



A COUP FOR GEORGIA COASTAL WILDERNESS

Protecting Land for Clean Water, Climate Protection, Recreation, and Habitat

When considering the full range of conservation benefits, the protection of 27,000 acres of wilderness in coastal Georgia has them all. The Open Space Institute’s (OSI) protection of one of the largest unprotected landscapes along the Southeastern Atlantic coast, an area roughly the size of Orlando’s Disney World, is a model for land protection — ensuring clean water, providing climate protection, promoting healthy communities, creating new recreational opportunities, and safeguarding critical plant and animal habitat.

The conservation of the pristine Ceylon and Cabin Bluff properties, which together make up the newest Wildlife Management Area (WMA) in the state of Georgia, is a momentous achievement in terms of impact and vastness. “The term ‘wilderness’ is hard to apply to many places on the Southeastern coast today, but the size and habitat quality of this land make it a true exception,” says

Jason Lee, program manager for Georgia’s Department of Natural Resources.

Home to centuries-old oak trees festooned with Spanish moss, of emerald wetlands, and sun-dappled longleaf pine forests, Ceylon WMA holds a human history both rich and tragic, and the promise of greater public access to the land’s splendor. Ceylon WMA’s permanent protection is the product of years of teamwork and seizing opportunity.

Once coveted by developers waving permits for 10,000 homes, shops, and marinas, this stretch of coastal land was spared development with the 2008 market crash. Seeing an opportunity, local conservationists dug in to protect the precious land — with OSI playing a critical role to complete the effort. With repeat support from the Wyss Foundation, OSI partnered with The Nature Conservancy to purchase the Cabin Bluff property in 2018 and the next year teamed with the Conservation Fund to safeguard the Ceylon property.

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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.

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THE SECOND-BEST TIME TO FIGHT CLIMATE CHANGE

Kim Elliman, President and CEO

An old adage says that the best time to plant a tree is twenty years ago, and the second-best time is now. The same can be said of the best time to fight climate change.

Extreme and deadly flooding, stronger and more frequent storms, wildfires, droughts, temperature spikes, rising sea levels, and the loss of habitat all point to a climate crisis requiring serious solutions and immediate action.

At the Open Space Institute (OSI) and throughout the conservation community, we know that land protection to combat climate change is more important now than ever. From carbon storage to protecting communities from the impacts of severe flooding, especially the most vulnerable communities, there are solutions in the land.

Protecting forests is particularly critical in the fight against climate change. Intact forests store carbon and capture carbon emissions being produced today. Forests currently capture 14 percent of US carbon dioxide emissions each year; proper forest management could significantly grow that number.

This year, OSI announced its Appalachian Landscapes Protection Fund (ALPF) aimed specifically at protecting some of the nation's most biologically rich and climate-

resilient landscapes. The initiative aligns with the Biden administration's plan to conserve 30 percent of US land and waters by the year 2030 to leverage natural climate solutions.

Harnessing the carbon-capturing role of forests to combat climate change, the ALPF seeks to strategically protect land along the spine of the Appalachian Mountains, which contain the world's largest broadleaf forest. The Appalachians are responsible for storing a majority of the nation's forest carbon, and provide essential climate refuge for plants and animals.

And because today's realities require action to curb the worsening effects of climate change, OSI is protecting coastal land and wetlands to fight sea level rise in the Southeast, while promoting better local planning and strategic conservation to absorb flood waters during increasingly severe rain events.

Today, with the effects of climate change intensifying around us, we must recommit ourselves to doing all we can to fight this greatest of worldwide challenges. Positive change and meaningful impacts are within our grasp. After all, in the fight against climate change, it's not too late to plant that tree — or save a forest.



