

Grace at the Clark Fork/Pend Oreille Conservancy

A Q&A with the Executive Director *by Trish Gannon*

In the fall of 2011, Eric Grace and his wife moved to Sandpoint, where Eric would take over the position of Executive Director of the Clark Fork-Pend Oreille Conservancy. With a background in land trust issues and a love of the high country, he and his wife Celeste (a large animal veterinarian) bring a lot to our communities. Recently, Eric took the time to answer a few questions about who he is, and what's going on with the CFPO Conservancy.

Q. So what is the Clark Fork-Pend Oreille Conservancy?

A. The Clark Fork-Pend Oreille

Conservancy is a non-profit land trust with a mission to help willing landowners permanently preserve natural areas, forests, lakes, streams, farms, ranches, and fish and wildlife habitat in Bonner County, Idaho and Sanders County, Montana.

CFPOC operates in the 1.2 million-acre Lower Clark Fork River/Lake Pend Oreille watershed that stretches from Trout Creek in Montana all the way to Washington state.

Since 2002, the CFPOC has successfully partnered with federal, state and local entities and private landowners to permanently protect critical habitat, forest and ranch land, important scenic areas and cultural landscapes. Our primary programs include the following:

- Our private land conservation program, which provides methods for landowners to permanently protect their land from development, with a focus on projects that directly preserve our watershed's ecological integrity. The primary tool we use when working with interested landowners is a site-specific conservation easement; a permanent legal agreement between a landowner and land trust that protects a property's special natural resources in perpetuity while allowing a range of activities such as farming or ranching. We currently hold and monitor conservation easements on 1,764 acres.

- Our public lands program, through which we encourage and facilitate public land management entities in their acquisition of land or conservation easements. These acquisitions help implement clearly defined conservation policies (such as the recovery plan for endangered bull trout) on properties with significant natural resource importance.

- Our outreach program, which focuses on increasing community awareness about the benefits of land conservation. Through this program, we also reach landowners who may be

interested in protecting their property's future but who are unsure about what methods are available for them to do so.

Q. Tell me what it is an Executive Director does:

A. Basically, the ED is responsible for implementing the CFPOC's programs. We are governed by a board of directors that sets policy and priorities, then the ED makes sure the works gets done. My primary duties currently include reaching out the public, working with contractors to make sure conservation projects are moving forward, fundraising and overseeing the daily running of the office. The CFPOC has two staff: Anne Mitchell, our administrative assistant, and me. Anne does a tremendous amount of behind-the-scenes work, and keeps me focused and on task. We also use contractors for specific projects.

The board also helps on projects, providing me great assistance. Plus we have general volunteers who help with all types of projects, from data entry, outreach, to moral support.

Q. What's your background?

A. I've been doing land trust work for the past 15 years. I recently relocated from a small farming town in western New York, south of Rochester, where I was the ED for the Genesee Valley Conservancy. I become interested in land conservation when my family got involved with the Genesee Valley Conservancy doing conservation easements on land we own.

Prior to that I worked in the gourmet food industry, where I learned all about retail (which has remarkable life-lessons). I also had other types of jobs typical for a recent college graduate who doesn't know what to do with his life.

I have a BA from the Colorado College, which is where I acquired a passion for the mountains and the West. I also spent several years working towards my Master's degree in Land Use Planning from the State University of New York (never did finish that pesky thesis, though). I decided there are many ways to become useful to the land trust community: a law degree, natural resource conservation, business, fundraising or planning. I chose the planning route as that was the most interesting to me.

Q. When did you come to Idaho and why?

My wife and I relocated to Sandpoint



last fall. Her parents live in Hamilton, Montana, and we wanted to be closer to them. The CFPOC job became available, I looked into it and realized I had the skills they need at this point in their growth, so when they offered me the position I jumped at the opportunity. Since then, we haven't second-guessed the decision. It's been great.

