

Squaxin Island Tribe: Conservation Success in Skookum Valley

The conservation of several large properties in Skookum Valley by the Squaxin Island Tribe is a local conservation story worth celebrating! The Tribe and Capitol Land Trust have partnered for many years to support our common goal of conserving land for generations to come. Sharing data and expertise—and making connections with landowners and funders—all help us work towards maintaining the local natural places needed for healthy fish, wildlife and human communities.

Skookum Creek cuts a path through southern Mason County, mostly along the north side of Highway 108, eventually emptying into Little Skookum Inlet and the southern reaches of the Salish Sea. The creek, once a rich stream corridor cutting through part of the Squaxin homeland, shows a century's weight of disturbance that supported a developing agricultural industry. The free-flowing waters were heavily diked and its shores managed for pasture and crops. Still, despite its challenges, the waters of Skookum Creek still support an active coho salmon run and the most important population of cutthroat trout in the South Sound, while its adjacent riparian areas and meadows host the overwintering Willapa Hills elk herd.

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*Conserved
valley teems
with promise...*

Photos: Skookum Valley wetlands, Doug Ridenour.
At left: Coho fingerling, courtesy of Squaxin Island Tribe.





4405 7th Ave SE, Suite 306
Lacey, WA 98503
360.943.3012
CapitolLandTrust.org

Dave Winter
Executive Director

Quita Terrell
Associate Director

Laurence Reeves
Conservation Director

Alison Beglin
Membership Engagement Manager

Mike Leigh
Stewardship Coordinator

Melissa Roberts
Stewardship Coordinator

Mary Birchem
Outreach & Education Coordinator

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Legal Counsel: Mark Peternell
Bean, Gentry, Wheeler & Peternell,
PLLC

Contributors: Pene Speaks, Jason
Callahan, Jane Chavey



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Preserved forever—266 acres including 4.5 miles of stream

Thanks to the Squaxin Island Tribe's conservation work, the creek will continue to play its timeless role in the South Sound ecosystem. As of today, four and a half miles of Skookum Creek, along with 266 adjacent acres, have been conserved forever; and will serve as an anchor for future conservation investments. Restoration efforts will only enhance the values delivered by Skookum Creek.

The conservation of Skookum Valley is a celebration of local conservation and the power of community partnerships to maximize investments. One of the valley landowners originally contacted CLT to gauge our interest in their property. CLT immediately recognized the conservation value of Skookum Valley and its creek. We also knew this area was a high priority for the Squaxin Island Tribe and recognized



Conservation grant awards include: National Coastal Wetlands Conservation Grant Program, Washington Wildlife & Recreation Program, Salmon Recovery Funding Board, and Squaxin Island Tribal Government.

the land trust could be most valuable in a supportive role. Since a project of this size would require partners and the creek cuts a path directly through the Tribe's reservation land, CLT reached out to the Squaxin Island Tribe to gauge their interest in the project. They readily agreed to take the lead on the conservation efforts.

Since 2017, conservation grants for the project have been awarded from numerous sources. These include the National Coastal Wetlands Conservation Grant Program, Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program, the state's Salmon Recovery Funding Board, and Squaxin Island Tribal Government. The grants and acquisitions all have been led by the Squaxin Island Tribe, while CLT partnered with the Tribe, sharing its expertise and knowledge in writing grants and helping with land acquisition. Altogether, partners raised more than \$2.2 million to purchase land from three different landowners, ensuring that this stretch of Skookum Creek will remain a haven for coho, steelhead, and elk for generations to come.

The Tribe is not done with the project. They hope to conserve more land and are pursuing opportunities to add approximately 100 more acres and over two miles of stream. In the meantime, work will get started on restoring what is already conserved—including restoring the bottomlands and reestablishing the originally forested areas. CLT will assist the Tribe where appropriate and keep our eyes out for other opportunities to leverage partnerships that move forward our mutual conservation priorities in the South Puget Sound and Chehalis Basin watersheds.

Photos, opposite page, top: Aerial view of Skookum Valley wetlands, Doug Ridenour.

Left: Adult female and male purple martins, Mike Melton.

Photos, this page:

Upper: Bald eagle surveys Skookum Valley, Doug Ridenour.

Middle: Skookum Valley property tour, Doug Ridenour.

Lower right: Elk herd moves across Skookum Valley, Doug Ridenour.