ON THE GROUND

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FRONT LEFT: Juvenile Gopher Tortoise
(Randy Browning, USFWS)

FRONT BOTTOM RIGHT: Ceylon, GA
(Mac Stone)

BACK COVER: Papscaanee Island
Nature Preserve (Robert Stone)



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FIVE YEARS OF INCLUSIVE CONSERVATION

OSI Fellowship Aims to Change the Face of Conservation



TOP LEFT: Keren Alfred TOP RIGHT: Erik Ndayishimiye BOTTOM LEFT: Vignyaa Ramadhin BOTTOM RIGHT: Dyaami D'Orazio

Long regarded as a movement led by white, male landowners and “aristocratic explorers,” the land conservation and environmental fields have lacked socio-economic, racial, ethnic, and geographic diversity. So, it should come as no surprise that Black, brown, and Indigenous people of color (BBIPOC) continue, even now, to be underrepresented within the fields of conservation and environmental protection.

In an effort to address this shortfall, the board and staff of the Open Space Institute (OSI) came together to develop a plan, and in 2016 launched OSI’s Conservation Diversity Fellowship program.

Designed to immerse recent college graduates in the various areas of conservation, from transactions and land stewardship to advocacy and grant writing, the year-long, paid program is making progress in making the world of conservation and environmental advocacy more welcoming to young BBIPOC graduates.

“OSI is investing in adding new voices to the world of conservation,” says Jessica Watson, director of OSI’s

Conservation Communities work, including the Conservation Diversity Fellowship program. We designed the fellowship to create a more inclusive conservation movement by ensuring that new points of view and lived experiences get a place at the table. But OSI also benefits from the knowledge that the fellows bring with them.”

OSI’s first Conservation Fellow, Dyaami D’Orazio, praises the program for expanding her knowledge of environmental career opportunities. “There are so many more roles for people in conservation than typically advertised. After my fellowship, I knew there was a place for me in the environmental field, and at OSI, that would accommodate my career interests and talents.”

More than just hiring diverse fellows, OSI has also embarked on an internal effort to create a workplace culture where all employees feel welcome and valued. “During my fellowship at OSI, I felt I was able to bring my full, authentic self to work,” says Keren Alfred, OSI’s 2018-2019 Conservation Fellow. “The fellowship prepared me for a career in conservation and confirmed my passion for environmental sustainability.”

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 5)

Making Plans to Combat Flooding

For generations, the Delaware River has been a source of drinking water, fertile farmland, and public enjoyment for residents of New Jersey's Warren County. Yet as the climate changes, the river has increasingly become a cause for worry, as it more frequently inundates local roads, homes, and businesses.

Now, two of the county's townships, Knowlton and Harmony, are turning to the Open Space Institute (OSI) and its partners for a tried-and-true solution: harnessing floodplains and wetlands to store and slow otherwise devastating floodwaters.

OSI through its Delaware River Watershed Protection Fund, capitalized by the William Penn Foundation, recently awarded a "Watershed Catalyst" grant to The Land Conservancy of New Jersey (TLCNJ) to collaborate with the townships to identify flood-prone properties and to inventory lands for flood mitigation.

This data can inform local planning efforts and enhance state funding applications for open space preservation, allow for voluntary buyouts to amplify flood resilience, and guide larger investments in water quality.

"OSI's grants came at a critical time," says Barbara Heskins Davis of TLCNJ. "Giving us the support to develop ideas that may be replicated across Warren County — and someday even throughout the greater Delaware River Basin."



Creating Connections in the Hudson Highlands

Spanning more than 93,000 acres and just an hour north of New York City are the protected lands of the Western Hudson Highlands, offering popular outdoor recreational destinations for local communities and city residents, alike.

Situated in eastern Orange County, the area is replete with lush forests and unparalleled views of the Hudson River. However, it is missing a key element that would turn this fragmented collection of parks and protected land into a more welcoming and cohesive outdoor destination: trail connectivity.

The Open Space Institute (OSI) has already protected almost a third of this majestic and sprawling landscape. And now, working with New York State and other partners, OSI has created the Highlands West Trail Connectivity Plan, which lays the groundwork for a regional trail network linking six state parks, Black Rock Forest, and Storm King Art Center with local town centers and train stations.

With the new plan in hand, OSI quickly completed an acquisition of the 180-acre Leone property to help connect Schunemunk Mountain State Park and Black Rock Forest.

