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LAND FOR PEOPLE. LAND FOR NATURE. LAND FOR GOOD.™



A Story of Strengthening Communities and Ecosystems Through Extraordinary Collaborations in the Pacific Northwest

Topher Donahue

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TO THE SALMON


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These hand-carved block prints depict over two decades of Forterra's work throughout the region. Our collaboration began in 1998 with artwork for an entrance sign at The Hazel Wolf Wetlands Preserve and grew into a tradition of handmade prints to recognize community leaders, volunteers, donors and departing staff.

Each print is an original piece of artwork. After carving an image into the block, I ink the surface, place handmade paper on top and hand-crank it through a vintage printing press. I want to thank Carl at Montford Press for the wonderful hours spent printing hundreds of prints in his studio.

Woodcut printmaking is a slow, labor-intensive process, but worth it for the unique character it gives the finished artwork. These prints tell the story of land, people and stewardship and the varied projects that have been accomplished over the years, along with the heartfelt work that continues to this day.

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Locally Grown

PREFACE

My introduction to the many flavors of conservation began in elementary school with a Cousteau Society membership gift from my grandparents and finding a copy of Edward Abbey's *The Monkey Wrench Gang* on my parents' bookshelf. When my mom found me reading it, I could tell her Catholic schoolgirl side wasn't entirely comfortable with my exposure to hippy Hayduke and his friends wrecking bulldozers and having sex in the desert, but my dad's atheistic influence helped her see that reading Abbey in third grade might set me on a path to benefit the planet.

We lived in a cozy little cabin without a television, running water, or a telephone, at the edge of Colorado's Rocky Mountain National Park. As adolescents, inspired by Abbey, my cousin and I decided to fight back against the development happening around our family property, but aside from animated conversations about our eco-warrior potential, the only activism we ever mustered was to nail a note of disapproval onto a new bridge being built. It seemed counterproductive to resist development by destroying things, so my cousin and I never got our Hayduke on. We figured if we ruined the builder's equipment, as the Monkey Wrench Gang flavor of activism often did, the developers would just buy new tools and our fight would only increase the impact.

My grandpa was a professor of math, a home builder, a staunch environmentalist, and WWII bomber pilot who was shot down over Germany and spent a year in German prison camps. He spent the rest of his life actively protesting war from a position of respect unique to veterans. My immediate family was almost vegetarian, rarely eating meat at home, and donating to the World Wildlife Fund on a budget that qualified us for free school lunches, but when I started archery hunting in my twenties, my mom bought me my first camouflaged shirt. Clearly,

my family oozed with apparent contradictions: Catholic and atheist, warrior-professor pacifist, builder environmentalist, animal-loving hunter.

So, when an old skiing buddy, Dan Nordstrom, contacted me to see if I'd be interested in writing a book about Forterra, a land trust in the Pacific Northwest with initiatives involving environmentalists and developers, Tribes and loggers, Republicans and Democrats, rock stars and lawyers, politicians and farmers, with a mission involving both urban and rural lands, I was thrilled. It all made perfect sense.

I was particularly fascinated by the resurgent Tribal influence on conservation and land management, but when I reached out to Tribal representatives about an interview, the reception was less than enthusiastic. For a moment, I was surprised—until I considered how words written by white men had treated them. After seeing bulldozers rip through the burial grounds of their ancestors, and experiencing treaties broken repeatedly, no matter how well-intentioned Forterra may be, or how respectful I could be in the writing of this book, the fact remained that they are the original caretakers of this land and the European track record of stewardship and honesty hasn't given the Tribes much reason for confidence.

The Tribes on whose lands this story occurs include The Confederated Tribes and Bands of the Yakama Nation on the eastern side of the Cascade Mountains, the Makah Indian Tribe at the northwestern tip of Washington who are related to the Nuu-chah-nulth and Ditidaht peoples of the West Coast of Vancouver Island across the Strait of Juan de Fuca, as well as the Coast Salish Tribes—the collective name for the linguistically related Tribes whose ancestral lands lie on the west side of the Cascade Mountains and in the vicinity of the Salish Sea, the vast body of water that includes Puget Sound and extends from Olympia, Washington, to the Campbell River north of Vancouver, British Columbia. They are not a single culture or even country. They are more than forty sovereign nations that lie within the borders of the United States and Canada, each with their own histories, rules, and traditions.

Numerous Forterra projects have included Tribal consultation and consideration, many of which have unfolded beautifully and a few of which have stumbled. The history of Forterra includes passages where Tribal stories and Forterra's story

intersect; after all, any story of land in the region is, at its heart, a story of Tribal land. But this telling in no way assumes to represent the Tribal perspective of what happened; the path of the Tribes was not mine to follow.

As I dug into the story, I realized that my assignment was complex. Forterra is the product of a vast network of people and the myriad forces of a dynamic region in a time of profound change. All the communities involved have sacred places and are dealing with some of the most important matters in the land. Additionally, there was no single entity I could base a full storyline upon; instead, I was connecting threads from many different people who have helped weave the tapestry of the organization.

During conversations and while visiting some of these places, I realized that what filled my notebooks and recordings wasn't a history as much as a glimpse into the challenge, evolution, and state-of-the-art of conservation in the age of the electric car, melting ice caps, social media mayhem, Black Lives Matter, the reservoirs of Powell and Mead drying up—those kinds of heavies.

Forterra hired me to create this book, but I would have written it anyway. This is the kind of story that someone who read Edward Abbey in elementary school would be honored to write. I dearly hope the stories, characters, memories, successes, failures, lessons, wisdom, and vision in the coming pages will further the critical, no-holds-barred effort to improve the future of land and all who rely upon it.

— Topher Donahue



A tree's wood is also its memoir.

—Hope Jahren

INTRODUCTION

One evening in 2019, Ken Workman, a fifth generation great-grandson of Chief Se'alth, Seattle's namesake, stepped on stage for Ampersand, an event hosted by Forterra, and spoke in his native tongue before translating for us immigrants:

> *This is the language of the Duwamish people that we were forbidden from speaking for so very long, but now we're beginning to hear our words and they're coming back. The first request Se'alth made to Governor Stevens when presented with the Treaty that would take his people's land was: 'Know this: we require unencumbered access to our burial grounds because we, as Duwamish people, have been living and dying on these hills for thousands and thousands of years. We have stories of when there was a cold, and a great war, and then the cold went away. In all of that time, grandmas and grandpas, aunties and uncles, they have been going down into the ground in these places. So, when all this comes to pass, and you build your towns here, the streets will throng with the ghosts of the Duwamish people.'*
>
> *What (Se'alth) was saying, when you take it in the context of modern science, was that all those grandmas and grandpas, aunties and uncles, the ancient ancestors, all come back up from the ground through the trees, through those roots. Then in the springtime the leaves come out and give us the oxygen that we breathe, and so grandma and grandpa continue to work even today, giving us the crisp air of the Pacific Northwest.*
>
> *So, we say, 'Thank you grandma and grandpa, for your heart, for your strength, and for the work you continue to do today.' So, in buildings like this, in the old parts of Seattle, that were built in 1909, they have massive*

*beams… In those buildings are the DNA of the Duwamish people. So, when grandpa said, 'the streets will throng with the ghosts of the Duwamish people,' of course they will—you built your buildings out of us.**

This is the reverence we have for our houses made out of those trees, because we recognize grandma and grandpa are in those trees, that continue to give us shelter from the rain and from the wind, and so we thank them, we say, 'Thank you Lord, for your children, for the grandmas and grandpas and for the ancient ones that have passed. That we see you, the ancient ones that have passed, in the very food that is sitting on our table today. And we are grateful for that.'

