



*Interview Series*

# CONSERVATION



waldron

# INTRODUCTION

## **INTERVIEW SERIES: CONSERVATION**

Waldron recently launched an interview series with CEOs, Executive Directors, and other leaders to find out their thoughts on management and talent. Our first series focused on Community Foundations, and this second series continues with a focus on Conservation organizations. (The following compilation of these interviews includes prominent leaders of Conservation organizations.) The interviews give us a glimpse into their experiences, and an opportunity to create conversations around what Conservation organizations require, and how those needs can be met today.

## **INTERVIEWER: ED ROGAN, VICE PRESIDENT, WALDRON**

Ed has been with Waldron since 1995 and is one of Waldron's most experienced executive search leaders. He manages a diverse portfolio of searches that includes nonprofit and public sector clients. Prior to Waldron, Ed worked for The Booth Research Group (BRG) in Denver, CO designing and conducting assessment centers and promotional tests for public safety agencies across the country. Ed holds Bachelor's degrees in Psychology and Sociology from University of Houston and a Master's degree in Industrial/Organizational Psychology from University of Colorado at Denver.

## **WALDRON**

As the consulting partner strategic leaders choose to help attract, engage, and inspire effective leaders, Waldron provides a combination of executive search, leadership development, and career transition services across sectors and industries. Our passion is helping people and organizations realize their full potential and increase their impact. We are proud to be a Certified B Corporation™ and an Inc. 5000 honoree.

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# TOM MARTIN

AMERICAN FOREST FOUNDATION, President & CEO  
WASHINGTON, DC



American Forest Foundation

**Q** *Let's begin by talking about what you find draws people to a career in conservation. Is it usually a career as opposed to a job or a stop along the way?*

**A** I think for almost everyone in the field, they're drawn to it by a passion for either wild places and wild things, or the health aspects of the environment. People tend to come with a very deep sense of personal mission and I think for many folks it is very much a career. I've been doing environmental things for 25 years and many of the people I worked with 25 years ago, I still have the opportunity to work with in the field today. People tend to stay. You can cycle through for-profits, nonprofits, and government work pretty easily. That's perhaps not as true in other parts of the American economy or American workforce, but it's a pretty seamless transition for people to make and that makes it attractive as well.

**Q** *What about the people who don't stay—are there any common reasons why people leave conservation as a field?*

**A** People can get burned out by anything that is this cause-oriented. If people are passionate about something, sometimes it can be hard to remember to go walk in the woods when you're so busy saving them. Secondly, a lot of folks in the conservation community care deeply about policy stuff and it's pretty easy to get frustrated, over time, seeing policy issues and battles repeat themselves again and again. That's another reason why people leave. It can be a policy issue on the local level or on the national level.

**Q** *How have you seen the field change in recent years? Are there any specific responses to technology, cultural norms, or shifts in public opinion or preferences? How have you seen the focus change?*

**A** One thing that hasn't changed is that Americans still think of themselves as conservationists. There was a poll that if you had to trade off the environment versus the economy and jobs which would you pick? And they said the environment 60/40. It remains a very popular issue but it doesn't tend to be a top motivating issue. That's been a challenge throughout the modern conservation community—less so at the beginning when there was a sense of newness and great momentum. In recent years it's been bogged down with battle after battle and there is some societal fatigue with that from time to time.

*The American Forest Foundation (AFF) works with families, teachers and elected officials to promote stewardship and protect the values provided by our nation's forest heritage.*

*When he joined AFF in 2009, Tom Martin brought several decades of conservation leadership experience including senior positions at National Parks Conservation Association (NPCA), Earth Force, National Audubon Society, and the Michigan Department of Natural Resources.*

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“ ...it can be hard to remember to go walk in the woods when you're so busy saving them. ”

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There is really interesting stuff happening with the intersection between technology and biology or technology and ecology. Apps that let you shoot a picture of something and then tell you what it is. There's a tree identification app; you go shoot a picture of the leaf and the bark and it tells you what it is.



There's a guy down in Costa Rica who is documenting whole sets of endangered plants and little critters and things—taking pictures and categorizing them. It's going to democratize science which is actually pretty scary for people who've spent ten years of their lives getting degrees and becoming experts. But what it means is the amount of data we are going to have about things is going to be incredible. Secondly, the ability to take that data and synthesize it, cut it, slice it, dice it, and figure out what story the data is telling us. And then maybe most importantly, over time, the ability to be able to more precisely measure the impact that different conservation activities and strategies have on the ground.

It's going to become a real driver. As with many parts of American society, social issues like the environment have not always been easy to measure. I think it will become more metric driven because technology is going to let us do it. It's going to become more participatory as well, because citizens everywhere can contribute information to a central database. And some may scoff and say that the quality isn't going to be as high as if you were having a PhD do it, and that's true. If you have 100 people out there gathering information, some are going to be wrong, but the large numbers tell you that overall, you're going to get a much richer picture of what is going on over there. I think it's going to be an exciting place to work, and there is going to be a different set of skills in the understanding of how to integrate technology into empowering people to participate that will be key.

**Q** *Following up on the technology piece, one of the expressions I've heard recently is comparing a "digital native" to a "digital immigrant"—those who grew up with nothing but the internet and devices in their hands, etc. versus those of us who remember going out and buying our first answering machine and microwave and then migrating to a technology-based career. Have you noticed any generational differences in skill sets, motivations, longevity, and commitment to the field? Is there anything that strikes you from a generational perspective?*

One of the things I've experienced is that communicators all too often fall in love with the medium they're using. Let's take Facebook for example. Tell me why we need to be on Facebook? What are you going to accomplish on our behalf through Facebook? How are you going to measure the impact of Facebook on our organization? Don't tell me how many "likes" you got, tell me what happened on the ground because of this and how we are going to measure it. I think one of the generational struggles is that with the people who grow up fully integrated with technology, you have to help them figure out how to milk it for what it's worth in creating real impact on the ground. If you have 100,000 visits to your website and nobody gave you a dollar, nobody saved an acre of land, nobody weighed in on a policy issue, what did you create there? That's not unique to the environmental field, nor is it unique to this generation but I think it's a challenge managers have with any communications technology.