"This area can serve as a model for how connecting protected landscapes enhances communities, fosters healthy lifestyles, protects natural areas, and supports local tourism," said Peter Karis, OSI's vice president for parks and stewardship.



Greg Miller

Conservation Game Changer in South Carolina

Protecting land in one of the nation's fastest growing states is both challenging and rewarding — especially when the outcome sets the stage for future conservation. The Open Space Institute's (OSI) protection of the 3,800-acre Slater property is seen as a monumental victory for local conservation.

Just 45 minutes from Savannah, Georgia and Hilton Head Island, South Carolina — two of the most popular tourist destinations in the Southeast — the Slater property is described as “magical” by Dana Beach, founder of the South Carolina Coastal Conservation League. It is comprised of pinelands interlaced with bottomland forests and cypress and tupelo swamps, and its protection expands opportunities for recreation in an area where public lands are scarce; secures habitat for hundreds of plants and animal species; protects water quality and local fisheries; and stores hundreds of thousands of tons of carbon.

Not only is Slater big in impact and acreage, its \$16 million price tag will make it among the largest conservation investments in state history when it is transferred to the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources. “The protection of Slater is not just a game changer for future ecosystem protection and land use in this region,” says Dr. Chris Marsh, director of South Carolina's Spring Island Trust and The Lowcountry Institute. “It is the game changer.”



Nancy Pierce

FIVE YEARS OF INCLUSIVE CONSERVATION

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3)



TOP: Sydney Williams BOTTOM: Neeyati Johnson

In celebration of the fellowship's fifth year, OSI is expanding the program with the support of Tom Barron and his Merlin Foundation. Barron is funding a second fellowship position for the next three years to help expand the thriving program. “I wanted to support OSI,” says Barron, “because the fellowship is serving as a launching pad for diverse young professionals and helping them make in-roads in the conservation field and beyond.”

With the ultimate goal of changing the face of conservation, the fellowship has helped each fellow find work in the environmental field after their time at OSI.

“OSI and I are invested in the fellows' continued success,” says OSI's Watson, who works closely with the fellows on career placement, mentorship, and networking. “There are a lot of issues around representation and inclusion in the field, and OSI's fellowship is working to uplift a new generation of diverse leaders who not only strengthen OSI as an organization, but the environmental movement more broadly.”

A COUP FOR GEORGIA COASTAL WILDERNESS

(CONTINUED FROM FRONT PAGE)

After a conservation buyer took ownership of 3,000 acres of the Cabin Bluff property, the state of Georgia, with funds from the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF), acquired the remaining 24,000 acres. Today the lands — almost 40 square miles — have become the long-awaited Ceylon WMA.

“So many pieces had to come together for the creation of Ceylon Wildlife Management Area, and the fact that we’re here now on conserved land shows how irreplaceable this landscape is,” says Dr. Maria Whitehead, OSI Southeast Land senior director, standing atop a bluff overlooking the Satilla River. “This is one of the state’s preeminent coastal properties, and now it’s protected forever and open to the people of Georgia.”

As visitors begin to make their way to the Ceylon WMA, they encounter a place that has quietly borne witness to the injustices and vicissitudes of history: the land’s scenic bluffs were once home to the Timucuan Native Americans. The massive longleaf pines were commercially extracted by outsiders, and the area endured intense logging and decimation. Nearby terrain was cleared for rice fields where Black slaves labored.

“It’s beyond gratifying to think that these former plantations can now give back to the public, sequestering greenhouse gases while protecting people and wildlife from sea level rise and flooding,” says Whitehead.

And not a moment too soon. One hundred miles to the north, the city of Savannah is projected to experience more than 30 tidal floods a year by 2030 — a threefold increase compared

with today. Sea level rise will also make today’s nuisance tidal floods much more dangerous and destructive.

Designated as a climate-resilient landscape, much of the Ceylon WMA will continue to provide habitat for wildlife, even as the climate changes. Strewn over the property are the burrows of more than 2,000 at-risk gopher tortoises. It is a formidable number that could sustain other at-risk species that shelter in the burrows, keeping those species as well off federally threatened or endangered lists. Biologists may also release endangered red-cockaded woodpeckers, which excavate tree cavities in old-growth pine stands to create homes for scores of other birds and small mammals.