And I am grateful you are here today, for Forterra's celebration. Just like my grandfather said, 160 years ago when he stood on the shore and said, 'Come ashore my friends, welcome my friends, you are welcome here.' Today, as the Duwamish, we continue to do the same thing in that we recognize that the world has grown much smaller today. So, we say, 'We welcome all people from around Mother Earth onto this land of the ancient Duwamish people, so it's my honor to say, thank you, and welcome.'



Along a lazy bend of the East Fork of the Satsop River in the Chehalis Basin of southwestern Washington, Chanty Sonnier owned a small ranch, with a barn old enough to be built from wood containing nutrients from Coast Salish ancestors. Sonnier added her own blood, sweat and tears to the property. "I built that place into the home I'd always wanted," she said. "It was my dream! There's nothing better than coming home after a stressful day, taking the dogs and heading down to the river, or grabbing a horse and riding into the hills."

---

*While human DNA or RNA has not been identified in trees,[1] marine-derived nutrients including nitrogen isotopes from salmon have been found in trees growing near rivers, and one researcher found that half the nitrogen used by trees growing near rivers in Alaska came from salmon[2] so it is quite likely that the wood in older buildings in the Puget Sound area contains human-derived nutrients from Coast Salish ancestors buried in the forest.

Sonnier raised her kids, sixty head of cattle, and ten horses on the property. For the first decade, it was paradise. Then, in 2008, a storm hit with 147 mph winds and thirteen inches of rain in four days. The Chehalis River was measured at over 50,000 CFS—nearly double its previous record. During the peak of the storm, the thunder of trees falling in the gale kept Sonnier and her sons wide awake. At dawn, they heard the 15x16-inch beam across the doorway of their barn snap. "We ran out there to try to prop it back up and realized the pastures were flooding. The cows were chest deep in water. We stabilized the barn, and then chased the cattle up onto the neighbor's hill. Then we just waited for the waters to recede."

That was only the beginning. In the following years, Sonnier frequently saw up to four feet of river surging across most of her forty-acre property. "Every year we would get more and more flooding. The water. You have no idea. When it came through the barn it would have whitecaps."

In 2013, Sonnier started losing animals. Five calves and a 2,000-pound, $10,000 breeder bull were swept away. When I asked her what might have changed to make the floods so much worse, she was quick to answer, "When they started heavily logging Matlock and the other side of the river—that's when we really noticed the water volume increase. It was incredible. There was no consideration for what happens below those areas. They didn't have erosion control. Over the last few years, they've started doing it, but it wasn't in place before. That caused a lot of our problems." During one flood, when she couldn't get home in time, her beloved horse, Alex, disappeared. Its body was found five days later and nearly fifty river-miles away on a beach at the mouth of Grays Harbor. That was the last straw. She wanted out of the heartbreak and declining functionality of her land.

In Sonnier's mind, there were two options: one, sell the doomed acreage to some unsuspecting newcomer, possibly with kids that could suffer the same fate as her horse; or two, find someone to steward the land who could help improve the situation. Forterra had expressed interest in the property as part of a greater floodplain initiative, the Chehalis Basin Strategy, that included thirty-five core partner organizations. As part of this program, Forterra purchased the land with funding from the State's Aquatic Species Restoration Plan which helped Sonnier into a new



The engineered log jam at the edge of the old Sonnier property on the East Fork of the Satsop River. Photo by Topher Donahue

home. Chehalis Basin Strategy collaborators took the baton and began restoring the property's watershed functionality. "It turns out, the property was perfect for a salmon restoration project," said Sonnier. "My kids and I, ever since owning the property, would go down on the sand bar (after a high-water event) and try to save all the smolts (small salmon) that were caught in the little ponds. We'd take nets and scoop up thousands of little fish and bring them back to the river."

When I visited the property, the barn floor was covered with the rippled sand patterns of a dried riverbed. The barn posts and an antique thresher machine were tangled in flood detritus. It was clearly a place where water ruled. At the river's edge, where Sonnier's cattle once grazed, an odd assembly of logs looked like the aftermath of a tsunami. A massive pile of entire trees, root balls still attached, was chained to posts sunk into the riverbed. Every time the river jumps its banks, debris catches on the posts and logs, slowing the water and adding to the feature; an engineered log jam providing habitat and forage areas for the fish and restoring the function of the floodplain.



The nutrients of salmon and Coast Salish ancestors in the beams of old buildings are where we now find shelter and community. A human-engineered heart at the center of a natural salmon nursery. Humanity and nature; it hasn't been a very reciprocal relationship lately, but the Pacific Northwest is uniquely suited for proving that it can be—indeed must be.

To start with, the features of the region are cartoon-like in scale. The size of the trees; the symmetry and juxtaposition of three-mile-tall volcanoes rising from evergreen forests rubbing against the crashing surf of the planet's biggest ocean; the intelligence and community commitment of the orca; the improbable life cycle of the salmon; and the 10,000-plus years of human ingenuity nurtured by its fertile soils.

Likewise, as the birthplace of such capitalistic juggernauts as Microsoft, Boeing, Starbucks, Weyerhaeuser, and Amazon, the region's global impact, both productive and destructive, boggles the mind. A comparison of aerial views of the Puget Sound area from before European settlement to today would put humans on par with glaciers, rivers, and tectonics as a force of change. Even before modern industrialization, the construction of Seattle entailed moving 50 million tons of earth to flatten a range of coastal hills, fill in tidal flats, and build Harbor Island, the largest man-made island on Earth at the time.

In 1916, when the locks were opened on the Government Canal, which connects Lake Washington to Puget Sound, the lake level dropped substantially, and the Black River vanished. Duwamish leader, Joseph Moses, described what must have been an apocalyptic day for the people who'd lived in harmony with the river and its resources since time immemorial: "The waters just went down, down, until our landing and canoes stood dry and there was no Black River at all. There were pools, of course, and the struggling fish trapped in them. People came from miles around, laughing and hollering and stuffing fish into gunny sacks." That was just one in a series of water diversions that reduced the Duwamish River watershed from 1600 square miles to 480.

Nature's moods in the region are also biblical in proportion. Sitting on a subduction zone, significant earthquakes happen about once each decade and one of



We can't conserve our way to sustainability. —Gene Duvernoy

Photo by Kristi Dranginis

the eleven coastal volcanoes erupts about twice a century. On top of the old guard catastrophes, climate change is now normalizing extreme floods and droughts. In the Chehalis Basin alone, "100-year floods" are occurring twice a decade—and increasing in frequency. The three largest forest fires in Washington's history have occurred since 2014.

These events highlight the fact that the "natural" disaster category is growing difficult to differentiate from the human-caused variety, and make it brutally obvious that the barrier we've erected between humans and nature is illusory. Virtually every scientist who studies climate, in separate labs around the globe, has shown beyond any reasonable doubt that the increasing severity and frequency of extreme storms, fires, floods, and droughts are driven by human activity. In light of this overwhelming evidence, the environmental movement is coming to the realization that just preserving natural areas isn't enough. As Forterra's first president and CEO, Gene Duvernoy, said: "We can't conserve our way to sustainability."

