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New book underscores emotion behind land trust movement

by **Douglas Imbrogno**
Staff writer

CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- A quote from Rand Wentworth, president of the Land Trust Alliance, pretty well sums up the book "Listening to the Land: Stories from the Cacapon and Lost River Valley":

"Stories about the why of saving the land, not just the how."

The handsome softcover book of photos, stories and quotes -- text by Jamie S. Ross and photos by Tom Cogill -- is newly out under the banner of the West Virginia University Press, and at one level the book is that rarity: a positive and hopeful publication about West Virginia.

At a subtler level, the book is also a well-put-together argument for the efficacy and power of land trusts at a time when development, from subdivisions to Interstates and power line corridors threaten the land. Nancy Ailes, executive director of the Cacapon and Lost Rivers Land Trust since 2000, helped to spur the book project on to underscore that it is the connection to the very land itself that makes land conservation work.

"Nearly every time we sit down to sign a conservation easement in an attorney's office, the landowners who are protecting their land burst into tears -- and I don't mean quiet tears. I mean sobbing out loud," Ailes said.

"It took me off-guard. It was that deep feeling for what they had done for their land and what it meant for them that gave me the idea about this book. I wanted to capture the stories behind those tears."

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"This place IS my mom and dad. The moment I drive into the lane I feel their presence. They're that much a part of this place." -- Becky Rudolph, from the book

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Land trusts work to put legal limits on how a piece of land may be used in the future in order to protect its status. The Cacapon and Lost Rivers Land Trust is by far the largest independent land trust in West Virginia. And -- with 13,000 acres projected to be protected by the end of the year -- is one of the top eight trusts (by acreage) protected in the entire Chesapeake Bay watershed.

"This is the most biologically diverse watershed in the Chesapeake Bay drainage," Ailes said. "It's the most biodiverse watershed in the whole Potomac River drainage. It's because people have taken care of it. It didn't happen accidentally."

There's also another reason for a book of stories about what the land means to people who've lived on it for generations, just like Ailes, an eighth-generation Hampshire County resident.

"I also wanted this book to help other land trusts understand that, I think, to be an effective land protection leader, you have to be able to empathize with the people that you're working with and understand where they're coming from."

The stories about the land and family homesteads are important "in that, land protection relies on neighbors talking to neighbors," Ailes said. "And that's how we get our work done. It's not me going out there and trying to sell land protection. It's about me getting to know a person who wants to do it and then having that person knock on their neighbor's door."

Hence, a book that recounts the Rudolph family's generations of fine-tuned haymaking. And Josh Frye's challenge of running the family farm near Wardensville, explaining in the book one reason why he turned down a career elsewhere to return home: "I'm so sick of seeing farmland developed. It scares me, too, because God doesn't make any more land. Once it's gone, it's gone."

For Frye, such tales paint a welcome portrait.

"The books I see about West Virginia are the poor, toothless people that everybody pities. I don't think we recognize sometimes what we have. I think we need to be proud of what we have and what we've protected and how we've stewarded our land.

"That's important to land protection. Sometimes we don't have that comparison to know we've got something to be proud of. I want this book to say, 'I matter' -- not me personally, but that this watershed matters and that the people who have stewarded this land for so many generations matter."

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"My mother and father both sacrificed and worked to get this place. My dad was a plumbing contractor, but my mother raised chickens and turkeys and pigs and anything to make a dollar. I've worked like hell, too, ever since I was a little kid. And if you work for something hard enough, you're going to take care of it, whatever you get. And I want it to remain just like it is. That means remaining as a haven for wildlife, and a source of community and renewal for all the hunters who have been coming for decades." -- Butch Mills, from the book

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Ailes has a straightforward philosophy when looking for supporters of land trusts.

"When a person comes to me and asks about this, I ask them: 'Does protecting your land pull at your heartstrings?' If they say, 'No, it doesn't, I just want the tax write-off or you're gonna have to convince me,' I just say, 'Next!' It's not my job to convince someone to do it. It's my job to help someone who wants to do it because it pulls at their heartstrings."

Which gets back to her overall philosophy of managing a land trust.

"It's a people project -- it's not just a land project when you're working for a land trust. It's all people and those stories, which translates into emotional connections."

"Listening to the Land: Stories from the Cacapon and Lost River Valley" can be purchased through the Cacapon and Lost Rivers Land Trust web site at cacapon.org.

Want to know more? The Cacapon and Lost Rivers Land Trust is one of several local, statewide and national land trusts operating across West Virginia. Founded in 1995, the West Virginia Land Trust, for instance, has been working statewide with landowners for nearly 20 years to try to preserve land through conservation easements and purchases. To see other land trusts working in the state, visit the Land Trust Alliance web site, findalandtrust.org.

Reach Douglas Imbrogno at doug...@cnpapers.com or 304-348-3017.