

CTC celebrates 25 years of protecting Tahoe lands

By Joann Eisenbrandt

Environmental Emergency Room. That could just as easily be the name on the sign outside the California Tahoe Conservancy's offices on Third Street, just a long block from Barton Memorial Hospital in South Lake Tahoe.

On Sept. 16, at Commons Beach in Tahoe City the Conservancy will celebrate a quarter-century of bandaging Lake Tahoe's fragile and wounded environment. On California's books since 1970, a 1982 voter-approved bond measure provided \$80 million in funding for this independent agency within the state's Natural Resources Agency. Funding for Lake Tahoe Basin projects began in spring 1985.



Cove East along the Upper Truckee River where it opens into Lake Tahoe is an ongoing project for CTC.

Photos/Kathryn Reed

Conservancy Deputy Director Ray Lacey explains the rationale behind its formation, "The easiest parallel is with the Coastal Conservancy, another early California conservancy, which was formed out of fear that California's coastline would become privatized because of intense real estate pressure. In Tahoe, there was state, national and international recognition that there were real problems. Water quality was declining and something had to be done quickly to turn it around. This was beyond the means of local governments and nonprofits without external assistance. The Conservancy became a conduit for those external financial resources."

When the Washoe first summered along Tahoe's pristine shores, they used the land but did not consume it. The track record of those who have followed has not been as stellar. Competing public and private interests, clear-cut logging, haphazard urbanization and overlapping regulatory layers have muddied the waters. Tahoe's stable environmental balance was lost, and that began impacting the lake's clarity.

"Tahoe was developed at the worst time in history," Lacey explains. "Older developed areas were pedestrian-friendly. Tahoe was developed in the postwar (World War II) era, when it was all about the car. That's difficult to retrofit."

Unlike the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency, the Conservancy is not a regulatory body. Its mission – to protect the Lake's legendary clarity, increase public access and recreational opportunities, and preserve Tahoe's wildlife – is accomplished in two ways: "One," Lacey explains, "as a conduit for both technical and financial resources to overwhelming local needs (grant projects); second, actual land acquisition and ongoing management of those lands (direct projects)."

The CTC's initial funding was targeted primarily at the acquisition of parcels on the California side of the lake. To date, the Conservancy has acquired more than 5,400 parcels.

“Twenty-five years ago,” Lacey explains, “the basin was subdivided for a population of 400,000 people, even though that wasn’t sustainable. TRPA had begun deeming some parcels unbuildable. We provided the ‘out’ for property owners who were otherwise caught between a rock and a hard place.” All the Conservancy’s property acquisitions are from willing sellers.

Since that initial bond, there have been a variety of funding sources: appropriations from Environmental License Plate Fund; offshore oil revenues collected by the federal government and given to the state of origin to offset the effects of offshore drilling; as well as statewide voter-approved bond measures – propositions 12, 40, 50 and 84 – for “clean air, clean water, and parks.”

This money also funds CTC grants to local governments and private nonprofits to match local funds and enhance the scope of environmental projects. One highly-visible example is the Lakeview Commons project at Highway 50 and Lakeview Avenue, now in the first of three phases. The \$6 million the Conservancy allocated will provide improved beach access, a better Highway 50 crossing, a non-motorized boathouse, picnic tables, terraced seating and new vegetation. As with other CTC grants, implementation of the project falls on the local partners. In this case the city of South Lake Tahoe and El Dorado County. Those entities commit to a definite completion timeline and the maintenance of the project for a set number of years. According to Lacey, the CTC has never had to seek legal recourse against a grant-funded project for failure to perform.

El Dorado County Supervisor Norma Santiago, who is on the CTC board, speaks highly of the Conservancy as a partner with local government.

“The Conservancy allows the county to work together on joint projects to meet our obligations as good stewards of the lake

– for projects like the bike trail or erosion control – we formulate a real partnership in meeting our mutual mission of water quality, air quality, and sustainable communities,” Santiago said.