The outlandish environmental dynamic of the Pacific Northwest makes it a fitting place for a more robust and regenerative form of conservation to evolve. Of all the emotions I felt during the writing of this book, the most prominent was optimism. I heard stories about how capitalism, conservation, and technological innovation are working together to heal damaged landscapes and preserve pristine ones, of salmon runs improving, of ecologically savvy timber harvesting methods helping previously clear-cut forests heal, and of innovative investment in communities resulting in more equitable, livable, and environmentally friendlier neighborhoods. I also had a front row seat to Forterra's most difficult challenge to date, one that illustrated clearly how critical it is to work together respectfully despite ideological differences if we are to solve our biggest problems.

What you're about to read is just one version of a living history that shines a light into this optimistic future and involves hundreds of organizations, thousands of people, businesses ranging from a one-man sawmill to some of the planet's biggest corporations, and the millennia-old commitment of Tribal Nations to nurturing both land and people for all time.





Goat herd in the North Cascades.
Photo by Jeff McGraw

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We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect.

—Aldo Leopold, 1948

CHAPTER ONE

WHY DO WE *Need* LAND TRUSTS?

If only the land could talk

Fly over the Pacific Northwest on a clear day (that may take a few tries) and you can't miss the checkerboard pattern of clear cuts in the vast forestlands below. If you like the symmetry, thank Abraham Lincoln. To incentivize westward expansion, he offered railroad barons ten, then twenty, square miles of land for every mile of track built, alternating on either side of the railroad.[8] This set the stage for a lasting and awkward wealth balance in the region, furthering a land ownership dynamic that was, from its very origins on the continent, cringe-inducing.

In contrast with the romantic image of poor immigrants coming to a new land to find their fortune, infant America was a commercial venture funded by private financiers in England. Settlers in Jamestown, the first European settlement on the continent, survived the first winter of 1606–1607 by trading with the Powhatan Tribe, but within two years more settlers had arrived and relations with the Natives had soured. By the end of the second year, 400 out of the 500 settlers had died, mostly from starvation.[9]

The blame for the disaster, and its salvation, depends on which version of history you read. One interpretation of the story is that the endeavor was doomed to failure until Governor Thomas Dale allotted each settler three acres of Powhatan land as their own. According to the CATO Institute, a libertarian think tank, tobacco exporter John Rolfe said that once private property was instituted, settlers

could engage in "gathering and reaping the fruits of their labors with much joy and comfort."[10]

Further research reveals that this private-land-as-savior version is grossly oversimplified. Governor Dale's private land allotment innovation was initially based on indentured servitude to the colony, and later a system that *sold* fifty acres to investors for twelve pounds ten shillings. Some historians consider this to be the first time land was exchanged for cash.[11] In the early American land game, nothing was out of bounds. From there, the story of building a country on the backs of indentured and slave labor is well known, as is Abraham Lincoln's effort to make the system fairer. Less understood, however, is how he used western land as a Tolkienesque ring of power, bestowing some with great riches while dispossessing others.

On the very same January day in 1862 that Lincoln declared the Emancipation Proclamation, his Homestead Act took effect, giving 160 acres to any head of family over twenty-one years old, including former slaves and women, who would venture out west and live on the land. A few months later, in July, he signed the Pacific Railroad Act of 1862 and set the stage for the checkerboard clear cutting we see today. It was an admirable time for Honest Abe and his pen, but there were a couple of issues. First, he created an enduring system of land ownership, caste, and wealth distribution based on a colossal government giveaway. Secondly, there were already people living on the land. American Studies scholar, Dr. Manu Karuka, explained: "According to treaties ratified by Congress, these lands belonged to different Indigenous nations. In other words, Congress granted land to railroad companies that was not legally under its control."[12]

While many writers of the 1800s eloquently described American Indian villages set against western vistas, a common political and social perspective of the time was that the Natives were doomed. When Columbus arrived, between 60 and 100 million people lived in the Americas.[13] By the early 1600s, the Native population had been reduced to around 6 million beleaguered souls.[14] It is this writer's opinion, one supported by numerous historical documents, that many of the treaties were seen as stopgap measures until the Indigenous disappeared. Rather than disappearing, however, they sustained their cultures courageously despite generations of inhumane efforts to hasten their demise.



Pacific Northwest timberland in various states of harvest and regrowth. *Photo by Margot Cheel*

In 1855, just seven years before the Emancipation Proclamation, Governor Isaac Stevens, a name still muttered with distaste by many in the Pacific Northwest, invited representatives from several Tribes to meet at Muckl-te-oh, what the Europeans call Point Elliott, for a shotgun wedding real estate deal where Native people had two options: sign away their land for a pittance, or fight a war they were bound to lose. They signed. In *Tulalip, From My Heart*, an autobiographical account of life on the Tulalip reservation that resulted from the Treaty, Harriette Shelton Dover described one young man's share of the compensation: for 54,000 acres that became Seattle and much of King County, he received a single fishhook and one yard of red ribbon. The boy got screwed, but 150 years later that Treaty, specifically its guarantee that the Natives would forever have hunting and fishing rights to their "usual and accustomed" areas, is restoring entire salmon runs and its influence is improving the quality of life—all life—in the region.

By 1871, the railroads had been given 175 million acres, more land than the state of Texas. Over the next century, the federal government would hand

270 million acres to homesteaders and firmly establish private land, the more the better, squarely at the heart of the American Dream. Land ownership came with a god-like power to do anything to the land, no matter the consequences. The ecosystem suffered, but there was so much of it, and the appeal of ownership so great, that not many paid it much attention.

Around the same time, the extensive logging of the Midwest and East Coast was becoming a cautionary tale of increased flooding, denuded landscapes, and poor water quality. Once a forest is clear cut, the hydrology of a watershed changes radically, with the same physics that contributed to the increased flooding of the Sonnier farm. A mature tree can soak up well over 100 gallons of water in a single day, and channel as much or more into the soils at its base. During a growing season, that same tree can release up to 11,000 gallons into the atmosphere through its leaves,[15] which is why cloud density is often thicker over forested terrain. Once the trees are gone, the stormwater, instead of soaking into the soil where contaminants are filtered and the water stored, runs unchecked across the surface. A healthy forest is the land's water treatment system and storage tank.

