



VIRGINIA VICTORY

Largest Conservation Project in Decades Protects Forest and Chesapeake Bay Water

For two decades, Nita and David Carl enjoyed the “Grace Furnace” property in rural western Virginia as if it were their own backyard. Their daughters, and later their grandsons, splashed in the pristine streams flowing through the 5,000-acre property, leased by a local hunt club that employed David as the land’s caretaker.

“The waters are so clean; that’s rare in this day and time,” says Nita. “My family and I took extra care to make sure they stayed that way.”

When Grace Furnace was put up for sale in 2016, it was, in part, these very waters — teeming with rare species and native trout, and flowing all the way to the Chesapeake Bay — that spurred conservationists to action.

Thanks to pivotal funds from the Open Space Institute (OSI), and additional support from the Chesapeake Conservancy, a celebrated local advocacy organization,

the Grace Furnace property, named for its historic “pig iron” furnace, was permanently saved. It is a momentous conservation win locally for people who love the land, and also for those more than 200 miles downstream, who see the project as a critical victory for water quality.

For watersheds everywhere, forest conservation at the headwaters is key to water quality downstream. Forests play a number of critical roles for stream health. They serve as natural filters, and provide nutrients from leaf litter that support life up and down the food chain. Forests also regulate stream flow, lessening flooding and drought events.

And yet, as important as they are, forests now cover only about 55 percent of the Chesapeake Bay watershed. Moreover, the watershed has been losing 100 acres of forestland per day since the 1980s to

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Our Mission

The Open Space Institute protects scenic, natural, and historic landscapes to provide public enjoyment, conserve habitat and working lands, and sustain communities.

OSI conserves diverse landscapes including parks and preserves, working farms and forests, and utilizes climate science to identify critical landscapes for protection.

ON THE GROUND

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COVER RIGHT: Flying over Grace Furnace (Neil Jordan)
COVER SIDEBAR: Hudson Highlands (Greg Miller)
ABOVE: Monarch Field Trip (Greg Miller)
BACK COVER: Monarch Release (Greg Miller)
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REDEFINING “WORKING LANDS”

Kim Elliman, President and CEO

The growing understanding of the range of benefits associated with strategic land conservation has me rethinking the definition of “working lands.” Traditionally, this term has been most closely associated with various forms of agriculture and timbering. But in truth, the “working lands” we conserve achieve specific goals that benefit humans and wildlife.

As scientific research reveals a more expansive understanding of the value of land conservation, so too is the definition of “working lands” expanding. Today, we know that protected land can, and does, play a larger role in sequestering carbon, curbing the impact of flooding, and protecting water quality; all outcomes that are critically important as our society works to address the biggest environmental challenges of our time.

We expect a lot from the land we protect. And that ask gets even bigger when we acknowledge that the land we protect should, wherever possible, be made accessible and welcoming. We cannot just assume — and especially not at a time when our population is becoming more and more urbanized — that people who have no connection to the land will

fully understand its value. Or, even more importantly, that they will be motivated to use and support the land.

If we really want to create a new constituency of dedicated and active individuals who fully appreciate the beauty of forests, parks, and waterways, we must make public lands places where people want to be — and are willing to fight for in the future. In other words, the “working land” is tasked with drawing in new devotees, and the land conservation community has an enormous role to play here.

There is simply no substitute for enjoyable, first-hand experiences in a forest or along a river. That’s why OSI is creating safe, informative, and inviting access points to nature, building well-constructed trail networks, and supporting connections between public lands and population centers. These are natural and vitally important extensions of our conservation work. Doing all we can to connect people to the land will pay off as we look to create a new generation of stewards.

After all, creating a relationship that starts with a sturdy pair of shoes, a canteen of water, and a deep breath, can set the stage for a lifetime of appreciation for protecting the “working land.”

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NEW CONNECTIONS AT BLUESTONE WILD FOREST

Newly Protected Land Gets a Trails Boost



Greg Miller

With an ever-expanding network of trails being built by the Open Space Institute (OSI) around New York State, combining land protection and park improvements at key locations was a logical next step.

The Bluestone Wild Forest is nestled in the southeastern corner of the Catskill Park. It is one of many cherished outdoor destinations in the area. Teeming with wildlife, the verdant pine forests and clear, unpolluted lakes of Bluestone are the perfect place to go for a relaxing hike, run, walk, or bike ride.

Realizing the high recreational and ecological value of this landscape, OSI purchased a 208-acre parcel within the Catskill Park, to connect two previously unlinked sections of the Bluestone Wild Forest.

Through just one land acquisition, OSI was able to protect this scenic landscape from development and unify two previously separated sections of

the park — Jockey Hill to the east and Onteora Lake to the west. This purchase set the stage for an expansion of the forest's network of trails.

"Creating the long-envisioned link between the two parts of Bluestone Wild Forest was a major win for OSI," says Tom Gravel, land project manager for OSI. "The acquisition was the perfect next step to continue our work connecting people to parks and making remote outdoor spaces easily accessible."

