

Feb. 19, 2001

Land Trusts Benefit Long Term Environmental Goals

The nation's private, nonprofit land trusts have been tremendously successful at land protection. More than 4.7 million acres have protected by local and regional trusts, which have protected 1.4 million acres by conservation easements alone, according to the Land Trust Alliance (LTA). This is fourfold increase since 1988 when only 290,000 acres were protected under these legal agreements.

Several major alliances are active in the western region and are cooperating in the achievement of common goals. These include the Land Trust Alliance, the Nature Conservatory and the American Farmland Trust. Currently they are working together on projects to locate private rangeland in the 7 state regions in the Rocky Mountains.

One of the researchers hired by the Nature conservatory is Dr. James Ferriday who lives in Fruita, Colorado and formerly taught at Mesa State College. His job is developing up-to-date computer methods using satellite data and map information to identify these parcels of land. Other methods they will use is the population data and population change to assess diverse pressure on the land. These cutting edge technological methods will provide the new information they need to assess the value of the land in relation to the environment around the parcels.

Other than tax advantages to the current landowners, what do they see as the long run advantage to having these easements given to so many large ranch developments? Dr. Ferriday's assessment is that this is essentially preservation for the future. With the increasing pressures of population in and around our cities and towns, these ranch lands maintained in their present form will be critical to the preservation of the ecosystem and the species.

One of the landowners in the area concerned with the increasing pressure on the environment is pioneer rancher Norm Ralston whose property lies between Genesee and the Ridge Development in Evergreen. He recalls that as a boy in the area he had never seen an elk until he went to one of the large ranches located further west. Later he told his father about his first sighting of an elk, today he said, 75 elk were on his property coexisting with his cattle. He has been approached by many environmental groups asking to put his property into various kinds of land trusts such as linking with the Beaver Brook trail and providing a buffer zone between mountain developments. His is one of the valuable properties waiting to be developed in the area.

What he and others like him will do with their land will greatly affect the environment. Picture an urban sprawl between Genesee and Evergreen, condo's town homes, 2-5 acre estates and mountain lion and elk subsisting on dogs, cats and tulips. The millions of acres of federal land off limits to development and basically off limits to the majority of people, created by Clinton's last strokes, will not have the impact that lands

granted conservation easements as part of land trusts will have on the quality of life in our mountain environment.

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