In 1905, the U.S. Forest Service was made official, but the U.S. Constitution did not allow the federal government to purchase private land. By leveraging the public's need for clean water, a banker named John Weeks initiated the Weeks Act, a bill allowing the federal government to purchase land for forest reserves. Virtually all the land in the east was private. Most lands to the west were public domain available for private interests, were owned by railroads keen to sell to the highest bidder, or were designated Native lands.[16]

President Theodore Roosevelt and Gifford Pinchot, the man credited with creation of the USFS, worked to establish federally managed forests from coast to coast. Their efforts resulted in 115 million acres of public land and countless Instagram destinations. Less well known is that over 86 million of those acres were Native lands.[17] Wielding the Dawes (General Allotment) Act of 1887, which divided Native property into 160-acre blocks that could be homesteaded (with the federal government holding the property titles), Roosevelt and Pinchot set about ceding vast acreages of Indigenous land to the U.S. government. In 1887, Tribes held 138 million acres; when Allotment ended in 1934, they were left with 48 million.[18]



The camas plant, with its nutritious potato-like bulb, is a valued traditional food source in the Puget Sound area. *Photo by Eric Strickler*

"Uninhabited wilderness had to be created before it could be preserved," wrote Mark David Spence in *Dispossessing the Wilderness*. As awkward as this fact may be to wilderness conservationists and romantics, Indigenous peoples used the land extensively. The prairies around Puget Sound existed due to Coast Salish Tribes burning forest to encourage camas and other tubers and berries that grew best without a thick forest canopy, but overall, the Indigenous lifestyle was gentle. Research published in 2020, using lake sediment charcoal, pollen, and archeological data, concluded that before European arrival there was very little human impact on the environment.[19]

Bob Whitener, a Squaxin Island Tribal elder and consultant who advised Forterra on multiple projects, described his view on Roosevelt's actions: "What Roosevelt did, in effect, was create a definition of conservation that said Indigenous use

isn't part of the ecosystem. That's just the exact opposite of the Tribal perspective of the environment; in the Tribal world, we're just part of the environment, the ecosystem. In fact, we're just one of many peoples that have this place in Washington. By peoples, I don't mean races of humans; I mean peoples. The deer people. The wolf people. The salmon people."

The combined effect of Lincoln's land giveaway and Roosevelt's wilderness creation rocked the Pacific Northwest with rich land to be owned, seemingly unlimited resources to be harvested, and the romance of wilderness untouched by human hands—immigrant ones anyway. In the nineteenth century, the region was already a beacon of opportunity for people from all over the world. The Puget Sound area was dominated by the British-owned Hudson's Bay Company, and it wouldn't have taken much of a shift in the accidents of history for the area to be under crown rule today, but one group was particularly influential in Americanizing the region: Black families from the east hoping to escape prejudice and farm soil they could call their own. A series of land purchases by community-minded Black families helped the young America establish a foothold in the region. The first was in 1844 when George Bush, a wealthy Black rancher and veteran of the War of 1812, purchased wagons for a group of families, Black and white, to travel west. Bush established a community at the southern tip of Puget Sound at the site that became the town of Tumwater.

Bush's effort staked American claim in the region to such an extent that some historians credit him for establishing an American town north of the Columbia River and ensuring that the land became part of the United States.[20] Twenty-five years later another Black man, George Putnam Riley, bought twelve acres in Seattle that became Beacon Hill as well as sixty-seven acres in Tacoma establishing the historic Black neighborhood of Hilltop, both of which played important roles in Forterra's story 150 years later.

Due to the twentieth century redlining policies of the Federal Housing Administration, Native Americans and Asians were prohibited from purchasing land, and people of color were only allowed ownership in certain areas. Further complicating the matter, rights to a single piece of land were divided up; mineral rights, development rights, logging rights, water rights, etcetera could be owned by different people and sold à la carte.



Kachess Lake from the Mt. Amabilis property, where Forterra purchased 480 acres of forest habitat for permanent conservation on December 11, 2011. *Photo by Charlie Raines*

It is from this melee that the land trust concept developed, a non-governmental entity tasked with finding long-term solutions in an increasingly complex, costly, and often destructive land/human interface. The formation of the first land trust is credited to The Trustees of Reservations which was established in Massachusetts in 1891.[21] The problems that land trusts seek to solve are so tied to the land dynamic in this country that author Richard Brewer wrote, "land conservation, like jazz, is an American invention."

Forterra president and CEO, Michelle Connor, after twenty-five years of conservation experience, shared her modern take on the task: "The water coming off developed land is sullied and the risk of fire is increased incrementally. Land trusts seek solutions that bend the economic trajectory and contribute to the greater landscape good." Without Lincoln's land giveaway, Roosevelt's dispossession in the name of conservation, discriminatory land management, and the separation of the various land ownership rights, the role of land trusts in the U.S. would be greatly diminished. Instead, there are 1400 land trusts spread across the country; isn't their very existence indicative that our relationship with land is fraught?



Ecosystems are so similar to human societies —they're built on relationships… Our success in coevolution—our success as a productive society—is only as good as the strength of these bonds with other individuals and species.

—Suzanne Simard, *Finding the Mother Tree*

CHAPTER TWO

COLLABORATE *Wildly*

As home to the largest temperate rainforest on earth, land conservation in the Pacific Northwest is inseparable from the evolution of forestry. One of the most influential proponents of developing more sustainable forestry practices is Suzanne Simard, a third-generation logger from British Columbia. In the early '80s, she saw that Douglas fir saplings replanted in clear cuts weren't growing as well as young firs in the nearby old growth, surrounded by trees the industry viewed as competitors.

Certainly, the forest is fiercely competitive, and Simard's work has been criticized for overemphasizing cooperation,[22] yet she showed that birch trees—once dismissed by foresters as "demon weeds"—*supported* Douglas fir through a vast network of mycorrhizal fungi in the forest floor. Long before Simard's experiments, Native Americans knew the fungal web was there, and that there was strength in diversity. In Simard's book, *Finding the Mother Tree,* she described Skokomish spiritual leader Bruce "Subiyay" Miller from of the Olympic Peninsula (Sunh-a-do) explaining how, within the forest floor, "there is an intricate and vast system of roots and fungi that keep the forest strong."

While Simard was traipsing around British Columbia conducting decades-long experiments, a land trust was forming in the Seattle area based on a very similar philosophy: *apparent competitors can be crucial collaborators*. The founding of

Forterra is usually credited to Gene Duvernoy, but he considers himself more of a "hijacker-in-chief" since the Seattle-King County Land Trust, which morphed into Forterra, already existed.

According to historian Alice Beattie, one of Forterra's founders and its first president, Gerry Johnson, explained how synergistic real estate negotiations drove the organization's development: "A lot of people were actively involved in the effort in the '80s to pass a county wide preservation bond issue. They authorized a program to purchase development rights from working farms throughout the county—it was pretty revolutionary at the time."

From this seed, transferring development rights (pulling building sites off one piece of land with high conservation value and transferring the site to another property more suited to development), the organization found itself frequently working on the needs of both built and natural environments, a space where few organizations functioned. One of the earliest examples of this is a collaboration between human "competitors" that resulted in a synergy not unlike what Simard found between birch and fir.



In the mid-'90s, Forterra (then called The Land Conservancy) was in its infancy, Duvernoy was operating on a shoestring (figuratively), and running the organization out of his attic (literally). He had previously worked for King County and had authentic connections in government and a background in complicated land transactions. A housing development firm, Quadrant, was planning to build several hundred homes on the Sammamish Plateau, an idyllic highland just east of Seattle.

In one corner of the property was a 100-acre wetland unofficially known as Saddle Swamp or Beaver Dam Wetlands. "I don't know how we originally came together," said Quadrant CEO, Peter Orser, in describing the collaboration between the county, Forterra, and his company. "I was trying to shed myself of this asset that was going to be very costly to maintain and, at the same time, in the back of my mind, trying to figure out how to make it a value to the larger community."

For a land trust to work closely with a county was not unusual, but adding a developer to the equation as an advocate for conservation was unprecedented. "I've come to realize that it was very unique," Orser said. "It required three different entities to put aside some of their traditional opinions of each other and get to a synergistic solution."