With the land protected, OSI shifted gears and began to think about how the land could be improved for public use before being transferred to the state as an addition to Bluestone Wild Forest.

Working with the community, local conservation partners including the Woodstock Land Conservancy, local outdoor retailers, local recreational advocacy group "Fats in the Cats," and the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, OSI

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and matters

Floodplain at Work

Spurred by a warming climate, severe weather events are becoming more frequent, putting low-lying neighborhoods increasingly at risk of flooding. As a result, many local officials are turning to natural solutions, including strategic land conservation, to safeguard communities and prevent development in high-risk areas.

These initiatives have attracted the interest of those who administer homeowner flood insurance policies. Under the “Community Rating System” (CRS) program, administered by FEMA, communities that enact strategies such as land protection, wetland restoration, and wetland management planning, can earn a reduction on flood insurance rates for their residents.

For example, in Charleston County, South Carolina, land protection efforts by the Open Space Institute (OSI) contribute directly to the goals of the CRS program, and help the community score points in the “Open Space Protection” portion of the application. Within the county’s floodplain, OSI has protected six properties, or nearly 6,000 acres, that absorb excess water during floods and help to reduce flood-related losses. To date, thanks in part to OSI’s conservation work, nearly 70,000 county residents have qualified for a 30-percent reduction in flood insurance rates through the CRS program.



Mac Stone

Now, OSI is being approached by other localities. “Natural solutions, including land conservation, are proving to be quite effective as we battle climate change,” says Maria Whitehead, OSI’s senior program manager. “We look forward to partnering with communities to reduce the risks associated with flooding — and perhaps even cut their insurance rates.”



Amanda Gentile

Spotlight on Community

On a darkened stage inside the Cultural Performance Center at Denny Farrell Riverbank State Park, the rich sound of a cello reverberates throughout the room, soothing and enchanting the crowd, as a spotlight focuses on a single, expressive musician.

Helping to elevate the display of talent is a host of recently installed improvements to the space, including the expanded stage, theatrical spotlights, state-of-the-art audio enhancements, and black-out shading. But it wasn’t always this way.

The much-loved center has operated as a hub of the Harlem community for more than 26 years. But until this year, the extensive facilities were beyond normal maintenance capabilities for Riverbank Park. Responding to a local need at this beloved park, the Open Space Institute (OSI) launched a fundraising campaign to revitalize the legacy performing arts center.

“By transforming the space, we not only improved the center, but deepened community connections to this unique park,” says Kathy Moser, director of OSI’s Parks program.

OSI’s Capital Campaign raised \$2.8 million, including a \$1-million gift from Robert Frederick Smith, providing significant upgrades and allowing the center to once again accommodate a full range of public activities and events.

A More Welcoming Garden

For more than a year, the Millbrook Gardens Project (MGP) had been struggling to transform an unused green space in the South Bronx at the Millbrook Houses Development, into a fully accessible community garden that could host educational and social programs.

Construction of the garden was stalled by legal issues that prevented the group from pouring concrete paths that would make the space usable and welcoming to every member of the community, including those with wheelchairs or strollers.

Soon after becoming a Citizen Action group of the Open Space Institute (OSI), MGP was able to get the legal counsel that would help clear the way for a solution.

“Once we partnered with OSI, we were able to move forward with the construction of the garden,” says Cesar Yoc, project leader for MGP. “OSI sponsored our group and helped us negotiate with the New York City Housing Authority. Now that we have paved garden paths, we can plan community events for people of all ages and physical abilities.”

Samayla Deutch, OSI’s senior vice president and general counsel, took on the project knowing that a successful outcome would result in tangible benefits for Millbrook Gardens. “Access to green space is an essential component for a healthy, thriving community,” says Deutch. “It is a true reward to advance the goals of a group of individuals who are passionate about supporting accessible outdoor activities in their local community.”



Jack Morningstar

BLUESTONE WILD FOREST

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Greg Miller

decided to invest in the land. OSI leveraged additional financial support from various partners, and then began planning a spectacular multi-use trail through the property. The new trail will connect existing state trails and support active lifestyles for people of all ages and physical abilities.

As plans for the trail began to solidify, OSI also received abundant support from the biking community in the Catskills.

“This area is no stranger to mountain biking enthusiasts,” says Billy Denter. As the owner of Overlook Mountain Bikes for more than 17 years, Billy has seen a hearty increase in the number of people coming to ride, hike, and explore the park, and he has aided customers visiting from Albany, Brooklyn, and as far away as Europe.

Billy finds that when people get on their bikes, they see the area in a whole new way. “On a bike, you see, feel, and experience the vibrancy of the landscape on a different level.”

With the trail work completed and the property soon to be open to the public, OSI’s Tom Gravel reflects on the personal significance of this project. “The work of protecting and improving land for people is never done, and there are still parts of the forest that are threatened. But I look forward to enjoying this special place with my family, and I know others will appreciate this landscape as well.”

VIRGINIA VICTORY

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development, conversion, and other threats, according to U.S. Forest Service (USFS) data.