Other notable Conservancy direct and grant projects include:

- Commons Beach in Tahoe City: Site of the 25th anniversary celebration, the Conservancy provided \$6 million to restore Tahoe City’s lakefront to its original condition. The land had been deeded “to the people of Tahoe City” by President Ulysses S Grant. “It’s a shining example of the Conservancy working with local entities,” Lacey explains.

- Upper Truckee River Restoration: The Upper Truckee River from Meyers to Lake Tahoe is now under public ownership (CTC, California State Parks, U.S. Forest Service, or the city of South Lake Tahoe), with the exception of one privately-held parcel. The Conservancy is working with its public partners to restore the entire river system because scientists say restoring a single piece isn’t effective in significantly decreasing the flow of sediment into the lake.

- Upper Truckee Marsh Restoration: The Draft Environmental Impact Statement is expected to be out for review this fall for the meadow and river area in the center of South Lake Tahoe.

- Sunset Stables River Restoration: A part of the Upper Truckee River project on Conservancy-owned land. The goal is to return the straightened streambed to its natural meandering course to slow down the flow and facilitate more frequent dumping of sediment and nutrients onto the surrounding marshland. The Conservancy expects implementation to begin in 2012.

- South Tahoe Greenway Shared Use Trail: The creation of a continuous 9-mile-long bike trail from near the junction of Pioneer Trail and Highway 50 in Meyers to Stateline, using the

old Caltrans freeway right-of-way. Purchased by the Conservancy about 10 years ago, all the parcels have been inventoried and design parameters are being explored. An EIS will come out in late 2010. This project is seen as a major step in making South Lake Tahoe a bicycle-friendly town. "Every new segment we complete," Lacey emphasizes, "will increase exponentially the value of the network as the segments are now starting to connect."

- Van Sickle Bi-State Park: With land donated by the late Jack Van Sickle in Nevada and Conservancy-owned land in California, it will bridge two states, which the Conservancy believes is appropriate as the watershed that is impacted covers California and Nevada.

- Angora Fire Resource Damage Assessment and Restoration Plan: The 2007 Angora Fire affected 177 Conservancy lots. An assessment was done to evaluate levels of damage to soils, forest, vegetation and wildlife on these lots, and establish priorities for restoration and protection of water quality impacts on the Lake. The Conservancy is in the midst of a forest-thinning project on some of these lots. Regarding residents' complaints about the process, Lacey responded, "Our lands are subject to the same rules as those homeowners face. We made no money on the timber cutting, as all the wood was of a low grade and sold to a firewood supplier to defray the costs of the project, which were from \$3,000 to \$6,000 per acre."

Moving forward

During the last 25 years, the Conservancy's focus and goals have changed. Land acquisition has largely been completed, with close to a thousand parcel acquisitions a year now down to a dozen that are mainly project-driven.

"Simply purchasing the land wasn't the end," the CTC deputy director explained. The focus now is on "realizing the

potential of those 5,000 plus parcels.”

The CTC’s granting role also continues, but is now enhanced by a third, new role – as a grantee. Because of a proven 25-year track record the Conservancy has successfully secured grants from federal agencies such as the Bureau of Reclamation and the Army Corp of Engineers. Given the current economic climate in California, relying only on money from Sacramento is no longer possible.

Another offshoot of this realization is the Tahoe Fund, a nonprofit launched in August 2010 to raise private money to match public funding for projects already “on the ground” in the Lake Tahoe Basin. Largely the idea of CTC Executive Director Patrick Wright, the nonprofit believes it fills a void in the environmental funding landscape. Its goal is, as its website explains, “To leverage public and private investments.” Unlike other organizations that are either watchdog groups or focus on one specific program, the Tahoe Fund, “will fill this void by enlisting the local community, visitors, and opinion leaders to support or contribute to a broad range of environmental, recreational, and educational projects.”