And as OSI and other conservationists redouble their efforts to protect Southeastern coastal wildlife habitat, Ceylon WMA — nestled between the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge, the Satilla River, salt marshes, and barrier islands — will also be a critical cornerstone in long-term plans for the creation of an interconnected corridor from Savannah down into the Big Bend area of Florida.

Eventually this place, just minutes from Interstate 95, one of the most heavily traveled highways on the East Coast, will become part of a different sort of highway, for migratory birds, black bears, and many more animals.

“The corridor is a lofty goal, but years ago we weren’t sure that this place could be saved,” says Whitehead. “Ceylon and Cabin Bluff will definitely lay the groundwork for more life-changing OSI projects in Georgia, and hopefully continue to raise the bar for conservation that matters most.”



Mac Stone

in conversation

Q & A WITH LINDA COOPER, NEW YORK STATE PARKS



Michael Grandeau

Clarence Fahnestock Memorial State Park has long been at the heart of the Open Space Institute's (OSI) conservation efforts in New York's Hudson Valley. Over the past four decades, OSI has doubled the size of Fahnestock, which today totals more than 14,000 acres and boasts 10 miles of the Appalachian Trail. This vast park, with its proximity to metro New York, is the focus of a suite of OSI projects aimed at improving access to the land, including an overhaul of the park's Canopus Lake Beach Recreation Complex and myriad trail renovations. This past summer, OSI and state officials celebrated the completion of the new Big Woods Trailhead, made possible through the support of Anne Perkins Cabot and the Topfield Foundation. Through it all, one person has witnessed the park's full evolution: Linda Cooper, New York State Park's Taconic Regional Director, whose leadership has been integral to the success of these projects.

What is the significance of this project?

Fahnestock is huge. It's bisected by a state highway and other busy roads and has lacked any official arrival-point and cohesiveness. OSI is helping to create a sense of place for the park. There are two newly installed grand park entry signs, and the new Big Woods trailhead area welcomes and educates visitors while providing easy access to several trails that traverse the northern part of the park. Plus, hikers will no longer have to park along the shoulder of a busy highway.

How does the partnership with OSI impact Fahnestock ?

Improving access for hiking and conserving lands for natural resource protection and park use is a goal both State Parks and OSI want for everyone. With State Parks' constrained budgets, partners like OSI allow us to accomplish far more than we could accomplish on our own. State Parks and OSI both want to make visitors feel comfortable, so they return to the outdoors again and again. Together, we are working to create life-long park enthusiasts and advocates who share our love of the land and pour that love back into our parks.

What's next for Fahnestock?

We are working with OSI on the renovation of the Hubbard Perkins Loop Trail, a 9.5-mile shared use trail starting at Hubbard Lodge. For the past four years, new bridges for the loop have been built thanks to a partnership with West Point cadets, engineering students who have used our parks to learn how to design and build as a team. We also have a few habitat projects in the works, including one to restore New England cottontail habitat. And working with OSI, we are one parcel away from physically connecting Fahnestock and the Hudson Highland State Park Preserve — which would add another 10,000 acres to connected trailways. It's a very special partnership indeed. The possibilities for making an impact seem endless.



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SHOWCASING RETURN OF PAPSCANEE ISLAND TO STOCKBRIDGE-MUNSEE COMMUNITY

New signage has been installed at the Papscanee Island Nature Preserve, located on the shore of the Hudson River, just 10 minutes from downtown Albany. The signage represents new ownership of the property following the Open Space Institute's (OSI) return of the land to the Stockbridge-Munsee Community (SMC) of the Mohican Nation – nearly 400 years after their ancestors were removed from their homelands. OSI originally protected the 156-acre Papscanee Island from development in the 1990s. Since then the land has been, and will continue to be, a quiet, publicly accessible preserve. Pictured below are Bonney Hartley from the SMC (right) and OSI's Charlie Burgess (left).

