

# Conservancies and Land Trusts Help Keep Pennsylvania Fishing and Boating

by Linda Steiner

photos by Linda and Bob Steiner



In their quiet ways, conservancies and land trusts have long been protecting and expanding public access to Pennsylvania's fishing and boating waters. They have also been preserving and enhancing the quality of streams, lakes and wetlands. Pennsylvania anglers and boaters have a lot to thank them for, and it's time these low-key organizations step into the spotlight.

The preservation of open space, rare species and habitats, and other important features of the landscape is the work that is normally associated with a conservancy or land trust. In the process, many waterways, from headwater streams and swamps to riparian borders of major rivers, have been protected by design or by simple inclusion in a larger parcel. Conservancies can be, but are not necessarily, land trusts. Sometimes a land trust is a division of a conservancy, which may have a wider mission than land preservation.

## How conservancies and land trusts function

Conservancies and land trusts protect land in its natural state from abuse and misuse by outright purchase, by receiving title to the property as a gift, or by acquiring easements. Easements are property rights that a landowner can transfer, by donation or sale, to another owner. Conservancies and land trusts typically acquire conservation or recreation easements.

Some conservancies retain a portion, if not all, of the land and waters they acquire. Others make it a practice to give or sell their acquisitions to national or state forestry, parks and wildlife departments that will continue the property's protection or public recreational use. In Pennsylvania, these entities are primarily the Game Commission, Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, and, to a lesser extent, the Fish & Boat Commission.

Conservancies and land trusts often act as purchase facilitators. They are able to provide funds immediately to obtain important lands and waters that government agencies want to acquire, but find difficult by the time constraints of the sale window. Often the funds the land trust or conservancy expends are reimbursed by the government agency when it takes possession. In other cases, the groups absorb the cost or pay the difference between the amount the government may be allowed to spend by law and the property's actual cost.

To do their work, most conservancies and land trusts become nonprofit IRS 501(c)3 organizations. Property owners who donate land to nonprofit land trusts and conservancies can gain an income tax benefit. If they decide instead to sell

*At right, Oil Creek, Oil Creek State Park, Venango County. This state park was a Western Pennsylvania Conservancy project.*



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the land to such a group, landowners can deduct from their taxes the difference between the appraised value of the land and the lower selling price. Furthermore, when dealing with a nonprofit land trust or conservancy, landowners do not pay realty transfer taxes. In Pennsylvania, neither does the land trust or conservancy when transferring property to the state—a savings all around.

### **Pennsylvania Land Trust Association**

According to the Pennsylvania Land Trust Association, an umbrella organization that supports the goals of land trusts and conservancies, nearly 100 conservation groups operate in the state. Some are small groups concentrating locally with a narrow mission. They range from the Allegheny Land Trust in the southwest and the Conneaut Lake-French Creek Conservancy in the northwest, to the Pocono Heritage Land Trust in the northeast and the Berks County Conservancy in the southeast. The Pennsylvania Land Trust Association has a list of organizations on its web site, [www.conserveland.org](http://www.conserveland.org), under “Find a Land Trust,” and those interested can locate a group by name or county working in their area.

Other conservancies and land trusts are active broadly in the state. The “Big 4” in Pennsylvania are the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy, the Wildlands Conservancy (Wildlands Preservation Fund), The Nature Conservancy (Pennsylvania Chapter), and The Conservation Fund (Pennsylvania Office).

### **Western Pennsylvania Conservancy**

Western Pennsylvania Conservancy, based in Pittsburgh, was founded in 1932. It has protected more than 204,000 acres of lands and waters in the state, transferring most to the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania to become state parks, state forests and game lands.

Western Pennsylvania Conservancy operates, as its name implies, mostly in the western half of the state. Today, anglers and boaters enjoy the Youghiogheny River at Ohiopyle State Park, Oil Creek in the state park of that name, Hemlock and Porcupine creeks in Venango County (Crawford Reserve), Lake Pleasant in Erie County, Slippery Rock Creek at McConnell’s Mill State Park, Lake Arthur in Moraine State Park, Laurel Run in Laurel Ridge State Park, Cherry Run in State Game Lands 295 in Centre and Clinton counties, and more, thanks to the work of the Conservancy.

