



Saving Long Lake: Community Driven Land Protection

In February 2020, the Crested Butte Land Trust completed a 750-acre federal land exchange that protected 120 acres and public access to one of Crested Butte's most popular open spaces, added 630 acres to the Gunnison National Forest and generated \$2.6 million for affordable housing projects in Gunnison County. What follows is a primer on the origin of the Crested Butte Land Trust and how this project responds to present community needs both in open space protection and the social fabric of this place.

Organizational Background:

The Crested Butte Land Trust is in its 29th year of protecting open space in Gunnison County. From inception this organization has focused on open space projects important to the protection of scenic vistas, recreation access, wildlife habitat protection and agricultural working lands. A relatively small land trust in terms of acres protected, the Crested Butte Land Trust has 4,500 acres in conservation easements and owns 1,500 acres in fee simple. From our first land conservation project that protected the confluence of Coal Creek and the Slate River and preserved the scenic vista of Paradise Divide between the towns of Crested Butte and Mt. Crested Butte, land ownership has been one of our most important conservation tools. Our most significant driver for fee-simple open space protection is recreation access. Crested Butte was a coal town, surrounded by company land on which the public enjoyed recreating until they were sold in the late 1980s, effectively cutting off town from the public lands just miles from the town's boundaries. Re-opening and protecting these corridors of access has been over 20 years in the making, which puts this organization at the center of public recreation planning in the Crested Butte area. In 2015 conserved lands saw over 100,000 summer recreators.

Why Long Lake Matters:

Long Lake, officially named Meridian Lake, is a vestige of the Crested Butte's glacial past. This natural lake, located just 2 miles as a crow flies from the Town of Crested Butte, was formed during the last ice age when glaciers traveled down the Slate River, Oh Be Joyful, and Washington Gulch drainages. The glacier that formed in Oh-Be-Joyful pressed into the Slate River Glacier to create a prominent moraine ridge between the Slate River and Washington Gulch. This ridge slumped once the glaciers receded to create Long Lake. With no springs or streams feeding this lake, its recharged with snowmelt from its small watershed. Easily accessible from town, Long Lake has been a favorite summer recreating spot for decades. One half of the lakeshore is owned by a multi-generational family ranching operation, the Allen Ranch, who has generously provided access for the recreating public. The other half of the lake shore was a 120-acre island of Gunnison National Forest surrounded by private property. In the early 2000s, this national forest property was proposed to fund the secure rural schools act via public auction. This idea was met with an outcry from the local community that Long Lake as too important to give up. This property sits adjacent to 1000 acres of conserved open space, provides critical fawning and calving big game habitat, and is a critical corridor for ranching in the Slate and Washington Gulch drainages. Fast forward to 2016 and divesting public lands was again in the spotlight. Having heard the public sentiment to protect Long Lake and the risk of its auction, the Crested Butte Land Trust reached out to the Gunnison National Forest to negotiate for the protection of Long Lake. What resulted is a \$3.4 million project that solidified the traditional work of the Land Trust while building bridges with a community under strain from rising real estate prices and the disappearance of the working class.

The Exchange Mechanics:

Protecting these 120 acres on Long Lake required private property of equal value be traded to the Gunnison National Forest. Private inholdings along popular recreating routes were creating challenges for forest service recreation management with many public disputes involving the closure of popular routes due to lack of responsible use by the public or management by the National Forest. The Land Trust owned a 16-acre inholding that included much of the lakeshore on Copley Lake, a popular alpine lake near the townsite of Irwin northwest of Crested Butte. As we looked for the remainder of the value, we learned that the Forest Service had been in long term negotiations with the Trust for Public Land to acquire a 614-acre inholding adjacent to the Fossil Ridge Wilderness. The Land Trust agreed to purchase the Fossil Ridge property, which combined with Copley Lake would equal the value of Long Lake. This meant the land trust needed to raise the full purchase price of Fossil Ridge in order to protect Long Lake.

Innovative Philanthropy Leads to Broadening the Open Space Tent:

The purchase price for Fossil Ridge would be the Land Trust's largest purchase to date, \$2.9 million, but this property came with big opportunities. This acreage was donated by long time locals Judy and Butch Clark, with the stipulation that the proceeds of it is public land conservation be designated to fund affordable housing in Gunnison County. They created the Gunnison Valley Housing Foundation to take the proceeds and partner with local municipalities to fund affordable housing developments. This funding mechanism gave conservation supporters and community development advocates a shared purpose. Through the 18-month campaign the Land Trust and Housing Foundation collaborated in grant proposals and fundraising efforts that built trust between two facets of our community frequently viewed as being at odds with one another. Locals concerned about affordable housing rallied to purchase ski chairs from Vail Resorts to support the effort, municipalities that did not have a stake in the future of Long Lake stepped up to fund the project.

Stewarding Long Lake- New neighbors Sustainable Recreation

Long Lake has had very little investment to manage the natural resource impacts of recreation. Both our ranching partners and adjoining neighbors have felt the pain as uniformed recreators end up dehydrated on back porches or start campfires that could threaten the grazing needs of a willing partners ranching operation. Early in the process the Land Trust and the Allen Ranch agreed to a revocable license for land trust management of recreation access to Long Lake on their property. This allowed the land trust to bring in partners like the mountain biking club and Vail Resorts EpicPromise Volunteers to reroute the unsustainable lake access trail completed in fall of 2019. Consistent recreation signage is the priority for 2020 followed by a trailhead and sustainable trail access plan that will re-envision trailhead and trail alignment that accounts for growing recreation pressure in our community. This community driven planning process will need to overcome years of resentment between adjoining landowners and the recreating public, but this organization's former and current successes in community recreation planning and management mean we are viewed as one of the only parties able to change this dynamic.

In closing protecting Long Lake through this collaborative exchange enabled the Land Trust to expand our ability to address community need while focusing on our core priority of open space protection. We are now pursuing more hybrid projects in partnership with our affordable housing partners to protect open space while providing opportunities to invest in affordable housing.

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Long Lake Land Exchange Story Map: <https://www.cblandtrust.org/maps/>