

## Land trusts raise hopes for future preservation

**PRESERVATION: Patches of private land are set aside, safe from development.**

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STERLING -- Times were simpler for Alaska's nature lovers decades ago.

If, like Calvin and Martha Jane Fair in 1962, you wanted a job in town but a life fed by moose and salmon from your land, you might have homesteaded on the Kenai River. Stake a claim to 160 acres, build a home and plant a few oats and some hay, and a black spruce forest along one of the world's great salmon streams was yours. The grizzly bears -- still spotted fishing on the Fair property this month -- were a bonus.

"It was just a village when we moved here," said Calvin Fair, who was the Kenai Peninsula's only dentist for a time.

Now the housing subdivisions have closed in, the river is crowded and Fair longs for the days when he could walk down to it and fight king salmon all day without seeing anyone.

"We came to an area hoping it would regress rather than progress," he said. Since it hasn't, the Fairs are among a new breed of Alaska pioneers who are protecting their wildlands through conservation easements.

Land preservationists say the century-old conservation land trust movement is gaining ground even in Alaska, where most land is public and there are only 1.1 people per square mile -- by far the nation's lowest density. Much of the state's population growth and private development has happened in lush valleys, on beaches and near salmon waterways.

Landowners who participate in creating trusts often get property tax breaks when assessors determine their land no longer carries the same development potential. Federal law also provides an income tax deduction spread over several years.

The Kachemak Heritage Land Trust -- Alaska's oldest regional trust at 17 years -- opened an exhibit at Homer's Pratt Museum this month to honor a dozen Kenai Peninsula landowners who have granted conservation easements that protect the land eternally while keeping it in private hands. The Fairs did that with 46 riverfront acres on their homestead.



Calvin and Martha Jane Fair stand in their Sterling-area backyard, which overlooks a 46-acre swath of Kenai River riparian land that they have preserved through the Kachemak Heritage Land Trust. Relatively new to the state, local land trusts are gaining a foothold and have preserved hundreds of acres of private land. (Photo by BRANDON LOOMIS / Anchorage Daily News)



Homer resident Helen Watson reads about her friend Beryl Myhill's conservation easement during an opening reception for a Kachemak Heritage Land Trust exhibit at Homer's Pratt Museum last week. "There's always a mother moose who comes and has babies right outside the kitchen window," Watson said. (Photo by BRANDON LOOMIS)

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Newer trusts operate in Anchorage, Dillingham, Fairbanks and Juneau. They work with members, donors, national organizations and grants to manage no- or low-development easements granted by willing landowners. They also accept or buy land outright, though managing those lands can be more expensive.

## LOCKS ON LAND

Some Alaskans who believe private land is in too-short supply occasionally confront the trusts about locking up land, said Barbara Seaman, executive director of the Homer-based trust.

"I relish those kinds of conversations," she said, because doubters usually will concede that free-market solutions are necessary to preserve a community's most important river or trail access points. "If the purpose is for public benefit, to me it doesn't seem like locking it up."

The concept does worry Kenai Peninsula Borough Assemblywoman Grace Merkes, though she said it may be appropriate in limited applications. After federal, state and Native corporations took their picks, only about 2 percent of the state was left, said Merkes, a Sterling resident and property rights advocate.

"There really isn't a lot of private land available," Merkes said. "But I have to say that the private land that is available is pretty densely populated in certain areas. Maybe (preserving) a homestead here and there wouldn't hurt, but I wouldn't like to see a lot of it."

The Fairs wish more homesteaders had joined the cause when the Peninsula had 10,000 residents instead of 50,000. Down their dirt road off the Sterling Highway, the "view lots" signs proliferate, advertising an ever-tightening circle of modern ranch homes. The neighborhood is not quite suburban, but neither is it wild anymore.

"Everyone wants their little spot," Martha Jane Fair said.

Of course, the Fairs, now in their 70s, were a wave of modernity when they arrived from Indiana after Calvin had served two years as an Army dentist in Whittier. They were among the area's later homesteaders, and they set up a trailer, not a shack, while their home was built. They had electricity. Neighbors used their well, the first on the road. "We were looked on as too modern by some people," Martha Jane said.

"You'd never even consider protecting the river, because there wasn't anybody but a few neighbors using it," Calvin said.

## IMPAIRED WATERWAY

Now the river is on the brink of being classified "impaired" by the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation. That means it's so polluted from outboard motor fuel on some days of the July king salmon season that the federal Clean Water Act requires remedial action.

"All these things are reasons you build on when it comes time to do something to protect the river," Calvin said.