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*...another thing that makes people successful here is listening deeply—for me that means you're not only able to hear the plain meaning of what people are telling you but you hear the cultural cues and frames that underlie all of that so you can much more deeply understand what it is that moves the people you're talking with and find common ground.*

**Q** *What have you found to be the common characteristics of your more successful hires? What are four to five things that people who stay and make an impact have in common?*

First and foremost they have a deep passion or love for what they do—I mean that in both a mission sense and a craft sense. If you're bringing a policy analyst into it, you're passionate about policy analysis, or if you're a web designer you're passionate about that as well. Having those passions together is important. Secondly, people who are willing to try things and then fail and then try again and learn from it is important. People who are willing to think of everything they do as a next experiment in a lifelong quest to do the perfect experiment as a



cornerstone or summation project.

I think of people in all fields and here, too often the flip side of passion is a sense that you hold truth in your hands and other people just need to understand that. And so another thing that makes people successful here is listening deeply—for me that means you're not only able to hear the plain meaning of what people are telling you but you hear the cultural cues and frames that underlie all of that so you can much more deeply understand what it is that moves the people you're talking with and find common ground.

The final thing is people that are more focused on the outcome than they are on winning. Give away the credit, let someone else feel like they got what they needed out of things, and just be focused on here's the environmental good we needed to create. If it means making a deal with a company I thought was a bad company doing bad things, I'll do that in a heartbeat if I can get them to do the right things. It's working with someone who you might disagree with politically. It's about being focused on the outcome and not the credit, and not on a sense that "I won this fight". Those are the people who are the most successful.

**Q** *What do you look for in the people you try to hire? Are there particular predictors, experiences, or leanings they communicate to you that you think help you assess if they are going to fit in that particular mold?*

You know the truth is that I fail too often when I hire. To some degree it has something to do with the role, but I far prefer someone who has had a variety of experiences versus someone who has had only one deep experience, with a few exceptions.

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**“ A good failure is far better than a stupid success. ”**

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For most, a variety of experiences gives people broader perspectives and helps them listen more deeply—so that's something I look for. Absolutely that passion. Can they connect to what's important in their life and if they can, how does that manifest in their work? Does that then show up at work as a passion for results or as a passion for preaching and telling others what to do? And finally, I look for people who've been successful, and that doesn't mean people who haven't failed, in fact it's almost a better indicator if they know when they failed, why they failed, and what they've done differently because of that—that to me is success. I look for people who are willing to take risks and the people I best enjoy working with are the people who are willing to challenge me and others around them with a well-crafted idea that may be entirely unorthodox in this setting. I look for people who've made those connections in the past and have had the audacity to go out and try to make them a success. A good failure is far better than a stupid success.

**Q** *Are there particular positions or types of positions within your organization that you find are more challenging to fill or maintain than others?*

Yes, Database Managers and areas where you're less likely to have the passion for our mission be the sustaining piece. That's an issue. Secondly, because of the size of our organization, I wish we were able to offer more robust and enduring career paths for some of our clearly talented young people. We do it whenever we can, but it's not always easy at our size. In a place like D.C. where lots of our staff are located, there are many opportunities to grow and go somewhere else. So we'll lose some people that way, and good on them, but hopefully we'll get them back the next time they're ready.

**Q** *Are there any non-financial incentives or benefits you've been able to implement to help retain employees?*

Our office is amazing. Four staff members worked with Scott Smiley, our Vice President of Finance & Administration, and our designer. You walk into our office here and you know what we do. You feel it deeply, and people who come to work here walk in and get a smile on their faces from the office alone. It reflects who we are, it is a cool, fun space to work in, and our conference rooms look like a living room or a kitchen table. And the wood throughout the office comes from people in our sustainable forest program. I'll send you a link\* that someone from Architectural Digest did. That I think is very much a non-financial attractant.



A piece that is probably not much of an attractant, but we think is important, is our culture, which is very attentive to young families. People who are looking for jobs rarely think of the culture of the place before they are in it. The culture here is that everyone has a point of view, and has the opportunity to express it and make a case for it. We probably spend more time thinking together on multiple levels than most organizations do. I think it ends up expressing itself more in retention than attracting people in the beginning.

**Q** *Following up on your comment about the wood coming from the sustainable forest program members—do you feel any more pressure, for lack of a better word, to walk the talk; to find ways in how you operate as a business to be more green; to operate in a more sustainable manner as a business? If so, what steps have you taken recently in that direction?*

Pressure no, excitement yes. We don't have anyone telling us we need to do more of this or more of that. We do it instinctively and find it fun to do. We put together a sustainability plan as one of our staff was getting her Master's in sustainability. She did her paper on us, it was wonderful and she's a Database Manager. So that helped us move in that direction. Right now I'm looking up at our acoustic tile and it's not fiberglass, it's aspen. It has the same performance characteristics, but it is considerably more environmentally friendly than traditional acoustic tile. We received three Green Globes for the building, which is a very competitive system. We got them because throughout the office there are things that reflect our environmental values. So pressure no, but excitement yes.

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**“ Getting to do something that helps people be better stewards of the land they have is really cool, and being able to line up your avocation and vocation at the same time, I'm really lucky to be able to do that. ”**

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**Q** *There are discussions at the public level that come and go relative to a lot of different things and at times they are conservation or environmentally-oriented. Over the last several years we've seen this global warming/climate change discussion. I'm curious from your perspective, if popular discussions like that, and now the terminology debate about “climate change” versus “global warming”, if they distract from the real issues? And what can people do in their own lives to address, enhance, or improve the environment around them? Is that something that you find helps or hurts the actual effort?*

It hurts it. In my mind, those kinds of debates are entirely useless. The reasons people fight over the nomenclature, global warming versus climate change, is an attempt to substitute a bumper sticker for what is happening in the world—and bumper stickers are much easier.

When we speak about that subject, we tend to just talk about the changes we see in forests. There are more catastrophic fires, more droughts, more severe storms doing damage to trees, more bugs eating and killing trees, more pathogens, diseases harming and killing trees, and I don't give a crap what labels you put on it. Those are real things that are happening in our forests. My most liberal members and most conservative members go “Yep, those things are happening and we have to do something about it”. We find it more useful to talk about the real observations of what is happening in forests than use the bumper stickers. What those bumper stickers tend to do is if someone uses the wrong phrase, you immediately say I disagree with them and discount what they say. If they use the right one you have 63 questions to ask to make sure they are pure enough for you to agree with them. From my point of view, they are really useless. We like to think about what real impacts are currently happening on the ground.