For years, Grace Furnace had been a top conservation priority for the USFS, thanks to its 14 forested, freshwater streams that empty into the James River, and in turn the Chesapeake Bay. The Grace Furnace property flanks the Jefferson National Forest, which together with the adjacent George Washington National Forest represents one of the largest blocks of publicly owned forestland on the east coast. This made its protection even more critical.

“Properties of this size and value come around only about once every few decades,” says Joel Dunn, President and CEO of the Chesapeake Conservancy. “It was vitally important for the entire state that it be protected, not subdivided.”

After the hunt club put Grace Furnace on the market, quick action was needed to protect the land. But because the Federal government was between budget cycles, the USFS was not going to be able to secure the funds on the seller’s timeline.

Moving quickly, OSI, with financial backing from the Wyss Foundation, provided a \$5 million grant to purchase the property in 2016, and to hold it until the USFS could secure funding.

“When conserving land, the window can be limited and you have to act quickly,” says Dene Lee, OSI’s Land Project director.

Soon after the purchase by OSI, the project was nominated for funding by the Land & Water Conservation

Fund (LWCF), the nation’s most important conservation program aimed at critically important land and water protection projects.

“The groundbreaking protection of the Grace Furnace property demonstrates in a very real way the kind of success possible when public-private partnerships mobilize around a worthy land conservation goal,” says Greg Zimmerman of the Wyss Campaign for Nature, a 10-year, \$1-billion commitment by Hansjörg Wyss and the Wyss Foundation to accelerate the pace of land conservation worldwide.

Just this fall, LWCF funds were used to officially transfer Grace Furnace from OSI to the USFS, ensuring the property’s clean waters will continue to feed the Chesapeake Bay. And its thousands of unspoiled, forested acres will be opened to the public.

One day, visitors will be able to take advantage of the incredible recreational potential of Grace Furnace, thanks to its location near Hoop Hole National Recreation Trail — a popular hiking trail flanked by rhododendron and swimming holes.

And for Nita Carl, there is relief that this local, wild playground with its critical natural resources will be around for yet another generation of her family.

“It’s been beyond gratifying watching others enjoy this land as much as we do,” she says. “And now, thanks to OSI and its partners, other peoples’ lives will be improved by the land as well.”



Neil Jordan

in conversation



Located in eastern Pennsylvania, Cherry Valley National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) has almost doubled in size with the support of OSI's Delaware River Watershed Protection Fund, capitalized by the William Penn Foundation and a coalition of enthusiastic partners. OSI sat down with Refuge manager Mike Horne, who reflected on the importance of saving forests that filter water for the Delaware River watershed, a source of water for 15 million people in Trenton, Philadelphia, and beyond.

GETTING OUTSIDE WITH MIKE HORNE

What in your background drew you to land protection?

I grew up on a dairy farm in central Pennsylvania. At a young age, I came to recognize the value of conservation, so it was a natural extension to work for the National Wildlife Refuge system and become a refuge manager.

The way I look at it, I'm a glorified farmer in many ways. It's just that my crops and domestic animals are different than on a farm. I don't know many farmers in central Pennsylvania who aren't inherent conservationists.

Why is restoration at Cherry Valley important for the Delaware River?

At Cherry Valley NWR, the lands we acquire have included former farmland and even a golf course. When I go out on the land, I'll see neighbors walking on the old cart paths and taking everything in, and sometimes they even take those ideas home.

A lot of local landowners even own a section of stream. And when they visit, they realize that they can do restoration on their own very cheaply. Little by little, we can't help but improve water quality in the Delaware.

How do you build coalitions to support your work?

Some of our partners don't care much about the threatened bog turtles on our land, but they care about the Appalachian Trail; and we have other advocates who care a lot about bog turtles, but not so much the Appalachian Trail. But when we get those two groups together, we have a strong partnership based on a diversity of desire and need, and that's really paid off for us.

What impact has OSI had in saving Cherry Valley?

OSI has been a great catalyst for us here in Cherry Valley. Often, we have funding assembled but are just short of our goal, and OSI has pushed us over the top.

I can tell you that we would not have had the same amount of land preserved at Cherry Valley NWR today if OSI hadn't stepped up. OSI also takes on the initial effort to help us meet with landowners and establish relationships.

What is next for Cherry Valley NWR?

We hope to see the refuge double in five to ten years. We are fortunate to have a great group of partners in OSI and other organizations, who are like-minded and share our vision for the refuge. So we are hopeful we can accomplish this for the community and for the Delaware River.



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BECKONING KIDS AND BUTTERFLIES AT RIVER-TO-RIDGE TRAIL

Since the opening of OSI's River-to-Ridge Trail in fall of 2018, more than 100,000 people have visited this pastoral landscape, easily accessible from the village of New Paltz in New York's Hudson Valley. Building the connection between people and the land is at the core of the trail preserve. River-to-Ridge is quickly becoming a popular recreational attraction and outdoor educational resource. The trail's one-year anniversary featured a Monarch butterfly tag and release project with area school children. The butterfly larvae were harvested from OSI-restored habitat along the trail.

