

Land purchase protects Bad River watershed

Issue: Corporate land divestment advances forest fragmentation

Ninety percent of corporate owned lands in Wisconsin, much of them forested, have been sold at least once since 1994. While there is not accurate data on how many acres of forest have been further subdivided and developed, when land is sold, it is frequently subdivided and sold to multiple owners. These parcels are often developed in some way, with roads, buildings, transmission and telephone lines, etc. which results in a fragmented forest that is less able to serve the functions of wildlife habitat, watershed protection and sustained supply of forest products.

Subdivision and development was the likely future of a 1043 acre Ashland County property in the headwaters of the Bad River, during the late 1990s. The parcel, owned by a large paper company, was for sale, and slated to be intensively managed for timber harvesting, clear-cuts, and a developed shoreline. Many of the adjacent lands are in public ownership and beyond them is the Chequamegon National Forest. The wetlands surrounding the lake provide important nesting and migratory stopover habitat for mallards, blue-winged teals, common loons, and neotropical migrants.

This parcel is especially important because Caroline Lake forms the headwaters of the Bad River, which supports the 16,000 acre Kakagon/Bad River Sloughs, called Wisconsin's Everglades. The sloughs, which are wetlands surrounding the mouth of a river or stream, are the largest fully functioning estuary remaining in the upper Great Lakes and contain wild rice, grasses, sedges, trees, streams, and open water. The watershed is key to protecting the sloughs since all activities that occur within the watershed may eventually impact the sloughs as well.

Ashland County is a rural county. Forests cover 82% of the county. 58% of its forested lands are privately owned.



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Approach: The Nature Conservancy purchases land, enrolls in MFL

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) learned that the Caroline Lake parcel was for sale and being considered by a developer; at this time they had already been working on downstream portions of the Bad River with the Bad River Indian Reservation to maintain water quality.

TNC wanted to prevent forest fragmentation that could damage the Bad River watershed. They could have offered to purchase a conservation easement, but the landowner wanted to sell the parcel outright. There were no local land division regulations preventing a developer from purchasing the parcel and subdividing it, so TNC decided to try to purchase the parcel with the help of matching funds.

They applied for and received a Knowles-Nelson State Stewardship grant which helped them purchase the land. They enrolled the land in the [Managed Forest Law](#) (MFL) and developed a management plan to meet MFL and [Forest Stewardship Council](#) standards.

Local people were skeptical about TNC buying the land; they



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worried that any timber harvesting would be halted and that the land would be closed to public access. This skepticism was eased when local residents realized that TNC would continue to keep this land open to the public. TNC realizes the need to maintain biological, historical, and cultural components of the landscape. Purchasing the

Caroline Lake parcel would ensure public access, protect water quality, and keep it from being subdivided and developed.

Outright purchase is one forest conservation option

Name of Property	Property description	Forest Protection Tool used	Organization or Land Trust	Timber management plan?	Payment arrangements
Caroline Lake	1043 acres, three miles of shoreline on Caroline Lake and Twin Lakes East and West	Acquisition, State Stewardship Fund and Managed Forest Law	The Nature Conservancy	Yes. Enrolled in MFL	½ paid by State Stewardship Fund.

Reflections on outright purchase

Weaknesses

It would be difficult for most small conservation organizations to obtain the financial resources needed for matching funds to purchase a property as substantial as the Caroline Lake property. In addition, many smaller conservation organizations do not have the staff resources necessary to write and implement a forest management plan.

Strengths

While this case is somewhat unique, because The Nature Conservancy had the ability to raise the capital necessary to purchase the parcel, it illustrates the advantages of an outright purchase.

TNC owns and manages the parcel, which will likely ease future stewardship costs. If this property were owned by another party and TNC utilized a conservation easement to protect this tract, future costs could be significantly greater. The responsibility to monitor the compliance of Conservation Easements in perpetuity can be a large financial burden for some organizations.

The Caroline Lake property is enrolled in the MFL program. This demonstrates to local people that TNC is not opposed to cutting timber. TNC follows a management plan written to ensure the sustainable return of forest products and the maximum protection of water resources and forest diversity.

Support was gained when the local residents learned that TNC would be managing the property as an open preserve and that TNC would continue to pay taxes under the Managed Forest Law. TNC's MFL management plan could be used to as a model for landowners participating in the MFL program.

Caroline Lake now serves as an educational and research location. It is one of several sites being used by Northland College to study the effect that deer and hare browsing have on the regeneration of conifer trees. Northland College is also monitoring the understory vegetation of northern hardwood forests, including those at Caroline Lake (PlantWatch Program).

Future

Outright purchases, like Caroline Lake, are made possible in Wisconsin because of the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program. The Stewardship program matches up to one half of land protection project cost. However, if small organizations pooled their resources,



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or if the sellers sold for less than Fair Market Value (Bargain Sale), the burden of fund raising for the remaining cost would be lessened. Continued support of the State Stewardship program is critical to the future of land protection by land trust, both large and small.

Although outright purchase requires significant financial resources up front, it decreases monitoring and enforcement concerns and is an effective tool for conserving forested land in perpetuity.

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For more information

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