**Q** *From your own experience what attracted you to this field and has kept you in it?*

My granddad had a big heart attack when I was 10 or 11, and he told his kids and in-laws that if he lived, his family had to buy him a house in the woods to recover. He lived and my family delivered on their promise, so I spent my summers running around in the woods. I went to a summer camp, and a mountaineering school, and



when I went to law school in Los Angeles my antidote was when the quarter was over I had to find a wild place to spend time. Since my granddad made that happen, it's been a big part of my life.

The forest my family has is sustainably managed and has been in the sustainable forestry system for at least the last decade. For me, it has a personal attachment. I like to go backpacking and go to wild places. Getting to do something that helps people be better stewards of the land they have is really cool, and being able to line up your avocation and vocation at the same time, I'm really lucky to be able to do that.

**Q** *Is there any piece of advice you've been given during your career that helps guide you that you'd like to pass on to people who would like to get into this field?*

**A** Campbell's "follow your bliss". Find what you love and find different ways to do it. For me, I need emotional and intellectual challenge. I've changed jobs and often careers every five to seven years. For me that's been a wonderful experience and I've learned so much more. I've been put in places I would've never imagined years before and years after. Don't be afraid to jump off the cliff and make a big change—that wasn't anybody's advice, just dumb luck and experience.

\*To read the article about AFF's sustainable office space visit:

<http://www.forconstructionpros.com/article/11310008/from-forest-to-functional>

# SUSAN SMARTT

NATUREBRIDGE, President & CEO  
SEATTLE, WA



*NatureBridge fosters environmental literacy to sustain our planet by providing inclusive, hands-on environmental science programs for children and teens.*

*When she joined NatureBridge in 2008, Susan Smartt brought extensive conservation leadership experience including senior positions at the California League of Conservation Voters, East Bay Regional Park District, and the California State Parks Foundation.*

**Q** *Tell me a bit of your own personal history and background.*

**A** My first job in the environmental community was for The Trust for Public Land in 1988 and I worked there until 2004. Previous to that I was a CPA, and then I moved into corporate finance and did that for a number of years. And then in my mid-30s I had a midlife crisis of sorts, and decided I needed to do something with meaning. I earned a Master of Public Administration with an emphasis on nonprofits and started to look for a job in the nonprofit sector. The audit partner at the corporation where I was working told me about a finance job at The Trust for Public Land and said I would be a perfect fit and sent me over. They hired me as their Assistant CFO and that's how I started.

**Q** *Was that Trust for Public Land national or was that the California office?*

**A** No, it was the national office.

After The Trust for Public Land, I became the Executive Director of the California State Parks Foundation, and then the Executive Director of the California League of Conservation Voters, and now I'm the President & CEO of NatureBridge. So I've mainly been in conservation, parks, and this organization. NatureBridge does environmental education in national parks. We're building the next generation of conservationists.

**Q** *Talk to me about some of your talent challenges, and if there are particular positions that are more challenging to fill at this time and in this economy.*

**A** We always have plenty of people applying for our educator positions. About half of our staff, so about 90, are educators who are out in the field doing our programs in national parks. We have kind of the top of the heap, if you will in environmental education, who have experience, so that's never difficult for us. The difficult part, and this is true any place I've worked, is filling IT, fundraising, and finance positions because those jobs can go anywhere. They can be in conservation, they can be in a hospital, or finance and IT can be in corporate America. So those are the most challenging. On the program and education sides we have no problem recruiting people. So it's more of the technical, IT, fundraising, finance positions that are a challenge.

**Q** *For a lot of people who work in conservation, it's more of a calling. Is that not the case across those positions that you say are more challenging to fill? Is it more common for people who are educators to feel that draw and that call?*

**A** Oh yes, absolutely. People who work on the program side are here because they absolutely love teaching kids and they really believe they are changing those children's lives and giving them a foundation of environmental literacy that will last the rest of their lives. It's a calling for them, it's a calling for me, and for my entire leadership team.

But when you're trying to recruit someone in finance and IT, environment may be a calling to them, but also senior care may be a calling, or feeding the homeless may be a calling. They may have a calling in many areas of the nonprofit sector. And if they really want to make money, they're not coming to the nonprofit sector.

For example, I hired an IT Director two years ago. He had been a consultant at Deloitte and was a year or two



away from making Partner. He took a 50% pay cut. The reason he did that and came to work at NatureBridge is that he got on an airplane every Monday morning and he would get home Friday night. He decided the money just wasn't enough to give up his life. He didn't have a call specifically to come to NatureBridge. He loves the work and he loves the people. The environment was not his top priority when he decided to change his life, but this is an interesting organization doing good work and he works with people he likes. So what I'm saying is that it's different when you talk about technical positions and for technical professionals who can work anywhere.

**Q** *When you think about the people who have come to NatureBridge and stayed, what are three to four common characteristics?*

**A** Being positive, taking initiative, being creative, and having a good skill match for whatever position they're in. Because, bottom line, we're in a business and we have performance standards for our staff. I believe that non-profits sometimes have trouble holding staff accountable for their work. We have annual performance reviews and metrics that we incorporate into our work. We want to be mission driven, but we want to spend every dollar efficiently which means our staff has to be really good at what they do.

**Q** *There's been a shift in the popular terminology around conservation; you hear a lot about "global warming" and "climate change" in discussions. Do you feel that the focus in those areas is useful or more of a distraction to what you do? Is it taking attention away from the real issues, and what has the popular media done for your efforts?*

**A** We very consciously talk about climate change. We're teaching in national parks and we have some funding from the national parks and we're adding more climate change curriculum to what we do. I think climate change matters. We're trying to engage kids to think about what is going on around them, it's best not to have too much jargon so they don't close their minds to what we're saying.

In general, I don't think the conservation movement has done itself a service by talking about all the doom and gloom, because it feels overwhelming. We focus on climate change and what each individual can do to contribute to slowing it. That's where we focus and I do think it matters.