**Alaska's nonprofit conservation land trusts**

**Great Land Trust, Anchorage**  
 ■ **Founded:** 1995  
 ■ **Mission:** Work with willing landowners and partners to conserve Southcentral Alaska's lands and waterways, in an area covering 67,420 square miles from Denali to Anchorage to Cordova.  
 ■ **Emphases:** Public access, farmland, wetlands and open spaces near the backyard.  
 ■ **Easements and acquisitions so far:** 384 acres, including 139 within 10 miles of downtown Anchorage.  
 ■ **Web:** [www.greatlandtrust.org](http://www.greatlandtrust.org)

**Interior Alaska Land Trust, Fairbanks**  
 ■ **Founded:** 1995  
 ■ **Mission:** Work with Interior landowners to safeguard the character of the land and the natural resources of the community.  
 ■ **Emphases:** Recreation access on private lands interspersed with Fairbanks neighborhoods, and wetlands on the Chena Flats.  
 ■ **Easements and acquisitions so far:** 200 acres, mostly in and around Fairbanks.  
 ■ **Web:** [www.gti.alaska.net/~indtrust/](http://www.gti.alaska.net/~indtrust/)

**Kachemak Heritage Land Trust, Homer**  
 ■ **Founded:** 1989  
 ■ **Mission:** Work with willing landowners to preserve natural, recreational and cultural land values on the Kenai Peninsula.  
 ■ **Emphases:** Prime fish and wildlife habitat, recreation access, historic sites and a park for the Homer Town Square project.  
 ■ **Easements and acquisitions so far:** 1,800 acres, at first clustered around Homer but now spreading around the Peninsula.  
 ■ **Web:** [www.kachemaklandtrust.org](http://www.kachemaklandtrust.org)

**Nushagak-Mitchina Wood-Tietchik Land Trust, Dillingham**  
 ■ **Founded:** 2000  
 ■ **Mission:** Protect salmon and wildlife habitat of the Nushagak Bay watershed in the Bristol Bay region, including Wood/Tietchik State Park and Toggak National Wildlife Refuge.  
 ■ **Emphases:** Holdings that otherwise could be developed in popular fishing areas.  
 ■ **Easements and acquisitions so far:** 270 acres  
 ■ **Web:** [www.nmwlandtrust.org](http://www.nmwlandtrust.org)

**Southeast Alaska Land Trust, Juneau**  
 ■ **Founded:** 1996  
 ■ **Mission:** Provide landowners a method for furthering their desires to manage their land for its conservation values in perpetuity.  
 ■ **Emphases:** Natural areas and places with community values.  
 ■ **Easements and acquisitions so far:** 2,800 acres, mostly in coastal areas around Juneau, Kake and Excursion Inlet, near Glacier Bay National Park.  
 ■ **Web:** <http://www.groupdesigns.com/sealtrustweb/>

Note: Acreage totals do not include acquisitions for which the trusts assisted The Nature Conservancy or The Conservation Fund, which have Alaska holdings in the tens of thousands of acres.

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Threats to beloved sites have changed attitudes statewide, according to The Nature Conservancy, a nationwide group that has fostered the growth of local trusts here.

This year the group commissioned a poll in which 68 percent of Alaska respondents said they strongly or somewhat supported voluntary land conservation agreements. A quarter of respondents opposed the idea.

The Nature Conservancy has partnered with the local trusts on some projects, such as protecting land at the mouth of the Anchor River, a salmon and steelhead stream north of Homer.

"These land trusts don't seem to get traction until people look around and say there's a lot of stuff we value here that is getting nibbled away," said Randy Hagenstein, conservation director for The Nature Conservancy's Alaska chapter.

## **CHUGACH ACCESS**

That nibbling, at Matanuska-Susitna Borough farmland and hemmed-in trail heads, has propelled the Great Land Trust in Anchorage since 1995. Last week it announced to members a new program aimed at maintaining public access across private lands near Chugach State Park trail heads.

"People are realizing more and more how important open space is for our health, our well-being, our livelihood," executive director Lisa Eyler said. "We in Alaska take it for granted. We have so much (land), it seems like, so we don't see the importance of preserving a park within a block of where we live."

The new initiative in partnership with The Conservation Fund, "Pathways to the Chugach: Connecting to our Park," started with a purchase of 160 acres at the Rabbit Valley entrance to the park. Funding came from the state, the Rasmuson Foundation, Conoco Phillips, Royal Caribbean and private donors.

The Southeast Alaska Land Trust in Juneau started in 1996. Its latest target, Coast Guard Beach in Ketchikan, has been a secluded public gathering place and late-night barbecue ground for generations, and few even knew that the state Mental Health Trust owned it and might subdivide it.

"Places like that define community character," executive director Diane Mayer said.

It took two years for the Fairs to complete the legal work on their conservation easement, and it wasn't free. They paid a fee that the Kachemak trust uses to inspect the land each year and make sure the terms are enforced. The land remains a forest, and is open to fishing.

In return, the property may be taxed at a lower rate when it passes to the Fairs' children.

Joking that he had signed away his children's inheritance, Calvin said he couldn't have stood to think that the entire north bank of the Kenai might someday be developed.

"You look up and down the river -- everywhere you look, it's developed," he said. "Right out to the river. I didn't want to see that happen. I didn't want to see it."

The Fairs said many Sterling residents don't understand their decision, but they will.

"People won't appreciate this for 50 years," Martha Jane said.

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