

GROWTH OF A LAND TRUST

NICHES Land Trust grew out of a meeting of three people July 29, 1994 in the Sociology Conference Room at Purdue University. Harry Potter, Persis Newman, and Susan Ulrich met to look into what a land trust was, what it would take to start one, and decide whether such an organization would be useful in west-central Indiana.

The roots of the meeting started several years earlier when George Parker, a professor in the Purdue Forestry Department, asked Susan Ulrich if the local Audubon Chapter had ever thought of becoming a land trust. They hadn't, but a year or so later in 1993, Fred Hoffman, the attorney for Gerda Kohnke and her son Peter, asked the Audubon Society to accept a conservation easement on the Kohnkes' Little Pine property. The family loved the property and wanted to protect it. The Audubon Society wasn't set up to handle easements—a function usually served by a land trust—but supported the idea and agreed to accept the easement since there wasn't any other group available. Then in 1994, Wal-Mart announced it would be building a store adjacent to the recently proposed Celery Bog Wetland Park. This park had stirred a lot of positive interest in West Lafayette, and the proximity of a Wal-Mart was greeted with dismay and led to a number of community meetings.

It was obvious at those meetings that there were people and landowners who wanted to permanently protect open space, but who had no way to do so or group to work through. Susan Ulrich asked the question George Parker had asked her earlier: had anyone thought about starting a land trust? Harry and Persis immediately volunteered to form a committee to look into what land trusts did, how to start one, and judge whether or not such an organization would be useful in the community: thus the July 1994 meeting. After that first get together, the three expanded the committee by inviting others with an interest in land protection to join them at additional meetings that included representatives from other land trusts in Indiana. Ed Schools of Sycamore Land Trust was one individual whose expertise proved useful, as Sycamore Land Trust had started only 5 years earlier. Bud Jersild of Central Indiana Land Trust, another young land trust, also came to talk to the group as did Ted Heemstra and his wife who were involved with ACRES. ACRES was particularly inspiring, as they were an older (30-years) group. This encouraged the local group by giving them a chance to see what a local land trust could become.

The big step forward in what developed into NICHES came when the Sycamore Audubon Society used their March 1995 Conservation Program to promote the idea of starting a land trust. Fred Wooley from ACRES came and talked about what Acres was and did. The meeting was publicized and a sign-up sheet was passed around for those interested in working to form a local group. Mike Dana, NICHES first VP, Rod Evans, the first treasurer, Susan Horn from Monticello, Don Bickel from Crawfordsville, Greg Shaner, Brian Tunis, and many others signed on.

Meetings were held to write bylaws. The name “NICHES” came from Harry Potter and seemed appropriate since the group hoped to save a niche here and a niche there to preserve some of the wonderful biodiversity of this area. Mike Dana was

friendly with Bob Bauman, a local attorney, through their children's softball games. Bob volunteered to handle incorporation pro bono and his firm helped with the 501(c) 3 filing. NICHES needed \$450 to cover the fee charged by the IRS. Sycamore Audubon Society stepped up and raised the money at a bake sale. Thanks to the IRS's surprisingly quick approval, NICHES was up and running as a not-for-profit by October 1995. The official come-out and announcement of NICHES existence was delayed until Earth Day in 1996.

What has happened since then has been incredibly rewarding. Landowners looking for options to protect their land have donated or willed properties to NICHES. People wanting to protect habitat, but who had no way to work towards this goal previously, joined and contributed funds and volunteer time. Jim Klatch was the first person to join NICHES giving a donation in memory of his parents. He still has membership #1. By the end of 1996 NICHES had 56 members along with two donated properties totaling 24 acres. The first was the Weaver Islands donated by the Dix Weaver family and the second a life estate on 4 acres donated by Bill Martin. Some of NICHES early members have moved away, some have died, but 37 of the original 56 individuals are still members. They've been joined by over 400 additional individuals and groups, and those 24 initial acres are a small fraction of the three square miles NICHES currently protects.

NICHES couldn't have protected what it has without the support of many wonderful people and generous partners over the past years. The Roy Whistler Foundation has been incredible, partnering with NICHES on the acquisition of nine separate parcels; other partners include the Indiana Heritage Trust, the McAllister Foundation, several community foundations, The Nature Conservancy, Tipmont REMC, IPALCO Golden Eagle, and Nucor Steel, along with a number of non-profits such as Ducks Unlimited, Pheasants Forever, the Indiana Native Plant & Wildflower Society, Friends of Sugar Creek, and the Wild Turkey Federation. The Sycamore Audubon Society continues to support NICHES and contributed \$1500 to the success of the recent 10th Anniversary Campaign.

Donors of land include: Dix Weaver; Bill Martin; the City of Crawfordsville, Al & Gladys Wright, Dick & Phyllis Boehning, Ed Chosnek, Dave & Pamela Justice, Courtney Justice, and Gerda Kohnke. There are equally generous people leaving land to NICHES in their wills. Nearly 1,000 acres are known to be willed to NICHES. Other land owners have sold land to NICHES at bargain prices. This includes the Weiler & Leopold families, the Etchison family, the Moyer family, the Hunleys, and the Sizemores.

NICHES' future looks bright. As the number of properties and complexity increased it was clear the board needed to institutionalize the organization and move from all-volunteer to hiring staff. A three-year \$300,000 10th Anniversary Campaign enabled NICHES to hire its first staff person, Gus Nyberg, as Executive Director in 2007. Through the use of USDA and USF&W grants, NICHES has managed to fund several stewards who are improving the natural quality of NICHES properties.

NICHES Endowment Foundation is another positive step. The Foundation's goal is to build the financial permanence NICHES needs to protect land forever. As NICHES property responsibilities grow, the need for secure funding becomes more critical.