The board consists of a mix of private and public figures, with the two public members, Wright and Jim Lawrence, administrator of the Nevada Division of State Lands, being non-voting members. Donors to the Tahoe Fund may specify which projects their donations will go to.

Also part of the new reality is the proliferation of gaming and the resulting dilution of Tahoe’s drawing power as a gaming-only destination.

Supervisor Santiago agrees, “There is obviously a changing dynamic in the basin. It is through environmental redevelopment we can create greater prosperity in the basin, make us more geo-touristic . . . The larger work is to attract

the capital investments to make the large infrastructure changes that need to be made.”

In the late 1990s, the realization began emerging that the only sustainable future for Tahoe must be built around what makes Tahoe unique – its natural attractions. Years of credible scientific research had shown lake clarity was quickly approaching a point of no return. Recognition of this led to the 1997 Environmental Summit, bringing President Bill Clinton and Vice President Al Gore to the lake. The resulting financial commitment is what Lacey calls a “watershed” moment in terms of political influence, with economic and environmental interests lobbying together in Washington rather than separately.

Understanding the CTC

But how well does the public understand the Conservancy’s role and how it fits into Lake Tahoe’s acronym-riddled environmental matrix. Anyone who’s lived in Tahoe a while knows the term “Conservancy lots,” and recognizes the rough-hewn, low-slung timber fencing that often surrounds them. Some may have even dumped a dead refrigerator or moldy mattress on them in the dark of night. But often that’s as far as it goes.

“We’re not well-enough understood,” Lacey agrees. “Conservancies are meant to be locally-based. Our board is comprised of both local and state representatives intentionally. We need to be much more approachable.”

Bob Kingman, currently Mt. Lassen area manager for the Sierra Nevada Conservancy, agrees with the need for enhanced public education. The SNA is a sister agency to the California Tahoe Conservancy, which unlike it, “doesn’t have any one particular resource we are mandated to conserve or protect. We focus on the economic, social and environmental well being of Sierra Nevada communities in 22 counties, specifically excluding the Lake Tahoe Basin.”

Kingman worked for more than 20 years in various positions at the CTC, and while there developed a class at Lake Tahoe Community College aimed at introducing the local community to all of the organizations and government agencies in the basin, giving a primer on the mission of each, its jurisdiction and how these entities all fit together.

Public education about the environment is a priority for CTC Executive Director Wright as well. The CTC website is being reconfigured to be more interactive and user-friendly. The Conservancy would like to see visitor centers at every entrance to the lake. It helps with the seasonal centers in Meyers and owns land for one in Tahoe City. There is also a Conservancy-funded \$1.8 million Explore Tahoe visitor center in Heavenly Village near Stateline, created in cooperation with South Lake Tahoe and others.

Like Kingman, who says his class at LTCC was “very well received,” Lacey believes the public is anxious to learn more about the environment and how to protect it.

“The environmental damage people do,” he says, “is not willful, but out of ignorance and lack of awareness. People are generally eager to learn. If you tell people, ‘You’re here at the gateway to Tahoe, tread lightly,’ they’ll listen. We have an important role to play so that when people do visit, they become good stewards of the landscape.”

The future role of the Conservancy is seen by the agency as a work in progress. Lacey terms it “adaptive management,” not holding on to a plan, but revisiting it as circumstances change. He acknowledges that the outcome is not in the Conservancy’s hands alone, as they have no regulatory power, yet he remains optimistic. “The single most momentous change is the coming together of the environmental and economic communities and recognizing we have a common goal.”

Party on Sept. 16

The Conservancy's 25th anniversary celebration on Sept. 16th at Tahoe City's Commons Beach is seen as an opportunity for all who love Lake Tahoe to come together. "Our constituency is the citizens of California and around the world. Everyone has an inherent right to enjoy these resources," Lacey says.

The event will include food, music, speakers and commemorative gifts. The Conservancy's redesigned Lake Tahoe environmental license plate will also be introduced. The celebration is free to the public and begins at noon.

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