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have a role, but they're not the end all, be all.”**

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**Q** *Have you seen any other changes in the conservation movement recently?*

**A** It's interesting to look at The Nature Conservancy. If I went to their website today I wouldn't be able to tell it's the same organization. Today they're talking about protecting the air and water. Years ago it was about protecting the last of the great wild places. It's very different now and they are tying conservation to clean water and clean air. It's not overtly climate change because they are pretty conservative about that stuff. I would say that The Trust for Public Land is as well. I do think they have changed their message generally on why conservation is important.

**Q** *There's a bit of a generational shift across the workforce, have you seen generational differences?*

**A** Younger people are more focused on work-life balance than my generation was and have a more realistic approach to what that means.

Another thing is that they're so technologically savvy. When they look at a challenge that the organization is facing they automatically look for a technology-based solution. It's quite interesting to me. I mentioned my IT Director earlier—he's the best hire I've ever made—but I've said to him, "You have a technology solution for



every problem, but every problem does not need a technology solution.” Sometimes it’s people!

I think it’s a generation that is a little too engaged in technology to the detriment of how they interact with each other. Too much email, too much texting and not picking up the phone enough. They’re used to having virtual conversations, and ultimately, nonprofit work only works when you are recruiting, engaging, and inspiring people through your mission, and email and text messages don’t do that. They have a role, but they’re not the end all, be all.

I’ll also say, it’s an interesting thing, especially the 20-somethings we hire. Many have not had any constructive criticism about what they do. They’ve all been told they’re great and wonderful because that’s what you’re supposed to tell your children no matter what they do.

Overall, the young people we hire here—particularly our educators—are amazing, just amazing. It’s an interesting dichotomy for us, because generally our educators are Luddites. They are outside teaching and putting 40-pound packs on their backs every day and being out in the field from 8:00 in the morning until 4:00 in the afternoon because they don’t want to sit at computers. Most of them don’t have smartphones. They don’t care about technology or making money. They care about having a job that takes them to beautiful places where they can inspire these kids. We have people in the educator world and people in the business world—two very different worlds that we walk in.

**Q** *Have you seen any difference in what draws people to conservation across generations? I’ve appreciated what you’ve said about the educators, what about the other people?*

I don’t think so. It’s pretty much the same thing that drew me to the field. I grew up on a farm and I was a 4H kid. So anything outdoors oriented is attractive to me. For me, an organization where you can meet with a board member in a beautiful place and go for a hike together is the place for me.

More broadly than that, understanding that the work that this organization does is to make sure that over time, those places are still there for others to enjoy, and that there will still be places for animals to live, and beautiful places for people to go. I don’t think that’s any different from when I started in 1988.

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**“ They care about having a job that takes them to beautiful places where they can inspire these kids. ”**

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**Q** *What about the people who leave the field—if you know of any? Do you see anything in common with what motivates people to pursue other fields?*

I can tell you why our educators leave. Our educators leave because they don’t make enough to support a family and have a more stable work environment, so they need to get Master’s degrees and go on to something else. These are seasonal jobs for our educators.

For those working in the organization, there are two main reasons why people leave. One is money. They want to make more money and they simply look for something else that pays more.

I think the other thing typical with a lot of nonprofits is burnout. I don’t see it as much in conservation as I do in social services where they see the hard side of life every day. Conservation work in general is very positive and uplifting.

**Q** *Given that you are operating in the national parks, you are obviously responsible stewards of the immediate environment around you. What do you do to mitigate your impact as an organization more broadly?*

One of the things we did when I started was move our offices downtown and make it more accessible to public transportation. That took 15 cars off the road because there was no way to get to our former office location



except to drive. In fact, the previous location made it hard to recruit people and I told them I would not take the job if we couldn't move the office.

We're building a new building in Yosemite and it will be LEED gold certified. That building not only reduces our carbon footprint but it's a teaching and learning opportunity.

We also went campus by campus about five years ago and did an assessment on how we were doing our composting and reducing energy and did an audit and changed some things we are doing. It's an ongoing, conscious effort up and down the organization.

**Q** *In response to the recent economic situation, have you implemented any non-financial incentives or programs to incentivize staff?*

**A** One of the things that we do with all of our staff meetings whether they are at the campus level, at the national office, or a board meeting is that we always include a mission moment. We make sure we tell a story or give some information that reminds people about the importance of the work we do. It's a small thing but it really makes a difference.

We make sure that we have a couple of outings each year as a team from the national office. We just take a day and do it. Those are some of the small things that we do—bringing cookies in twice a month—just show people how much you appreciate them and being consistent about it.

We had a tough year this past year. We had some fires at Yosemite which cost us about \$600,000. We had no raises and no pension plan match for this last year. We've been very conscious about all the small things we can do to remind people of the importance of their role—whether that's an accounts payable clerk, the CEO or an educator—and doing small things to show our gratitude at the campus level and at the national office.

**Q** *From the perspective of inspiration or advice, is there anything from your own background that has stuck with you that keeps you going?*

**A** Yes, focus. Early on I had somebody say to me that most people have too many goals and too many activities. You should have three goals that you are going to work toward for three to five years. And make sure you do all of those well. If you dilute your focus, no matter what you're attempting, nothing gets done well. If you have 10 goals, you're not going to get them done. When my board has come to me with a list of 10 goals for my annual work plan, I tell them, "Too many. Start over."

Focus the organization, make sure you have your strategic plan and that the goals are there, and make sure everyone is rowing in the same direction. Focus. That's the best advice I ever got.

**Q** *What advice do you have for someone just coming into the conservation sector?*

**A** I would tell them to build some technical skills. Technical skills can be anything from understanding land transactions to IT or finance.

One of the things that served me well is that I came from a finance and administrative background. I'm as good as anybody in my organization at reading budgets, forecasts, and making sure we are well managed in those areas. I can do that in my sleep. That was the strength that I brought to the organization.

You need more than a general management background. Ask yourself, "What am I offering?" Think that through, and spend the time developing something that you can really showcase.