Lower left: Browsing female (cow) elk, Mike Melton.





What is a Watershed?

The places we live, the trees that shade us, the farms that feed us, the habitats that support fish & wildlife, and our drinking water are all dependent on healthy watersheds.

Have you ever wondered where a stream or river is flowing to? Or where the snow goes when it melts? Or maybe you've wondered where your drinking water comes from. The answer is WATERSHEDS!

A watershed is an area of land where water drains from higher elevations (sometimes called headwaters) to lower elevations and into rivers, streams, lakes and ultimately the sea. Every body of water you see is either transporting water downstream or receiving water from upstream. Some of that water comes from snow and ice pack in the mountains and

some of the water is absorbed into the soil where it can eventually seep into the nearest stream or into underground reservoirs called aquifers.

We all live in a watershed and where water flows, life grows! The places we live, the trees that shade us, the farms that feed us, the habitats that support fish and wildlife, and our drinking water are all dependent on healthy watersheds. Watersheds can be large or small, and can include hundreds (and sometimes thousands) of small creeks and streams. Washington has 62 larger watersheds,



Photos, top: Chehalis Basin Watershed in fog, landscape view, Mike Melton.

Above: Fish bearing stream cascades from wetlands in Darlin Creek Preserve, Mike Melton.

Left: Middle school students carry out water quality testing, Mary Birchem.

Opposite page: River otter in beaver pond, Darlin Creek Preserve, Garrett Yarter.

Upper right: Streams flow into saltwater along Eld Inlet shoreline, Mike Melton.



known as Water Resource Inventory Areas (WRIAs) that are used as the basis for planning and actions to safeguard water availability and endangered salmon.

Chehalis Basin – A Very Big Regional Watershed

Many of us live in the Chehalis Basin watershed. It is the second largest river basin in Washington State. The land within the basin encompasses the homelands of the Upper Chehalis and Lower Chehalis Tribes, now known as the Confederated Tribes of the Chehalis Reservation, and includes parts of five counties. The Chehalis Basin's waters flow from surrounding mountains like the Olympics, Cascades and Willapa Hills and eventually empty into Grays Harbor. Besides enriching the many communities within its boundaries, the watershed contains numerous rivers and other habitats supporting critical fish populations along with a huge variety of plants and animals.

Kennedy Creek Watershed – A Smaller Local Watershed

Kennedy Creek, draining about 18 square miles in Thurston County, is a relatively small but important watershed in our region. It lies within the ancestral homelands of the Squaxin Island Tribe. Kennedy Creek itself is about 10 miles long originating in the Black Hills and emptying into Puget Sound at Oyster Bay, the southernmost end of Totten Inlet. The watershed provides critical habitat for native fish including coho and chum salmon runs. Kennedy Creek's intertidal saltmarshes also provide critical habitat for over 140 species of birds including migratory shorebirds.



Did You Know?

As water flows through a watershed it can pick up sediment and contaminants. So how we manage and treat the land has a direct impact on watershed health and the ability of watersheds to support many uses and functions, such as drinking water, recreation and wildlife habitat. Increasing population growth and development is resulting in loss of critical watershed recharge areas and fish and wildlife habitat, but there are steps we can take to protect watersheds. Land conservation is one important tool to ensure that key landscapes important for watershed health remain intact forever.

How to keep your watershed healthy

- ▶ Support your local land trust! Your support helps us protect critical watersheds that benefit fish, wildlife and people.
- ▶ Plant native trees, shrubs and plants and remove invasive species (Himalayan blackberry, Scot's Broom, etc.) if possible.
- ▶ Limit use of toxic cleaning and garden products, substituting effective natural products.
- ▶ Dispose of all chemicals properly. Local hazardous waste disposal programs offer proper disposal of chemicals to keep them out of rivers and Puget Sound.
- ▶ Conserve water. Take shorter showers, don't run the tap while you brush your teeth, use drip or timed sprinkler systems for your garden.
- ▶ Drive less. Cars contribute pollution to watersheds in many ways including exhaust, breakdown of tires over time, and leaking gas, oil and other chemicals.



Inspiring Kids Preserve

An Everchanging Landscape

On the eastern shore of Henderson Inlet, just a mile north of Capitol Land Trust's very first conservation project on Woodland Creek, sits Inspiring Kids Preserve. Not only does this preserve have a promising conservation story, it also will help fulfill the Trust's decades-long vision for a uniquely focused preserve: to strengthen our community's conservation ethic by fostering meaningful experiences out in nature.