Q. What are some of the projects you're currently working on?

A. We have some exciting conservation projects in motion. We don't publicly talk about these until they're completed, but I can say they're diverse. One project has a public access component, and others are in the stunningly beautiful Bull River Valley.

Another thing we're working on is a fundamental overhaul to the way we spread the word to the public about who we are and what we do. We have a track record of great conservation success, yet most of the community we serve doesn't know we exist. One of my primary goals is to build the organization to the point where all area landowners know we are here and can help them with their conservation options. We also need to work on outreach to the general public to let them know who we are, what we do, and how our conservation programs benefit the entire community.

Q. How would you define the strengths and weaknesses of this area?

A. Obviously, the most striking thing about this area is its natural beauty and the opportunity for outdoor recreation. But, with the good usually comes some bad, and in this case it is (or was before the recent recession) huge development pressure. This is why a proactive land trust is so important. There are many examples of areas around the country that experience massive growth, which causes the loss of the very attributes that define the community.

Land trusts can work with individual landowners who see the need and value in private land conservation, and we have many tools we can tailor to the specific needs of the landowner that provide economic benefits while ensuring the land keeps its important natural features, whether it be ranching, forestry, habitat or scenic beauty.

I also really appreciate the sense of community I've experienced. The individual towns such as Sandpoint, Clark Fork, Noxon, all have very unique identities and take great pride in who and what they are. (I'm sure the other towns

do, too, I just haven't yet had the chance to explore them!) Collectively, they all play an important role in defining this great region.

After this March, I could use a few days of sunshine! But if that's a regional weakness, I know it will be more than made up for this summer.

Q. What do you like to do when you're not working?

A. I like to be outside playing. Skiing, running, hiking, horseback riding, canoeing, etc. I also like to cook and check out the movies and music being offered at the Panida.

Q. How do you think we can best balance the interest in using our natural resources with preserving them?

I must preface this answer by stating upfront that the CFPOC has no regulatory authority over any landowner. All the conservation we do stems from landowners who want to do conservation; we can't tell anyone that they must protect their land resources.

We also need to separate this question into two distinct areas: private land resources and public land resources. I'll focus on the private lands, as the CFPOC doesn't get involved in the debate over public land use (thankfully).

With that being said, my first thought is it's entirely possible to do both: use and protect. We can, and do, protect land that allows for use of the natural resources in a way that provides economic benefits to the landowner. Sustainable timber harvesting, ranching and recreation are perfect examples of this. Much of the land we protect has an element of sustainable use of forest products. We also protect a parcel that allows for cattle grazing. So the landowner has forgone his or her ability to sell the land to a developer, or open it to mining, yet they can continue using the land for economic benefit. For the CFPOC, conservation is not an all-or-nothing proposition.

Secondly, there are parcels that are better used for development. We don't advocate for completely ceasing all new development. We understand a vibrant community needs growth. We want to work with landowners and the community to help identify areas that are better left as open space. Once we have these areas identified, we can work with the landowners to find a way to implement this protection.

Conversely, there are areas that should be left completely wild. Stands of old growth cedar, streams used for bull trout

spawning, important properties that link larger habitats are just a few examples.

If we look at the region as a whole, we can achieve this balance. There's more than enough land and resources available to satisfy the economic needs of the community, while safeguarding important parcels. If we're smart about it, plan, and realize that the long-term economic health of this community relies on a continued use of these resources, plus protecting the recreation/tourism opportunities, it is entirely possible.

Q. How can people interested get involved with the CFPO conservancy?

A. People interested in learning more about our programs can find information on our website: www.cfpoconservancy.org (we're in the process of updating it, but there is some good info there now). We always need volunteers, depending on what types of projects we're currently working on. Give the office a call and talk to me about opportunities. Also, we rely on people helping with our outreach. If you know of a landowner you think might be interested in conservation, have them give us a call. 208 263-9471

Q. Anything else you'd like to say?

A. I'm just so happy to have landed in this remarkable landscape, doing this great conservation work. There's such great potential for substantially increasing the work we do. It's a challenge, but one that is terribly important.

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