With Quadrant, King County, and Forterra each playing a critical role, the unlikely teamwork paid off. The ecosystem was preserved, stewardship of the land was funded in perpetuity through homeowner dues, and the surrounding communities benefited from a thriving wetland. Orser chuckled as he recalled complaining about having to build a bus parking lot at the site: "I was like, 'Why do I have to build that?' Now, I would hazard to guess that a million kids have been there and ultimately it was dedicated to Hazel Wolf,* the icon of icons in terms of land conservation."

Afterwards, Duvernoy asked Orser to join, and eventually chair, the Forterra board, which Orser looks back on as a day that lives in infamy. "I was one of the most outspoken board members, and not always in a complimentary way, trying to bring business dynamics, economic accountability, and 'what are we doing here' kinds of questions. And I was a developer! Most of the people on the board thought there should always be the word *rapacious* in front of the word *developer*." In the years that followed, Duvernoy and Orser occasionally gave a presentation titled *The Odd Couple of Conservation*. "That's why I love the organization," Orser concluded. "It doesn't immediately take a side. It has values and a mission focused on the natural world and the built world, but it was always about synergistic partnerships."



*Hazel Wolf grew up the daughter of a single mother in the slums of Victoria, B.C., Canada. After moving to the United States during World War I, she joined the communist party in an effort to help people. She was targeted by the U.S. government for being a "subversive foreign national" but, after a deportation case that lasted fourteen years, the accusation didn't stick, and she became a U.S. citizen. Wolf dedicated her life to both people and the environment, receiving the National Audubon Society Medal of Excellence among other honors.



The Hazel Wolf Wetlands, conserved by an unlikely collaboration between a county, a land trust, and a developer. *Photo by Todd Parker*

SEEKING ALLIES WHERE MANY WOULD SEE ENEMIES is also part of the fabric of the region, including the story recounted by Ken Workman at Forterra's 2019 Ampersand event. The image of Chief Se'alth standing on the beach of the Duwamish River with open arms welcoming the Maples family, a group of Europeans, in about 1850, is surely a high-water mark for humanity. In *The River that Made Seattle,* BJ Cummings wrote: "Se'alth's relationship with the Maples and their contemporaries was the product of his decision to launch a grand experiment: building a multi-ethnic society in his homeland… After careful consideration, he sought to ally with the new American settlers."

Throughout his life, Se'alth worked for a harmonious relationship with the immigrants, and his approach, while contentious among the Tribes, fostered collaboration between the Natives and settlers. Cummings went on to explain: "In stinging rejection of Se'alth's vision of coexistence, Seattle's first official act when incorporated in 1865 was to prohibit Native people from living in the city unless as laborers housed by their employers." But the experiment Se'alth initiated didn't die.

It's not unusual for people to think of Native American Treaties as something that happened long ago and have little modern influence, but in the Pacific Northwest they are real-time players in the land for good effort. Bob Whitener recalled the rise of Treaty Rights stoically. "We call them the Fish Wars, and it really isn't an exaggeration. Personally, I've been shot at, chased with pitchforks, hosed down with garden hoses, cussed at, spit on, you name it, while commercial fishing—and a lot of it happened while I was still in high school."

Tribal fishing access is protected by federal law, but the State of Washington didn't see it that way. The Native Americans acted according to the Treaty of Point Elliott, which gave them hunting and fishing rights. The game wardens, enforcing State law, arrested the fishermen. The moment the Natives were released from jail, they headed back to the river. The State response escalated. The Indigenous fishermen were beaten and gassed, their nets slashed, and boats and fish confiscated.

One gillnet-wielding warrior, Billy Frank Jr, was jailed over fifty times, starting when he was fourteen years old. In 1970, Frank was part of a group of sixty Coast Salish men, women, and children who went into battle—by going fishing under the Puyallup River Bridge in Tacoma. On this fateful day, the conflict had garnered national attention (thanks to actor Marlon Brando's arrest while protest fishing with the Tribes) and onlookers gathered to witness the scene. Frank wrote, "They gassed us and threw us in jail, but someone else got gassed that day too. His name was Stan Pitkin."

Pitkin was a U.S. attorney for Western Washington and had attended the protest to assess the situation. The irony is surely not missed on the Tribes that it took a famous white man getting arrested (Brando) before anyone paid attention, and then a powerful white man being gassed (Pitkin) before any federal action occurred. Shortly afterwards, Pitkin initiated the filing of *U.S. v. Washington* on

behalf of the Tribes. This lawsuit led to the landmark 1974 Boldt Decision. "Now, it's no longer an implied right of protection," said Whitener. "It's a guaranteed right of protection upheld by the United States Supreme Court. We still have to use it carefully, but it really helps all the environmental conservation groups and wildlife agencies in the state of Washington and it all comes down to the Treaty Right to protected habitat."

Mr. Frank went on to serve in the U.S. Marines and became such a steadfast and effective advocate for Treaty Rights and environmental stewardship that he received the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the Common Cause Award for Human Rights Efforts, the Albert Schweitzer Prize for Humanitarianism, the American Indian Distinguished Service Award, the Wallace Stegner Award, and the Washington State Environmental Excellence Award. At the time of this writing, a statue in his likeness was slated for installation in the place honoring the nation's greatest heroes: Washington D.C.'s National Statuary Hall.



Forterra's collaborations with forestry companies resulted in the conservation of many thousands of acres, but not everyone liked the idea. Maryanne Tagney, one-time Forterra board chair, recalled the heated emotions around the concept: "Way back in the '90s, when we first started working with forestry companies, we were getting hate mail: *You're selling out the environmental movement! You've betrayed us!* A big headline said something like: *Are Environmentalists Turning into Loggers?"*

One irate environmentalist was so inflamed by conservationists working with timber companies that they threw a pie squarely into the face of Charlie Raines, a bulwark of land conservation in the region and long-time Forterra collaborator. Raines wasn't representing Forterra at the time, but the incident illustrates the heated emotions surrounding the joining of the armies. Certainly, the ire for the consequences of rampant clear cutting and resultant habitat degradation is not misplaced, but logging's day in the court of ecosystem functionality came earlier than many others. Clear-cutting public land is no longer allowed and private-

ly owned timber lands are managed with far more consideration for long-term ecosystem health. This opened the door for Forterra to collaborate closely with timber companies; relationships that have proven critical in important land for good initiatives, including several featured in this book.

Thanks to the colorful Pacific Northwest culture, many of Forterra's collaborations have been exceedingly fun as well as productive, like when Forterra partnered with grunge music legends to save a mountain. It started when Pearl Jam's Gerry Amandes and Chris Cornell of Soundgarden were soaking at the Goldmeyer Hot Springs, admiring the scenery of Hardscrabble Mountain across the valley. Someone mentioned



Hardscrabble Mountain, where a collaboration between Forterra, Soundgarden, and Pearl Jam saved the peak from a mine. *Photo Forterra collection*

that a mine was planned amidst the spectacular landscape. The rock stars decided to buy the mountain and stop the mine. To make the transaction happen, they called Forterra.

Duvernoy had never heard of Soundgarden or Pearl Jam (quite possibly the only person in the Puget Sound area at the time who could make that claim) but he liked the idea of saving Hardscrabble. Michelle Connor bought him a Soundgarden CD and Duvernoy visited their studio to sort out details. "In a way, it was a culture clash, but with a great synergy," said Duvernoy. "There were cables, speakers, amplifiers, and guitars lying around, helter-skelter. Here were these hyper-hip guys in torn up jeans and whatever else the grunge bands wore back then—and me. I'm just a guy working on land conservation, so I went in there with my corduroy pants and button-down shirt, tripping over cables."