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**“ Focus the organization, make sure you have your strategic plan and that the goals are there, and make sure everyone is rowing in the same direction. Focus. That's the best advice I ever got. ”**

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# BOB DAVIDSON

SEATTLE AQUARIUM, President & CEO  
SEATTLE, WA



## SEATTLE AQUARIUM

*Opened in 1977, the Seattle Aquarium is the ninth largest aquarium in the U.S. by attendance and among the top five paid visitor attractions in the Puget Sound region. Major exhibits include: Window on Washington Waters, Life on the Edge, Pacific Coral Reef, Puget Sound Fish and Dome Room, Puget Sound Orcas Family Activity Center, and Marine Mammals.*

*Robert W. Davidson became CEO of the newly nonprofit Seattle Aquarium in 2010, after serving as CEO of the Seattle Aquarium Society since 2002. He guided the reposition of the Aquarium Society leading to the successful Aquarium Operating Agreement with the City in 2009.*

**Q** *To begin, why don't you tell me about your career path to becoming CEO of the Aquarium?*

**A** I've been at the Aquarium since 2002, first as the CEO of the nonprofit Seattle Aquarium Society as a support organization for the Aquarium, and then more recently as CEO of the Aquarium itself after a transition from city management. My early career was in politics. In Washington D.C. I was a White House Intern and the Chief of Staff for a congressman from Seattle in my early years and I managed a number of political campaigns. I then left that and went into the printing business and then the investment management business for a while.

In my personal time, I volunteered on the board at the Woodland Park Zoo Society and ended up getting involved in the transformation and redevelopment of the Zoo. That ultimately led to a public bond issue that I helped to promote; a need to set up the private side of the Zoo which I did. I became the Executive Director of the Zoo Society, set up the private fundraising, and helped raise \$10 million dollars for the Zoo. Ultimately, that led to involvement with the Aquarium where there was a need to do similar work.

**Q** *The Aquarium transitioned from City operations to nonprofit management 3 - 3 1/2 years ago. How has that impacted talent recruitment and staff development?*

**A** The vision of what the Aquarium could become has been powerful in helping us attract strong talent across the board. The sense that the shift to nonprofit management combined with the vision of the Aquarium's role in a redeveloped and transformed Seattle central waterfront and the emergence of the Aquarium as a nonprofit with a stronger editorial voice for conservation issues has helped attract people who share a strong mission orientation.

**Q** *You have an unusual challenge given that you need people with very specific, scientific skills necessary for the care of animals, and people with more general "business" skills that are transferable from other areas or industries. Have you found either side of those to be more challenging to fill or to keep people engaged? What have you found to be the most difficult roles to fill?*

**A** There aren't that many aquariums and there are a lot of people whose life ambition is to deal with live animals in a setting where they can be teaching, caring for them, and doing research. So those are the easiest jobs to fill. Every time we post one of those jobs, we have hundreds of applicants for jobs that also involve cleaning up exhibits and vacuuming up fish poop. One might think there might be some challenge to that but the reverse is true. There's always a rush whenever those jobs are posted. Those decisions are difficult because often the people applying, even for entry level positions, have already put in volunteer service here or with other institutions to learn the trade. There's an expectation that if they're coming in to apply they've got a long list of references and proof that they're going to be good employees.

Here's an example to illustrate the tougher positions to fill. When the Aquarium was a part of the City of Seattle, it had a whole range of support services provided by the City. For example, the Parks Department handled



management of construction projects and maintenance of the facility. Things were spread across different parts of the Parks Department. When we assumed management of the Aquarium, we had to hire people directly to handle those things.

So the Facilities Director position was a brand new position at the Aquarium. The Aquarium had never had a single person solely responsible for facilities from a systemic standpoint. We had to define what the position was and lay out the standards and expectations. Did we need somebody who knew everything about pumps, and pipes, and fish? Or did we need someone who understood a complex public facility with very demanding stakeholders and animals that might die if things went wrong? We have large events here and people get upset if their special event for 2,000 guests gets messed up.

In our first effort we were concerned about what would happen if we didn't have specific aquarium or life sciences expertise in that role. We hired someone who didn't have that background because of their strong experience in other things that were important. It was an "Aha!" that an aquarium, in some ways, is oddly enough like a hospital or a symphony hall, in a sense that you have very public dimensions and standards of dealing with the public. But you also have very strong stakeholder demands—biologists taking care of the animals, fundraisers dealing with donors, educators dealing with tens of thousands of young children coming through here. So we realized the facilities role required a sophisticated understanding and service orientation.

**Q** *When you're looking through a plethora of resumes and meeting people, are there specific characteristics that you look for that lend themselves to success here at the Aquarium? Are there three or four common traits among your successful staff?*

Putting aside the question of whatever demonstrates professional competence or understanding for a specific position—the required technical skills—I think passion and an alignment with our mission and who we are is the important starting point. We look for people who understand that coming to work here is something special. It's not just a job. I look for indications that when they come to work in the morning they're going to feel that they are a pretty lucky person.

On top of that, I try to get a sense that they've done things that demonstrate that they have pride in what they do coupled with initiative. That tells me that they have the ability to be an independent performer. In addition, and perhaps at variance with my last statement, in this place, nothing gets done without teamwork. There has to be some sense of how they play with others.

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**“ I look for indications that when they come to work in the morning they're going to feel that they are a pretty lucky person. ”**

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**Q** *Do you see any differences generationally? You've been in this business for some time and you've seen people come and go. Do you encounter any different characteristics across the various age groups?*

I think with some of the younger people I see less patience and willingness to jump through the hoops as they build their careers. With earlier generations, there's more of a sense of orderly career progression and skill development. It's not right or wrong; it's just a difference in expectation.

**Q** *For promotion opportunities?*

Yes, and I think younger people get responsibilities earlier than in times past. That poses issues for the organization because you can't assume general levels of competence in something as simple as how to write a letter, something that could have been assumed in earlier years. And so someone comes in with great energy, ambition, and purpose, but then you realize unexpectedly there are some skills that have not been gained.



**Q** *Yes, we've dealt with that as well. There are some things that were givens back in the day that don't necessarily translate into the younger folks these days.*

But there's a lot of positive in that too. We have some people who came in from the tech sector and it's built in that there is an impatience of process, of time, because if you don't move quickly in that sector you're out of business. So a premium on speed is a healthy thing in an institution like the Aquarium, where certainly under City management things didn't change very fast.

**Q** *How have you seen other aquariums and similar institutions nationally and internationally change their message and approach to conservation? And is that visibility truly rising like I think it is?*

The answer to your last question is 'yes,' it's rising because activity is rising as is an awareness about how conservation and conservation education fits into the identity of an institution.