In the northern portion of the Allegheny River, the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy has protected scenic shoreline and islands, transferring ownership of most to the Allegheny National Forest. In Venango County it worked with the Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission to provide boaters with Fisherman’s Cove Access, and it has purchased additional ac-

cesses on other waterways. The Conservancy is active in protecting land along the Clarion River and on Chestnut and Laurel ridges in the southwest region. Late last year it acquired the Coho Tract in Erie County, 540 acres bordering Lake Erie, which will go to the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources to become a new state park.

Through local programs, the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy is working to preserve the unusual ecology and exceptional fishery in the northwest’s French Creek. The Conservancy also purchased more than 9,000 acres to consolidate the forest boundaries of Sproul State Forest and safeguard the watersheds of two streams. It has also acquired exceptional wetlands, bogs and fens to protect the homes of rare and endangered species.

### **Wildlands Conservancy and Wildlands Preservation Fund**

Based in Emmaus, the Wildlands Conservancy is the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy’s eastern counterpart. The Wildlands Preservation Fund is the land trust arm of the Conservancy, founded in 1984. Most of its project properties are ultimately transferred to the Pennsylvania Game Commission. Some are notable for their water resources and their opportunities for anglers and boaters. For example, in eastern Luzerne County, the Wildlands Preservation Fund acquired more than two miles of the Lehigh River, the Creveling Estate, with most becoming state game lands. It also protected the Lehigh Marsh, the headwaters of the same river, near Tobyhanna.

A 1,500-acre purchase by the Wildlands Conservancy, the Atlas Powder property, contains nearly two miles of the Little Schuylkill River, a coldwater stream in Schuylkill County. The conservancy partnered with the Fish & Boat Commission in the Five Locks project in Berks County, securing about one mile of Schuylkill River frontage. It also obtained a 1,100-acre addition to the Pennsylvania Game Commission’s Middle Creek Wildlife Management Area, which includes several miles of Segloch Run. And it worked in Pike County to protect the Cheecho Wild Acres, which supply clean water to Little Bushkill Creek. In all, the Wildlands Conservancy is responsible for getting nearly 40,000 acres into protective public ownership.

### **The Nature Conservancy**

The Nature Conservancy is a national organization with a land trust component, the Land Preservation Fund. Its Pennsylvania chapter is based in Conshohocken, with additional offices in the Poconos and the Harrisburg area. The Nature Conservancy was incorporated in 1951, with a plan for a system of sanctuaries to protect rare species and threatened habitats.



**Pennsylvania Land Trust Association**

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Harrisburg, PA 17101  
(717) 230-8560  
[www.conserveland.org](http://www.conserveland.org)

**Western Pennsylvania Conservancy**

209 Fourth Avenue  
Pittsburgh, PA 15222  
(412) 288-2777  
[www.paconserve.org](http://www.paconserve.org)

**Wildlands Conservancy  
and Wildlands Preservation Fund**

3701 Orchid Place  
Emmaus, PA 18049  
(610) 965-4397  
[www.wildlandspa.org](http://www.wildlandspa.org)

**The Nature Conservancy**

15 East Ridge Pike, Suite 500  
Conshohocken, PA 19428  
(610) 834-1323 or 1(800)-75-NATURE  
<http://nature.org>

**The Conservation Fund, Pennsylvania Office**

105 North Front Street, Suite 400  
Harrisburg, PA 17101  
(717) 230-8166  
[www.conservationfund.org](http://www.conservationfund.org)

Most lands managed by The Nature Conservancy are open to the public for educational and recreational purposes. It has protected by purchase or easement more than 9 million acres in North America, including more than 46,000 acres in Pennsylvania. In addition to its reserves, the Nature Conservancy also acquires lands that are transferred to public entities.

