



By Jon Christensen

## Is Conservation Ready for the Light of Day?

Conservation still has a clubby smell. Sometimes there's a whiff of wool and leather, gunpowder and fly-fishing rods, musty old maps, and remote destinations. Sometimes it's the scent of wetlands, wet corduroy, and binoculars. Sometimes it's the smell of no smell, the insider baseball of scientific publications, computer models, meetings in hotel conference rooms. And sometimes it's the smell of money. But conservation can no longer afford to be an insider's game.

If there is any doubt, consider the *Washington Post's* ongoing investigative reporting on The Nature Conservancy. The reporters, Joe Stephens and David Ottaway, dug their teeth into the Conservancy and are not letting go. They have followed the story doggedly. The Conservancy has been shaken badly. The Senate Finance Committee has opened an investigation, the IRS has moved auditors into the conservancy's headquarters, and the Conservancy's board has appointed an outside committee to review its governance.

This has left a lot of conservationists wondering, What next? Would the *Post* stop at the Conservancy? Or would the paper start investigating other conservation organizations? When the *Post* reporters showed up at the Land Trust Alliance's annual meeting in Sacramento in the fall of 2003, conservationists had their answer. And insiders waited anxiously for the result.

It came in late December: a wide-ranging and blistering critique of conservation easements. How on earth could developers get away with writing off twice the value of their property as a conservation easement donation? That's

a neat trick. No wonder developers have been all over conservation easements like flies on, well, a sweet deal.

Overall, the *Post's* article did not reveal anything that people inside the land trust movement haven't known and haven't been talking about for some time. The surprise is how shocking it all looks when it's brought out into the light of public scrutiny. That is something conservationists are going to have to learn to live with. Scrutiny is one of the surest signs that conservation has become a mainstream player.

The survival of conservation easements as a tool for protecting habitat on private lands will depend on the ability of land trusts to sort out the conflicts, clean house, and articulate the public interest in helping landowners, some of them filthy rich, to preserve their land—and their wealth. From the looks of the *Post* article, they're not off to a good start. But that's not a fair standard. Investigative journalism is constructed to make a moral point about wrongdoing. It is not constructed to give a nuanced and proportionally balanced picture of a complicated reality.

That picture will be much harder to put together. It will have to be done by land trusts and conservation organizations throwing open the doors and windows of their cozy clubs and letting in the light of public scrutiny. That, of course, is much easier said than done. It will involve admitting mistakes. And in a culture where money chases success, or at least success stories, failure is simply not an option, even though the insiders know it happens all the time. ☛

**The Uneasy Chair** is named in honor of Bernard DeVoto, who, from 1935 to 1955, wrote "The Editor's Easy Chair" column for *Harper's* magazine—a perch from which he often sallied forth in defense of conservation. Wallace Stegner's biography of DeVoto was more aptly titled *The Uneasy Chair* (Doubleday, 1974), from which this column takes its name and its challenge.