Capitol Land Trust was first involved here in 1992 when Harmony Glover donated a conservation easement on 56 acres, including mature forest and a substantial amount of shoreline. The property, which for millennia has been part of indigenous peoples' tribal homeland, was an active farm throughout the 1900s. In 2018, Capitol Land Trust celebrated the outright purchase of Harmony Farm, making it the northern portion of Inspiring Kids Preserve.

Two years prior, in 2016, Capitol Land Trust purchased the adjacent 52 acres south of Harmony Farm, which had been used as pastureland, a pony farm, and a logging operation. The now 108-acre preserve protects over one mile of Puget Sound shoreline—important habitat for coho and fall chum salmon which return annually to streams in the area. The preserve supports fresh and saltwater wetlands and mixed conifer and deciduous forests of varying ages, along with areas that are becoming diverse natural habitats—thanks, in part, to our restoration efforts.



2016



Fall 2017



Spring 2022



Making Space for New Growth and Recovery

Large-scale environmental restoration of the preserve has included removing 16 derelict structures, four vehicles, and other debris. Invasive non-native plant species have been controlled on about 75 acres and about 20 acres replanted, all to increase the variety and health of native plants on the site.

The northwest corner of the property—formerly used for agriculture—now sports thirty-five circular areas replanted with native species like Oregon ash, serviceberry, Nootka rose, Garry oak, Wapato, willow, and more. In just six years, plants are flourishing—spreading and beginning to reproduce. A wetland on the field's eastern side has expanded and even supports beaver now! With better water retention on the site, naturally occurring wetland plants like cattails, rushes, and sedges have multiplied.

The 'old' tree farm on the south part of the site has also experienced restoration—the Douglas-firs have been thinned to decrease density. This reduces competition between trees, providing more access to water, sunlight, nutrients, and space, resulting in a healthier and more diverse forest.

Young Hands Help Out

It wouldn't be Inspiring Kids Preserve without getting local youth involved in the restoration process. Over the last four years, over 400 youth of all ages have helped nurture the preserve in a variety of ways: planting, mulching, maintaining trails, removing nonnative plants and debris, even building brush piles for wildlife. Our dream is that those "Kids" will return in the years to come, maybe even with their own children, to see how the land has continued to change and how their effort helped it thrive.



Photos, opposite page, top: Aerial view of Inspiring Kids Preserve in winter, showing restoration area next to the estuary, Mike Melton. From upper left, counter clockwise: Aerial view of field in 2016 before CLT purchase, Mike Melton. Field in fall of 2017 after planting of native trees and shrubs in restoration circles, Mike Melton. Field in spring of 2022 showing native species growth in restoration circles, Mike Melton. Aerial view of a beaver-influenced wetland in winter, Mike Melton.

Photos, this page, from top left, clockwise: Middle school students from North Thurston Public Schools mulch trail, Mary Birchem. Olympia Mountaineers youth group sits in front of wildlife habitat brush pile they just built, Sam Phillips. Young child volunteer gets a little help planting a tree in the restoration area, Mary Birchem. Olympia Mountaineers youth peeks out of wildlife pile he helped build, Mary Birchem. Left: Porcupine at home on the newly built wildlife pile, Mary Birchem. Left: Beaver dragging branches near wetland pond, captured on monitoring camera, Tom Terry.



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4405 7th Ave SE, Suite 306
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Photo: Beaver-gnawed alder adjacent to wetland pond, Mary Bircherm.

CONSERVATION CONVERSATIONS: BEAVERS!

▶ We are excited to welcome environmental journalist Ben Goldfarb for our next Conservation Conversation event about beavers! This year we've seen an increase in beaver activity at many of Capitol Land Trust's conserved properties. Ben will join us to discuss the history of this world-changing species; how beavers can help us fight drought, flooding, wildfire, and climate change; and how we can coexist with this challenging but vital rodent. Save the date and pick up a copy of his book *Eager: The Surprising, Secret Life of Beavers and Why They Matter* to read before the event.

Save the Date

- ▶ Tuesday, November 15, 4:00 - 5:00 pm
- ▶ Zoom

Registration will be available on our website soon

- ▶ CapitolLandTrust.org/events