One of its Pennsylvania fishing-related acquisitions is the West Branch Wilderness, 3,000 acres in Clinton County, which contains Ritchie and Johnson runs. Both streams are Exceptional Value waters, and Ritchie Run is a Class A Trout Water. Now a reserve of The Nature Conservancy, the parcel connected neighboring Sproul State Forest and Bucktail Natural Area.

Other projects of The Nature Conservancy in Pennsylvania include the Mt. Bethel Fen Complex, Thomas Darling Preserve at Two Mile Run, Bristol Marsh, Mountain Run Ponds, and work on the French Creek Watershed.



## The Conservation Fund

Active nationwide since 1985, The Conservation Fund has its Pennsylvania presence based in Harrisburg, but the assistance it provides in protecting lands and waters resonates throughout the state. The Fund helps local, state and federal agencies and nonprofit organizations acquire property from willing sellers to protect open space, wildlife habitat, public recreation areas, river corridors and historic places. It has helped conserve more than 3.6 million acres across the United States.

In Pennsylvania in late 2003, The Conservation Fund assisted in acquiring more than 7,500 acres, the Theta Lands, for Luzerne County and the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources. The Watres property in the tract will be added to Lackawanna State Forest. Part of the property going to Luzerne County includes Crystal Lake.

The Conservation Fund was involved in adding 9,000 acres, Pennsylvania Suburban Water Company lands in Northumberland and Columbia counties, to Wyoming State Forest. The property contains several reservoirs and Roaring Creek. The Fund also worked with the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources to acquire an 11,900-acre inholding in Sproul State Forest, the Litke Tract, in Centre and Clinton counties, including two Exceptional-Value and two High-Quality streams. It helped the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy purchase the Coho Tract along Lake Erie, an example of how it partners to accomplish land protection work.

## The Fish & Boat Commission's role

The Fish & Boat Commission has worked directly with some conservancies and land trusts on specific projects, but the Commission's role, says John Arway, chief of the Environmental Services Division, is more to help identify areas that need to be protected. The Commission also gives technical assistance and advice in the transactions.

"The Fish & Boat Commission also becomes involved in the deals the conservancies broker with the Game Commission and Department of Conservation and Natural Resources," says Arway. "We're glad to get these parcels into public ownership, whoever is the owner. We're longstanding and strong supporters of conservancies."

Bernard Kiesnoski, chief of the Commission's Real Estate Division, says the Fish & Boat Commission does not buy, nor does it currently have the resources to buy, much land. There have been some notable exceptions, such as its recently obtaining shoreline for angling access along Walnut Creek in Erie County at the Manchester Hole, and the project with the Wildlands Conservancy on the Schuylkill River. Besides its boat launches at waterways across the state, the Commission owns some lakes in their entirety, as well as portions of streams, such as those along Falling Spring Branch, Franklin County, and Spring Creek, Centre County.

Furthermore, through its disbursement of State Wildlife Grants, the Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission and its sister agency, the Pennsylvania Game Commission, help to forward the efforts of conservancies to protect and restore fish and wildlife species of concern. These cost-share grants are made possible through the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service's Federal Aid Program.

Grants made to The Nature Conservancy include those to monitor reptile populations in southeast Pennsylvania and to perform a statewide assessment and inventory of timber rattlesnake sites. Some of the grants awarded to the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy will fund projects designed to determine the Pennsylvania range and distribution of the Eastern massasauga rattlesnake and continue research on freshwater mussels and associated fishes in French Creek. The Coldwater Heritage Partnership, a cooperative effort of the Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission, the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, Pennsylvania Trout and the Western Pennsylvania Watershed Program, provides grants to conservancies and other groups doing work related to the state's coldwater resources and their fisheries.

In a day when access to waterways across private lands is becoming increasingly difficult, anglers and boaters can be grateful for the continuing work of conservancies and land trusts to guarantee that places where we can enjoy our outdoor sports will always be there. ☐