I first joined the board at the Zoo in 1983. They were just forming an education department and had only recently hired their first full-time vet. Their international conservation outreach was non-existent and locally it was limited. Conceptually, zoos were viewed as parks with exotic animals and a nice place to have a picnic on a Sunday afternoon. Zoos were not viewed as serious conservation organizations.

As society changed there came a greater recognition, in my view, of the planetary needs for life on Earth. People also began asking, "Why would we give you permission to maintain animals in captivity?" Why would we as a society give permission to do that? The standard changed. And you see this argument going on today with elephants in particular at the zoo. Peoples' thinking about these things isn't fixed.

And so zoos and aquariums, in order to attract people who wanted to work there, attract visitors who wanted to come there, attract donors who wanted to give support to those activities, had to move with societal changes to find a niche that people felt added value. The professionalism of the zoos and aquariums has been transformed over the last 30 years all along that spectrum.

**Q** *Do you feel an increased responsibility to be more conservation-oriented in how this building operates and how the Aquarium operates as an organization? In that respect, what are you most proud of that you've implemented or that this organization does?*

The answer is an emphatic 'yes.' Going back to the mission, a few years ago, when I first came to the Aquarium, we were trying to figure out the mission statement of the Aquarium. We found seven of them. None were actively in practice, although they had a lot of good ideas. That triggered some soul searching for the Aquarium and out of that emerged a mission statement—Inspiring Conservation Of Our Marine Environment.

In the spectrum of zoos and aquariums there are those more on the entertainment side on one end, and on the other end there are institutions that are primarily scientific research organizations. Along that spectrum were institutions that were seeking to cause people to act in their own lives to do something and others that were simply trying to educate or prompt questions. So in that environment and with our mission statement we've got to walk the talk. Particularly when we assumed more control over what we do at the facility. It became very clear that we were doing a lot of things that were expensive, wasteful, and not in line with our mission in regard to the facility. This year we are spending a million dollars refitting and upgrading our systems—electrical, heating, air conditioning, and lighting—all to bring them in line with modern energy standards.

Last year, in cooperation with City Light, we installed the largest array of solar panels of any aquarium on the West Coast and we did it through a program that allows City Light users to buy some of that credit to offset their own use. Ultimately we will own all of those rights. But for the next 10 years, thousands of people in the city are participating in conservation through the Aquarium, so those are some examples.



**Q** *You've been in conservation for some time and have met a lot of people from the technical/scientific side as well as the business side. Something draws folks to conservation or the environmental sector that is probably unique to each person but there may be some commonalities. Are there things in your experience that are common reasons for people to choose a career in conservation?*

I'm going to segment that a little bit. I find that we have people who are much more specifically drawn to the Aquarium because of its connection to the sea. The marine aspect of it is the appeal. And we have people here who decided they were going to be a marine biologist at age ten and here they are. The head of our life sciences department grew up on Vashon Island, was around the water all the time, and went to the University of Washington and got his degree in fisheries. His first job was at the Seattle Aquarium when it first opened and he's still here.

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**“ As a challenge every day you have to ask, how can you frame the issues so that people can relate to them? ”**

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On the more general conservation side, I think we have more examples of that in education, in the interpretive department, where there is an opportunity to interact heavily with kids at a formative stage of their development and feel that you could actually have an impact on how they behave and give value to the world they live in.

We do research each year on how our staff feels about their job and how the Aquarium is performing. What we've found is that there is extremely high alignment with the mission which sometimes gets us in trouble if they think we are not managing the place properly in every respect toward that.

**Q** *With the economic challenges that we've all faced and with your own transition, the challenges around becoming a self-standing organization, what types of non-financial incentives or benefits have you found to be successful here?*

I wouldn't hold ourselves up as paragons of super smart practices, but we have tried to listen. I think it starts with going back to the comment earlier of why are people here? To give them the sense of identity that this is a very special place. We give a family membership to the Aquarium to every employee. It's a free and easy thing to do that they can be proud of and it's a way for them to share their work with their family. We do the same thing with volunteers when they reach a certain number of hours.

The Aquarium has been in a period of substantial change for a decade, which can unnerve people. During that process we have tried, in many ways, to give people the opportunity to tell us what they think, what they're concerned about, and to provide some ways to see action—which doesn't cost any money but is a sign of respect.

Another thing we do is that we have a monthly all staff meeting, and we program it. We put as much attention into that as you would into putting on a show. In an effort to think about who is doing good stuff in the institution that people don't know about but should know—and not in the management ranks. We put those people into the spotlight to share and take pride in their accomplishments. After all of those meetings I walk away thinking, and I think others do too, “Wow, this is a happening place”, and it's fun to be a part of—and that doesn't cost anything.

**Q** *What brought you into this field? What attracted you initially and what has kept you here?*

From the time I was six years old and I got a campaign button out of a gumball machine, I had an interest in politics, history, and public affairs. I was active in civic things as early as sixth grade, and that propelled where I wanted to go to college. I was active in politics in college, and then helping elect people to office and working in government, and in all of that was a sense of public purpose.



When I got married, my wife and I decided that running for office was probably not a good idea for raising a family and so, I decided to get into business. I spent a period of time in business, which brought a certain satisfaction; but what I found was that ultimately, it wasn't enough. As a result of that epiphany, my involvement with the Zoo board led to being asked to set up the private side of the Zoo. So that's how I got into the Zoo world and in that sense the conservation world.

Then later on, the Aquarium had a need to follow a similar path to the Zoo in its evolution as an organization—leaving City management and becoming a nonprofit, purpose-driven institution. So that's what led me into this.

**Q** *Thinking back over the course of your career or back to your academic days, what stands out as the most important piece of advice that anyone has ever shared with you?*

**A** One of my favorite people that I've known in my life, and worked for, was a man named Joel Pritchard. I helped elect him to Congress and was his Chief of Staff for a long time in Washington D.C. I remember him telling me about what shaped his decision to get involved in public life. It came from when he returned from WWII and felt that in addition to having a family he needed to make a difference somehow. His counsel to me was to do something where I felt purpose, and that's broadly defined.

