

THE TRUST FOR PUBLIC LAND conserves land for people,
to improve the quality of life in our communities
and to protect our natural and historic resources
for future generations.

The Trust for Public Land

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

William B. Rogers, TPL President

John W. Baird	Roy Richards, Jr.
Robert E. Carlson	Marie Ridder
Page Knudsen Cowles	Martin J. Rosen
George P. Denny	James D. Sano
Douglas P. Ferguson	Christopher Glenn Sawyer
James S. Hoyte	F. Jerome Tone
George Knox	Matthew G. Trifiro
Eugene C. Lee	Julia Widdowson
Michael E. Patterson	Martha M. Wyckoff
Douglass A. Raff	

Center for Land and People

ADVISORY COUNCIL

William Cronon	Gary Paul Nabhan
Michael Dorsey	David Orr
Dianne Dumanoski	Scott Russell Sanders
Torri Estrada	Anne Whiston Spirn
Jan Flora	Mary Evelyn Tucker
Eric Freyfogle	Mark Walters
Tony Hiss	Alvin Warren
Kurt Hoelting	

The Story Handbook

LANGUAGE AND STORYTELLING
FOR LAND CONSERVATIONISTS

Essays by Tim Ahern, William Cronon, John Elder,
Peter Forbes, Barry Lopez, and Scott Russell Sanders

Photo essays by Courtney Bent

Introduction by Will Rogers

Edited by Helen Whybrow



A CENTER FOR LAND AND PEOPLE BOOK

The Trust for Public Land

San Francisco, California

2002

Caretaking Tales

BEYOND CRISIS AND SALVATION

| WILLIAM CRONON

All too often it seems that the hard work of land conservation is done under crisis conditions. An important piece of real estate suddenly comes on the market, or is threatened with development, or is subject to new government policies, or in some other way demands our urgent attention. So we roll up our sleeves and get to work, raising money, building coalitions, purchasing easements, invoking legal precedents, organizing political support, cutting deals—all the necessary tasks without which few acres would ever receive the protection they deserve. The goal of saving land for the public good could hardly be more important, and there is nothing sentimental about it. Successful land conservation is rarely achieved without consummate technical expertise and hard-nosed realism.

It may thus seem a little counterintuitive, if not downright perverse, to assert that nothing is more vital to the success of land conservation than the stories we tell about it. In the midst of raising millions of dollars and making complex deals with power brokers, why on earth should we waste time on something so seemingly intangible and trivial as storytelling? Surely

busy land conservationists have more important things to worry about.

But in fact nothing could be more essential. Stories are the indispensable tools that we human beings use for making sense of the world and our own lives. They articulate our deepest values and provide the fables on which we rely as we confront moral dilemmas and make choices about our every action. Here is a new situation: What should we do? The answer, repeated in infinite variations, always takes the form of a narrative. If we do *this*, then *that* will follow, and we judge our actions good or bad by the chains of cause and effect we thus set in motion. Just so do stories provide the interpretive compass with which we navigate our lives.

A moment's reflection will confirm that even the practical day-to-day work of land conservation is full of storytelling. Why should this donor give money for the purchase of this land? Because doing so will set in motion a story in which the donation makes possible the purchase, and the purchase in turn embodies values about which the donor cares enormously. Why should this politician throw her weight behind this project? Because doing so enables her to author a story that demonstrates for future audiences (and also for herself) the kinds of actions and commitments she can be counted on to support. Why should people in this community wish to preserve this green space as a park? Because the park will then provide the scene for countless future stories about the children and families and lovers and lone souls who will find affirmation in that place.

There is nothing trivial about such stories. Indeed, one might even say that natural ecosystems and abstract geographical spaces become human *places* precisely through the accumulation of narratives that record and pass on to other people the living memory of what those places *mean*. Stories *create* places by teaching us why any given patch of earth matters to the people who care for it.

If this is so, then what kinds of stories should land conserva-

tionists tell about the places they seek to save? What sorts of values and meanings do we want our stories of these places to affirm?

The very nature of this work means that all too often we find ourselves telling *crisis stories*. Here is a precious place, and here are the awful things that are about to happen unless we immediately do something to save it. A key attraction of crisis stories is the urgency they convey: the more compelling the crisis they narrate, the more desperate the call to action. An equally important appeal is that crisis stories call upon listeners to assist in authoring a completely different narrative in which the impending tragedy is transformed into its opposite by changing the anticipated ending. The purpose and power of crisis stories, after all, is their ability to metamorphose into *salvation stories*.

This is in fact one of the oldest narrative traditions in Western culture, going all the way back to the Hebrew prophets who foretold disaster if the Jews did not mend their ways in time to avoid the wrath of a just God, thereby altering the end of the prophet's story. Here is a crisis—in most instances, a crisis that our own bad conduct has precipitated. Here is what we must do to avert disaster. Here is what we will gain if our heroic efforts succeed. In just this way do crisis and salvation complement and complete one another. In American conservation history, places whose meanings have been defined by stories of crisis and salvation include such famous names as Hetch Hetchy, Echo Park, and Glen Canyon. But in fact every successful and unsuccessful land conservation battle reenacts these same narratives of paradise lost or paradise regained.

