

## The Making of a Conservation Maverick

Amos S. Eno began his environmental career in slightly unorthodox fashion - by traveling around the world, twice. His travels exposed him to David Western's work with the Maasai in Kenya's Amboseli region, which began one of the first programs to include the local pastoral community in conservation and the sharing of tourism revenues. His first job in 1974 landed him in Washington, DC, working in the Office of Nathaniel P. Reed, Assistant Secretary for Fish and Wildlife and Parks. After working his way up in the Department of Interior he joined the National Audubon Society for six years. From 1986 to 1999, Mr. Eno led the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, or NFWF, serving as its Executive Director for the last nine years of his term.

Someone with such long experience working with and for government agencies can be expected to have a clear-eyed view of bureaucratic strengths and shortcomings. Such is the case with Mr. Eno, who began to focus on supporting private initiatives on private lands while at NFWF. Through grants to California rice farmers, the Malpai Borderlands Group, the Colorado Cattlemen's Agriculture Land Trust, and the California Rangeland Trust during the 1990s, his hunch about the importance of private landowners grew into a certainty.

After leaving the Foundation in 2000, Mr. Eno looked around and realized that he wanted to continue his work with private landowners. "I felt that greater focus, attention and public support were needed to foster private stewardship on working landscapes. I still do."

"As the great grand-nephew of Gifford Pinchot, father of the US Forest Service, I'm acutely aware that Pinchot's vision of a conservationist is embodied in the rancher, the farmer, and the private forester stewarding and renewing the bounty of his or her land. Pinchot wrote, 'The central thing for which Conservation stands is to make this country the best possible place to live in, both for us and for our descendants. It stands against the waste of natural resources which cannot be renewed; it stands for the perpetuation of the resources which can be renewed, such as the food-producing soils and the forests; and most of all it stands for an equal opportunity for every American citizen to get his fair share of benefit from these resources. . . . Conservation is the most democratic movement this country has known for a generation.'"

Eno believes that the federal government, despite its history of creating a system of parks and nature reserves admired around the world, needs to radically change its focus to achieve conservation. "The feds are broke and states are broke. Agencies have a \$25 billion backlog of operations and maintenance funding, and for the past several years Forest Service expenditures to fight wildfires have dwarfed their management and research budget!

"Where does that leave us? It leaves us working with what Aldo Leopold called the small 'cogs and wheels' of the countryside. I would argue that along with the native grasses, ephemeral streams, and top predators, those small cogs and wheels include the private landowners who have tremendous power to influence ecosystems.

"Furthermore, I believe that maintaining our human cultural heritage is as important, if not more so, than the application of science and technology to conservation. I've met so many landowners who love their land, it is part of who they are. If we allow that culture to die, I guarantee the health of the land will go with it."

Mr. Eno sees the coming focus of conservation on private lands as a new frontier, in all the context that the historical notion of the American frontier embodies. "It will be hard, difficult, work - pioneering new pathways and techniques, and fraught with missteps and risk. I certainly don't have all the answers, I don't believe anyone does. But I do believe we have a winning formula in the way that the [Private Landowner Network](http://www.privatelandownernetwork.org/) [http://www.privatelandownernetwork.org/] and our other sites reverse-engineer the web to bring valuable information to landowners for use in a way that fits their own unique circumstances.

"As Dan Kemmis (*This Sovereign Land*, 2001) has written, 'A steadily expanding number of westerners on both sides of the political fence are coming to believe that they can do better by their communities, their economies, and their ecosystems by working together outside the established, centralized governing framework.'"

## Questions and Quotable Answers

Q: How many private land owners are there in our nation of 330 million people?

A: "Less than 13 million: 2.2 million farms and ranches encompassing 920 million acres (USDA 2011), and 10.7 million forest land owners who own nearly three-fifths of all US forest lands. Together this assemblage of ranches, farms and private forests represent 70% of the US lower 48 states' landscape. If you throw in Alaska and Hawaii it declines to 60%, but it still represents, unquestionably the largest conservation market of the 21st century."

Q: If private lands are so important, why not rely on regulation to protect them?

A: "Are you referring to eminent domain? Endangered Species Act restrictions? The Clean Water Act's wetland mitigation requirements? All of these strategies have been applied for the past 30 years, and still our problems are multiplying. Plus, we live in a democracy where private property rights are respected, which is why these options have proven so controversial over the years. Voluntary action through easements, education, and technical assistance will be far more effective, but incentives can also be complemented by removing impediments to conservation. Revising the tax code so that landowning families are not forced to subdivide their property to pay estate taxes on farm land that is valued at the price of a condo development would be a major first step."

Q: Do private landowners, whose average ages are so advanced, really use the internet that much?

A: Yes. People over 70 are one of the fastest growing groups using the internet. I know plenty of ranchers on the move all day who are as tied to their smart phones as any Washington politician. Furthermore, a huge transition is coming, remember? The trade publication, *Agripulse*, recently reported that 83% of young farmers view the internet is an important tool to access general and farm news, while 72% turn to the web to collect buying information for their operations.

Q: Have you worked with the current administration to influence their thinking in these matters?

A: "Yes. We work closely with the federal land management agencies in developing key content for our landowner websites. We also put our 2 cents in to comment on the development of Obama's America's Great Outdoors initiative. To a large degree it relies on the 20th century strategy of focusing on public protection of large spaces, with one plank calling for a private

lands initiative. Far from simply a plank, I believe private lands will have to build our 21st century conservation initiatives from the ground up.”

Q: Landowners have been a key component of land management in the U.S. since its founding, and obviously today’s landowners have been aging for quite some time. Why is action so urgent now?

A: “Well, action has been needed for a long time. The issue now is that as aging landowners pass their land on to the next generation, problems are magnified. Land rarely goes to a sole heir, so it tends to be broken up or even worse, sold off and the proceeds shared among the next generation. Young people, even those whose families grew up on the land, are often much less engaged or knowledgeable about natural resource management. They need more assistance than previous generations. A study in the Rockies, conducted over a decade, found that ranch turnover went as high as 42%, and the majority of ranches went to amenity or out-of-state buyers. This new breed of landowner will almost assuredly need stewardship guidance.

“That same *Agripulse* article I cited earlier also stated that young farmers believe farm income should come totally from the marketplace (avoiding federal subsidies), and they are committed environmental stewards with 68 percent saying that balancing environmental and economic concerns is important and 58% using conservation tillage. I recently read in a blog that young people are turning in droves to farming, and since they don’t know how to farm, guess how they learn? The internet!”

Q: How can the urban populace help?

A: “I believe that urban people everywhere need more of a basic understanding of their connections to the local ecology - the part past the urban service boundary. They need to adopt the same attitude of awe and respect for today’s land stewards that we now tend to have for America’s original land stewards, the Native Americans. It’s no coincidence that many Native American peoples practiced burning as a means of promoting desired habitat conditions for hunting and gathering. Today, decades of inappropriate fire suppression have contributed to a build up of fuels, increased wildfires, degraded forest health, and the near loss of one of America’s great forest types, Southern longleaf pine. As metropolitan areas continue to grow, suburban sprawl and ranchette development put the squeeze on working lands and make landscape scale management, such as prescribed fire, nearly impossible. This can only change if the people living in cities understand and support land stewardship to the same extent they now support recycling and green energy.”