Corporation

Welcome to our new team members!

MINNESOTA LAND TRUST

www.mnland.org | 651-647-9590 | Toll Free: 1-877-MLT-LAND

2356 University Ave. W #240 | Saint Paul, MN 55114
394 South Lake Ave. #404 | Duluth, MN 55802

EMAIL US AT: MNLAND@MNLAND.ORG

Bring the outdoors to your living room on May 28 with our free virtual event.



Register at
mnland.org/mnmade
or 651-647-9590

DESIGN BY BARBARA PEDERSON



PHOTO: MIKE LARSEN AND LINDA NELSON

Restoring Nature, Restoring Ourselves



MID-YEAR REVIEW | SPRING 2020