However compelling these prophetic narratives of crisis and salvation may seem, and however effective they often prove as tools for organizing, we should recognize that their very power also entails risks. For one, people can stand only so many crises before exhaustion or disbelief sets in. Under ordinary circumstances, daily life does not present itself as an unrelenting string of crises. If someone insists on telling us stories that suggest other-

wise, in which every environmental problem or land conservation challenge threatens impending doom, we eventually doubt the storyteller and begin to think of the boy who cried wolf.

Even more important, the same promised salvation that makes crisis stories so attractive can also convey deeply misleading ideas about the nature of conservation. Yes, it sometimes does happen that dramatic action needs to be taken to “save” a given tract of land from threats that might otherwise do it serious harm. But triumphing over these urgent threats brings neither the transcendent salvation nor the narrative closure that our stories tempt us to expect. The real life of real places never “ends” the way stories do.

Instead, the end of the crisis is almost always the beginning of a very different story about the much subtler challenge of *caring* for the land, day in and day out, with no end in sight. We’re not nearly so good at telling this kind of story. It’s much more exciting to cast ourselves as heroes in a dramatic struggle to “save” a place we care about. But once it has been “saved,” the heroic story we’ve just enacted can tempt us to move on in search of the next dramatic struggle, forgetting that the real work of caring for the place we’ve just protected will start again tomorrow, and the day after that, and the day after that, forever. Real life and real places are like this, even if stories are not.

Narratives of crisis and salvation entail at least one additional risk as well. Far more often than not, the places we seek to protect are cast in such stories as “natural,” whereas the forces that threaten them with destruction are cast as “human.” There are plenty of good reasons for this, given the cleverness and zeal with which human beings can sometimes muck up the world around them. But if the only stories we tell are ones in which natural victims are threatened by human villains, and the only honorable human response is to “protect” nature by isolating it from further human interference, then we may want to worry just a bit about the moral lessons such fables teach about humanity’s place in nature.

Salvation stories in which a natural landscape is spared from human use or restored to organic health in the wake of human damage can imply that most of the things people spend the bulk of their time doing—building comfortable homes, raising happy children, doing honest work, consuming good food, enjoying life—represent “damage” from nature’s point of view. If the ultimate implication of a crisis story is that humanity is an awful wound from which nature must somehow heal, can we claim to be offering any constructive vision of a better human way of living and working with nature? What sources of hope and self-respect do we expect a child to find in such fables?

For all these reasons, we need more than just narratives of crisis and salvation if the work of land conservation is to succeed in the long run. The most helpful stories may actually begin right after a crisis has been resolved and a tract of land has been “protected.” The high drama may be over, but the ongoing work of sustaining the land for which we are now responsible has just begun. To help guide our lives beyond the crisis, we need to become better at *caretaking tales* that celebrate the quieter forms of heroism in which people commit themselves to nurturing a place and its inhabitants, human and nonhuman alike, for all time to come.

Such stories will focus on themes that tend to be less visible in narratives of crisis and salvation. They inevitably involve continuing *relationships* between people and the natural world, so that *connections* rather than *disconnections* play more central roles. Just as important, they show people *working* in and with natural systems to sustain those systems for the long run. Working for the good of a whole that contains rather than excludes a human presence means recognizing that natural systems are in fact *communities* to which we ourselves belong. Acknowledging our membership in—and dependence upon—such communities is the necessary precondition before we can take responsibility for them. *Narratives that celebrate connections and relationships in communities that we ourselves are responsible for*

nurturing and sustaining: it was precisely these kinds of stories that Aldo Leopold was advocating when he penned his famous words, "We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect."

Love and respect: surely these are the core moral values that the storytelling work of land conservation must celebrate and affirm. It's worth noticing that neither of these crucial words can ever describe individuals or people in isolation from the rest of the natural world. Both are inherently relational, and both describe the emotions from which our sense of obligation and responsibility and community toward the rest of nature ultimately flows. Utopian though it might seem, if we could become steadier in our practice of such values, not only might we become better at telling caretaking tales, but our need for stories of crisis and salvation might diminish as well.

This leads to one final observation about the stories we tell in the work of land conservation. Almost always, and for the best reasons in the world, our stories focus narrowly on lands we are trying to save: a wilderness on the north slope of Alaska, a grassland with oil beneath it near the front range of the Rockies, a family farm threatened with subdivision on the outskirts of Chicago, a community garden in Harlem. Certainly we must tell compelling stories about such places.

But caretaking tales—tales of love and respect, of belonging and responsibility—in fact need to be told about *all* the lands of this good earth, including those where people earn their livings and make their homes. Not just wildernesses and parks and public green spaces need our celebration. So too do cities and suburbs, farms and ranches, mines and industrial forests, factories and homes. It's not just that the wildernesses and parks and green spaces will be destroyed by forces emanating from these other places if we don't do a better job of witnessing and taking responsibility for the relationships that bind all of them together. It's also that we human beings need to find honor and

self-respect for ourselves and our children as much in our homes and workplaces as in the lands we set aside as special. We need caretaking tales for all of them together, because only then can we hope to find true salvation for them all.