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**“ In the conservation field, we do a lot of talking to each other and not enough to the broader population and we're seeing the result of that now. ”**

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**Q** *Is there anything else that you'd like to share?*

**A** Recent survey research indicates that conservation as a movement has lost substantial support in the U.S. over the last 30 years. Which doesn't mean the problems have been solved—quite the opposite—but why is that? I think it's a good question for people who have careers or are committed to conservation in different ways to recognize that there is a lot of work to do to understand what the public is thinking and to frame these policy issues and decisions and involvement in ways that don't assume that all right-minded people will immediately agree with you, because they don't. And I think it's a frustration, it's a frustration I know I have and we have at the Aquarium.

As a challenge every day you have to ask, how can you frame the issues so that people can relate to them? In the conservation field, we do a lot of talking to each other and not enough to the broader population and we're seeing the result of that now. Public policy of conservation today in the U.S. is a mess. And just doing the same things all the time is not going to change that.

# WILL ROGERS

THE TRUST FOR PUBLIC LAND, President & CEO  
SAN FRANCISCO, CA

**Q** *To start, why don't we talk about some of the challenges that you've had, as an organization and as a leader, around particular positions and opportunities that are more difficult to fill.*

I think the more difficult positions to fill tend to be higher up in the organization, and they tend to be the positions that require a breadth of knowledge and experience on the one hand and real skill in working with and supervising people on the other. So positions like Chief Operating Officer, especially in our organization where we have such a large complex organization with a broad mission delivery.

State Director is another position where people have to be good at managing people. They've got to be inspirational, good partners on the outside, and be able to create strong relationships with government and others in the private sector. They really have to understand and speak articulately to our mission so that they can also be good at raising money. That's a pretty broad set of skills, and so those kinds of positions are difficult to fill.

And then I think in general, just given the competition within the nonprofit sector, finding good philanthropy staff and avoiding staff turnover is always a challenge.

**Q** *So are there particular attributes that you look for when you're interviewing and recruiting? Maybe you've already mentioned some in your first response, but are there three or four things that come to mind?*

Obviously subject knowledge, the basic qualifications of the position. Beyond that we're looking for people who have either a demonstrated or convincing passion for what we do—that it matters personally to them.

In addition, people have to be good communicators and be good with people—especially in an organization like ours that is very distributed and where communication is critical. I look at nonprofit experience as a plus. It's not essential but we've certainly had situations where we hired people who we thought were going to be great, but who had spent so much time in the private sector that they never really quite got nonprofits, and others who just made the transition easily.

Also, I prefer it if the position that they're filling makes sense in the trajectory of their career. That's something else I tend to look for. And certainly, someone you'd want to have lunch with. Basically, do you enjoy being around this person. Because other people are going to be reporting to them, partners on the outside, donors they are talking to. So I look for someone who is personally engaging and good to be around.

**Q** *Have those things changed at all in recent years, or are those still some of the common things you've always looked for in people during your time with the organization?*

You know, I think those are pretty consistent. I think what's changed is the subject knowledge area. In other words, we're doing more and different things. So we're looking for different skill sets, but I think the sort of

THE  
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*With a goal of ensuring that every child has easy access to a safe place to play in nature, The Trust for Public Land works to protect the places people care about and to create close-to-home parks. The Trust for Public Land also conserves working farms, ranches, and forests; lands of historical and cultural importance; rivers, streams, coasts, and watersheds; and other special places where people can experience nature close at hand.*

*Will Rogers is a nationally recognized advocate for land conservation and has been with The Trust for Public Land since 1991, as the Director of California, Hawaii, and Nevada Operations, and as CEO beginning in 1998. Prior to The Trust for Public Land, Rogers managed urban projects for a Chicago-based real estate development company.*



personality traits to be able to thrive and add value, etc. have always been there.

One other thing we do look for is the sense that someone has initiative. We're reasonably entrepreneurial, and thinly staffed for what we accomplish so people have to be self-starters. We want people who are comfortable in an environment that is not highly bureaucratic and overly structured.

**Q** *Picking up on your comment about the logical trajectory within their career path—when you're talking to folks who are well established in either conservation or the nonprofit world, or are making a sector change, do you find that they are in it for the passion? Is there something about the field that draws people, or are people doing it because it's a rewarding career, is there any sort of common theme for why folks are attracted to The Trust for Public Land and conservation more broadly?*

I think we attract people from within the conservation field because of our focus on people\*. That is an ascendant theme within conservation.

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***“ I think now there's the recognition that if we don't include our species as one of the endangered species and begin to address it and connect people to nature, we're never going to get the rest of it to work. ”***

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For years a lot of conservation was about people being the problem, and protecting the rest of nature from people. I think now there's the recognition that if we don't include our species as one of the endangered species and begin to address it and connect people to nature, we're never going to succeed with conservation. There is a growing awareness out there, and I think that's one thing that attracts people within the environmental and conservation sector to our mission.

And then from outside, people who come from the for-profit world—we hired a Marketing Director from a major consumer products retailer and we've hired other people from the for-profit sector—I think for them it really is about meaning; taking what they've learned and being in a more meaningful work environment where they feel like they can contribute to something other than the bottom line.

**Q** *Have you seen any generational changes? As we're seeing the younger workforce move in and more experienced people start to retire, do you see any changes in the motivations, work styles, or work habits within the generations?*

The first difference that comes to mind is how millennials are more conversant with social media in terms of communication with each other, and use of technology—that is certainly a change.

Another I think is more mobility. People tend to not stay in their jobs as long. I detect more interest in training, and accumulating experience, that may have something to do with why people change jobs because that is important to them. We see the same fundamental commitment and passion about the work across generations. I don't think that is changing.

\*Mission Statement: The Trust for Public Land creates parks and protects land for people, ensuring healthy, livable communities for generations to come.



**Q** *With social media and the Internet, there is so much more information out there. You get these debates about climate change and global warming, there are popular topics relating to conservation and the environment that get a lot of attention paid to them. Have you seen that detract from or enhance your own efforts as an organization to really focus on the issues that are important to your organization?*

Well, there is a reason that people are talking about climate change and global warming, and it's because it's the biggest environmental challenge the planet is facing. So, of course it's making a difference and it should be making a difference.

I think what it means is that the way in which people care about the environment, care about conservation, care about connecting people to nature—whatever your niche is in the ecology of the environmental movement—climate change has an impact. And it's impacting how we talk about our work and the actual programs that we do.