A three-year negotiation ensued, resulting in Forterra acquiring the property and its mineral rights. Members of both bands and their producer, Brendan O'Brien, donated $400,000 for the purchase. After the successful culmination of the Hardscrabble project, Pearl Jam enlisted Forterra to help plant thirty-three acres of trees to offset the carbon footprint of the band's 2009 world tour and kick started Forterra's initiatives involving carbon capture and nature asset services. At one point, Duvernoy embarrassed himself by forgetting that Stone Gossard played guitar so, in a light-hearted apology, bought Gossard a pair of castanets and told Stone it would help him increase his repertoire for the band.

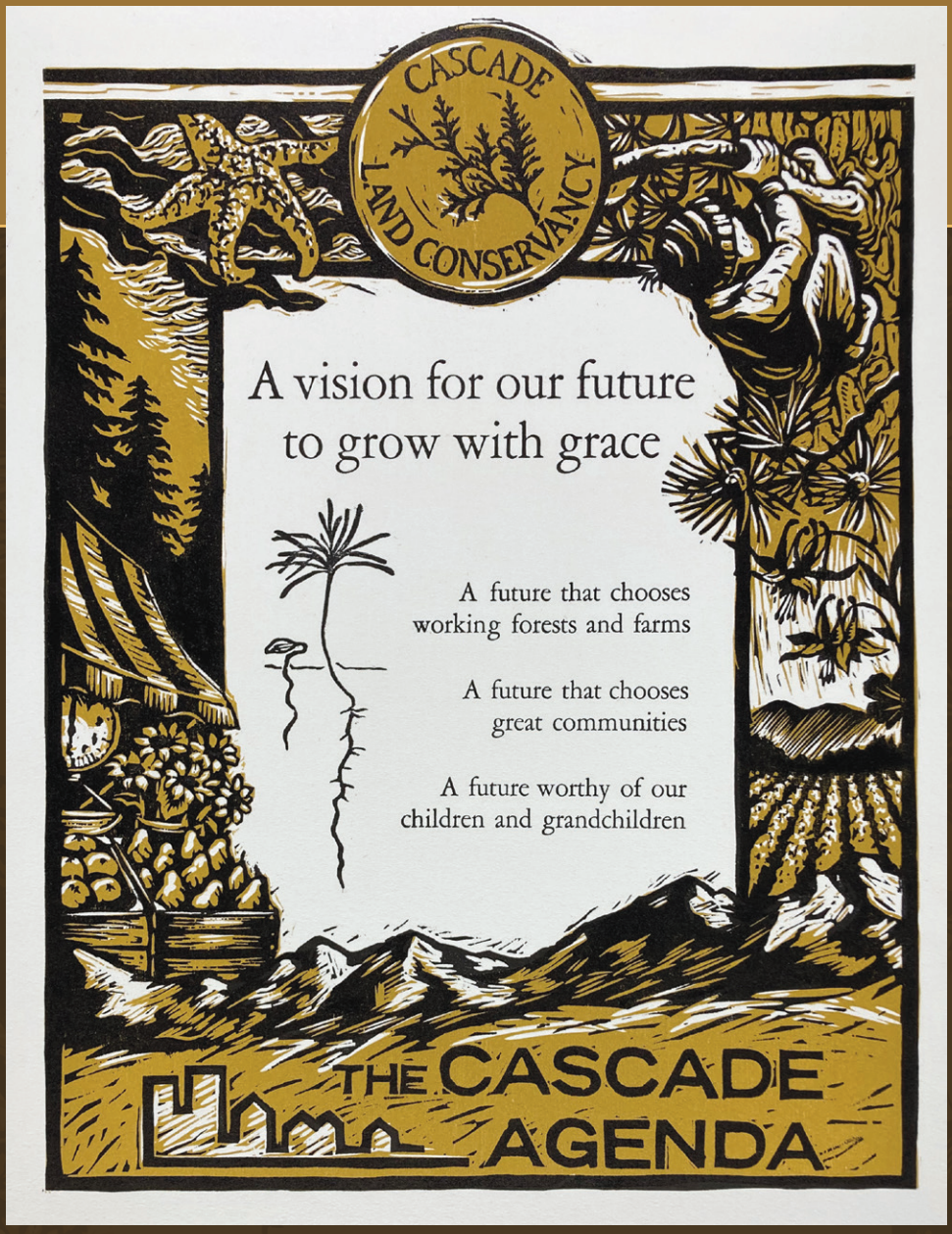


Board-level and network collaboration has also been a cornerstone of Forterra's work over the years and attracted some of the region's most visionary individuals. Many nail-biter campaigns succeeded thanks to board members bringing their experience, network, or resources to a project. Peter Orser explained, "The brain power and the mission alignment that sits in that room in the last thirty years has been impressive." As many upcoming stories will illustrate, this vast and diverse

Forterra network has a been a driving force in the win-win outcomes of so many challenging projects.

As years passed, nature's strong voice further emphasized the need to solve problems collaboratively. Along with the global symptoms of climate change—rising seas, scorching temperatures, gargantuan storms, farmland desertification, and displaced populations—local symptoms flared up as well. Wildfires in drought-stricken forests imbued once-glorious Seattle summers with vibes of Armageddon. During the 2021 heat wave, record high temperatures cooked clams in their shells along the coast of the Salish Sea and a fire swept through Lytton, British Columbia, a small town 150 miles north of Seattle, turning 90% of the town to ash in a matter of minutes. Simultaneously, the long simmering conversation around social justice flared up, with all the associated emotions of denial, fear, guilt, and distrust creating an uncomfortable environment, but also one ripe for change.

Nearly every one of the dozens of people I interviewed for this book, from Forterra employees sharing the insider view, to county government staff describing waterway restoration initiatives, to legendary investors and entrepreneurs who've helped shape the global economy, to community groups who worked for decades to save a few acres, expressed a similar sentiment: *success in matters of land is all about respectful collaboration.*



The Coast Salish sense of place I have engaged, must not be thought of as 'memory culture.' People continue to be richly engaged within the cultural traditions and practices which make places meaningful, and connect Coast Salish people to the land.

—Brian Thom, Dept of Anthropology, McGill University, Montreal, PhD Thesis 2005

CHAPTER THREE

CALL AND *Response*

Linguistic anthropologist Keith Basso spent many years with the Western Apache, where he learned that they view conversation as a form of voluntary cooperation in which the listener's perspective matters at least as much as the speaker's. "Persons who speak too much insult the imaginative capability of other people," Basso wrote, in his award-winning book *Wisdom Sits in Places*. "With too many words a speaker seeks to smother his or her audience by seeming to say, arrogantly and coercively, 'I *demand* that you see everything that has happened, how it happened and why it happened *exactly* as I do. A good narrator, on the other hand, encourages their listener to 'open up their thinking' and to 'travel in their minds.'"[23]

Halfway around the globe, in Sub-Saharan Africa, another millennia-old culture developed a musical variation on cooperative communication known as the *call and response*. It's the root of jazz and blues and has been described by scholars as a "democratizing process"[24] and a way of inviting the listeners to be "colleagues in the creation."[25] For Africans, pirated from their homelands by slavers, call and response became a survival tactic, a way to retain a sense of spirituality and community in an inhumane world.[26] As community advocate Jeff Dade explained it, "The call and response is so deep and widespread that it's American now. Black history is American history. Whenever we have Black

History month, I tell my white colleagues, 'That's you, too. It's part of all our rich heritage. There are parts of Black culture that are already in you, part of you, that you've grown up with.'"