For us, whether we're talking about our land and water work outside the city limits, or we're talking about our parks for people working inside cities, climate change is certainly a major theme. It has become almost malpractice—particularly in big cities that have storm water run-off problems, combined storm water sewer systems, and where we have these much more frequent severe weather events—if you don't actually engineer parks to be sponges. So, the actual on-the-ground implementation work is changing in response to climate.

There are some other issues as well such as protecting shorelines to deal with buffering storm surge, etc. or health and the obesity epidemic. We're now doing fitness zones around the country. That's something we weren't doing five years ago. But we're responding to fundamental changes that are going on with the environment and society. So, those things are very real. Some topics can also be faddish to some extent, but they do demand a response.

**Q** *We talked a little bit about what moves people into the conservation/environmental field. What is it that you find draws people to it, if there's anything you want to add to your earlier response? And maybe on the other side of that, do you see common themes for why people are driven away from the field?*

Well, I don't know, when you talk about the field you're talking about a lot of different ways of engaging in the field. Advocacy is one way. I think people, in particular younger people, are very passionate in their beliefs. Fortunately, they still believe in the political process and in helping change people's opinions, and attitudes, and behaviors. But I think a lot of people burn out on the advocacy side of things. So to some extent, people come in because they feel they can make a difference and leave because it's exhausting and it uses you up. A lot of advocacy organizations are thinly funded and people end up burning out.

We're more on the implementation side. I believe there is an awareness of big problems out there and there is both a need and an opportunity to deal with them. I think the salience of climate change and some of these other issues is attracting people into the field. Historically it might have been because boomers grew up doing the family trips in the station wagon to the national parks, and getting outdoors with a stronger connection with nature. I think that connection with nature is more tenuous in the current generation. But the challenges and problems are certainly more evident and a lot of people are responding to that.

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**“I think that connection with nature is more tenuous in the current generation.”**

**Q** *Is there anything you might tell someone who is contemplating either a career change, or thinking about it as they are winding their way through college and thinking about a career in conservation and the environmental field?*

It can be very meaningful. So if it is important to people to make a difference, particularly if people have a



connection with nature, this is a great field to be in. I think if people are looking to make a lot of money, then I would advise them against it. I talk to a lot of 20-somethings who are coming out of college or graduate school and are just doing informational interviews. I think it's important for people to cultivate that inner voice that tells them if something fits or doesn't and to pay attention to that inner voice. I think that's true in any career or field. Beyond that, it's the sort of thing you have to try on and see what fits.

**Q** *What brought you into the field, and what keeps you in it?*

**A** I have always loved nature and the outdoors. In past careers I was in agriculture for a while, I was a beekeeper. I got into real estate. I like cities and the built environment, and I like the way those things work together. I think it was the combination of my skill set around business and real estate, my love of nature, and the need to find a place where I could have a career where both my passions and my skills would be useful. And dumb luck brought me to The Trust for Public Land 22 years ago.

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**“ I came for the land but stayed for the people. ”**

**Q** *I'd like to ask a couple of questions about The Trust for Public Land more broadly. Given that you work in the conservation field, I would expect that there is some feeling of responsibility to act in a way that is consistent with your mission as far as how you operate as an organization. I'm curious if there are any particular steps that you've taken as an organization to mitigate your impact on the environment and if there are particular things that you have found to be successful in that regard?*

The usual approaches: we recycle, we use green products, and we do what other organizations do. We try to locate ourselves in green buildings both for the health of our employees and also because we want to support that sector of the development community.

In the parks work we do around the country, we make a point of using green materials produced by responsible manufacturers and we're in the process of adopting a nationwide standard for that. We certainly try to minimize our travel and we do a lot of conference calls. We have our leadership spread across the country and I think that is actually helpful, we're not all concentrated in our headquarters in San Francisco. We use Skype; we're still figuring out what to do with teleconferencing. We have 30+ offices around the country and so we're highly distributed, which creates certain challenges, but we don't do a whole lot of face to face.

**Q** *Considering what's happened with the economy over the past several years, a lot of organizations have pursued non-financial or non-monetary ways to recognize, reward, incentivize, and retain their talented staff. Is there anything like that The Trust for Public Land has been able to identify and implement that you have found to be successful?*

You know, this is one of those things everybody talks about, and I'm not sure how much there is in the way of breakthrough. I think a really strong organizational culture where people enjoy working together and enjoy the workplace is huge. And I think a lot of our staff's longevity—we have relatively low turnover compared to other organizations—can be attributed to the mission, but other organizations have great missions as well.

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**“ I think it's the day-to-day passion and commitment, and the 'make it happen somehow' attitude of people in this organization that really inspires me. ”**

In reference to the culture, we have a place where people genuinely like working together and like coming to work. To a point, flexibility in terms of work style, work hours, etc. can be helpful. We don't have a workplace where everyone can work from home if they want to, but we do have more flexibility now than we used to.



And finally, recognition. I think genuine recognition, not the knee-jerk recognition that some organizations do, also helps people. But I think it's easy to be formulaic rather than genuine and I'm not sure how much good that really does.

**Q** *My last question is sort of a personal question about your own inspiration. Is there anyone or anything that you've found particularly inspiring during your career you'd like to share with us?*

**A** There have been a number of people who have inspired me. Our organizational tagline is "Conserving Land for People." And a lot of staff end up saying, "I came for the land but stayed for the people." I do travel around the country a lot (probably more than anyone else in the organization because of the nature of my job) and I spend a lot of time with staff as well, and what most inspires me are the remarkable efforts, and remarkable level of commitment, and passion people put into their work. It just inspires me every day.

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**“ It’s a wonderful culture that combines genuine commitment with entrepreneurial spirit. ”**

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There's no one person, no mentor, nothing along those lines—I find mentors in a whole lot of people. I think it's the day-to-day passion and commitment, and the "make it happen somehow" attitude of people in this organization that really inspires me. It's a wonderful culture that combines genuine commitment with entrepreneurial spirit. It feels almost like a hybrid culture: the for-profit seriousness about outcomes—and we are certainly competing with for-profits on the one hand—and the best of the idealism and commitment that you find in nonprofits. That's what gets me up, keeps me here, and gets me energized.

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