While these two inclusive communication styles developed far apart, they share two essential elements: thousands of years of continuous culture and an intimate relationship with the natural world. Collaborative communication helps sustain a functional community and identity over long time horizons and, as a land trust working for the long-term benefit of people and land, Forterra endeavored to take a lesson from this approach.



Of all Forterra's call-and-response efforts, arguably the most successful and wide-reaching was inspired by an anniversary and bookended with a birthday. In the early 2000s, Seattle was celebrating 100 years since the Olmsteds, the visionary family behind New York's Central Park and one of the most renowned landscape architecture firms of all time, designed Seattle's park system.* John Charles Olmsted wrote that the parks' "primary aim should be to secure and preserve for the use of the people as much as possible of these advantages of water and mountain views and of woodlands, well distributed and conveniently located."[27]

Seattle's turn of the century park investment was funded by two city bonds totaling $3 million (about $100 million in 2025 dollars) and resulted in one park for every 3000 of King County's 110,000 residents. Since then, the population in the urban areas grew twenty-fold. The parks? Not so much. Over the same century Puget Sound was transformed from one of the planet's most productive nurseries of living things, to a shadow of its former glory where once-chubby orcas, a symbol of Pacific Northwest vitality, grew gaunt, skulls protruding sickly from their forms,

*Central Park was the work of Frederick Law Olmsted. His sons, John Charles and Frederick Law Jr., formed the Olmsted Brothers. Frederick Law Olmsted worked on Central Park. His sons, separately, worked on Seattle's park system.

as the Chinook salmon populations they relied upon declined.[28] The mouth of the Duwamish River was designated a superfund site requiring expensive and nearly impossible remediation—dredging the seafloor to remove toxic waste without letting ocean currents spread it.[29] The juxtaposition of Olmsted's vision and the decimation of what had been an exceedingly rich ecosystem was obvious, and begged the question: *What will we do to this place in the next century?*

For an answer, Forterra initiated the Cascade Dialogues, a call and response that included 3500 people from diverse communities across the region. The result was combined into a plan, the Cascade Agenda, but the intent wasn't for the Agenda to be a static, 100-year blueprint; rather, as Michelle Connor explained, "The aim was to implement the strategy sooner and to update it continuously, so that it is a rolling 100-year vision that adapts to new understandings and circumstances—like always looking seven generations ahead." The Cascade Agenda document describes the depth of this input:

> *We have engaged elected and business leaders, civic leaders and stakeholders from Tribes, farmers, and foresters, and heard not only what they value in the region but what concerns them about the future. We held a series of teen dialogues to listen to tomorrow's potential leaders. We have consulted planners, economists, and scientists on the critical features of the forests, waters, farms, and urban areas of the region.*

Positive steps were already being taken to restore and preserve the systemic functionality and beauty of the Puget Sound region, but nobody had taken the time to gather such extensive input and use it to develop a cohesive strategy. The results turned the more discriminatory Rooseveltian definition of conservation on its head and forever changed Forterra's role in the region. Long-time Forterran, Kristi England, who was instrumental in the Dialogues, explained, "All these folks, when they looked at the long game, realized they had many of the same goals and a common purpose."

Maryanne Tagney had a front row seat to this metamorphosis as part of Forterra's Steering Committee at the time of the Dialogues. She worked on land use


SAVED AS FARMLAND
15 New Homes
10-Acre Lots
forterra.org/farm



The Cascade Agenda changed the organization's trajectory and inspired a wider view, as shown here on a sign marking Forterra-conserved farmland.

Photo by Danny Ngan

issues in the region in the '80s and was part of the initiative that pushed through an unpopular but critical zoning change in the foothills. Until then, much of the expanse of farmlands and forest that stretched from the city limits to the craggy summits of the Cascade Crest was zoned for subdivision into parcels as small as one-acre. "There was huge uproar because people had thought they would be able to sell off their land in one-acre chunks," Tagney said. "And they were understandably upset that they no longer could."

Part of the genius of the Dialogues was that they helped minimize such backlash and instead inspired an ambitious collective vision beyond the selfishly short timeline of individual profit or biases. The Agenda targeted measurable goals that included both economy and environment, with specific attention given to 1.3 million acres of working forests, farmlands, parks, and shorelines. There was strong agreement that increasing the quality of the cities without expanding their footprint was essential; a high-quality urban environment was critical to preserving the undeveloped areas. Nobody's hundred-year vision included a house on every acre. This consensus changed Forterra's bearing and set it on a course few land trusts had ever sailed.

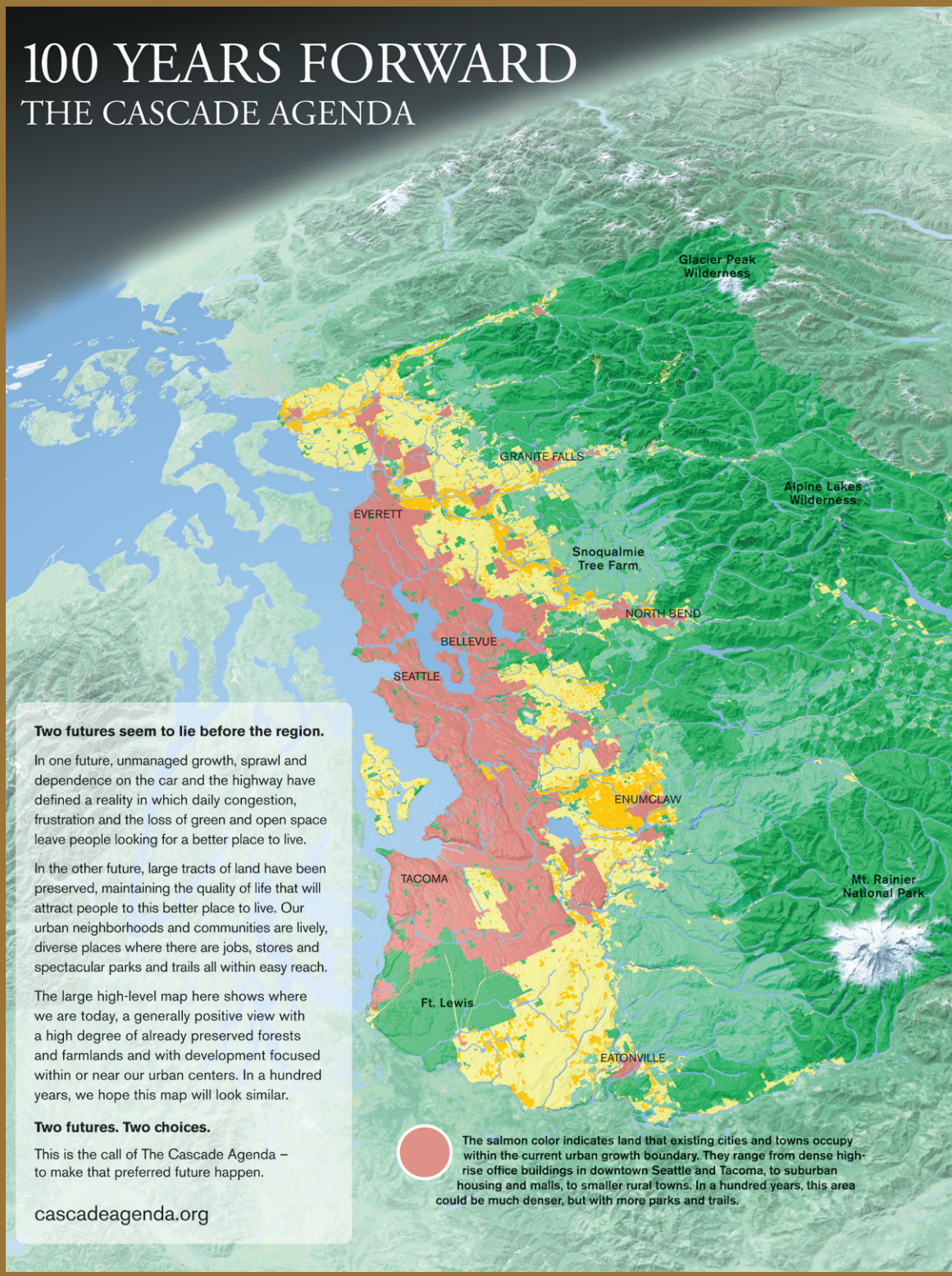
Tagney explained, "The shift, becoming more involved in the built community and the human community, was the Cascade Agenda." The estimated $7 billion price tag was impossible to fund with organization or government sources, so Duvernoy developed a strategy the organization has followed ever since. Long-time board member Dan Nordstrom described it as a "triage approach," where keystone places that have an outsized value relative to the cost are prioritized. The Agenda was received enthusiastically, with supportive media coverage from all corners including an article in the *Seattle Times* that read:

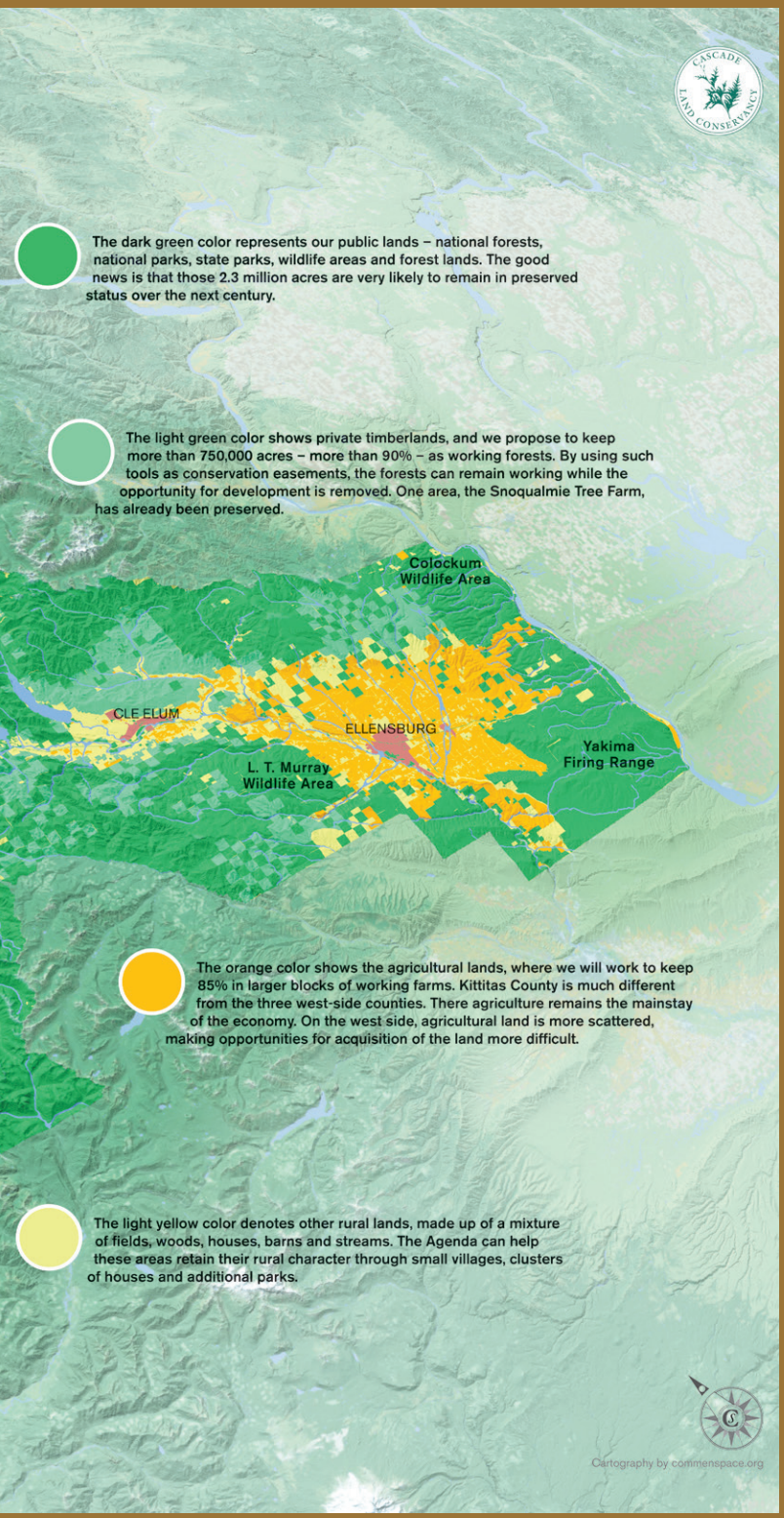
> *Underlying the Cascade Agenda is the recognition that the region need not choose between its economy and its environment. Indeed, that is a false choice. We cannot have one without the other… If cities and towns truly become family-friendly, with good roads and schools and nearby jobs so that we want to live within them and not outside them, the pressure on our critical landscapes will be at a level our market-based strategies can manage.*

The kickoff event for the Cascade Agenda was the annual fund-raising Breakfast. The Forterra Breakfast originally started with, as Peter Orser said, "a group of twenty-five of us sitting around in the library writing Gene $50 checks," and evolved into a see-and-be-seen, who's-who event among the doers and shakers of the region, with 1500 attendees and enough coffee for everyone to get excited about something. During the Cascade Agenda announcement Breakfast, a particularly serendipitous event occurred. Denis Hayes, the co-ordinator of the first Earth Day, stood up and said, "Girls are longer lived than boys and, with life expectancies that keep increasing, a baby girl born about now could live for 100 years." A few minutes later, Maryanne Tagney received news that her granddaughter, Tabitha, had just been born. In 2022, Tagney recalled proudly: "We decided Tabitha was the Cascade Agenda Baby and that we would note how far we were into the plan by watching her grow. She'll be eighteen this summer—the Cascade Agenda Baby will be going off to college."

Resilience consultant Skip Swenson explained the transition pragmatically: "Starting around 2005, with the launch of the Agenda, the focus was not just on conservation, but on where and how does a land trust fit into the urban environment? There were two major thrusts, the first was getting cities behind the idea of the Cascade Agenda—realizing it's not just an open space issue, it's a regional land use issue. So, we had a Cascade Agenda Cities program where cities adopted ordinances and policies that would align with that; we ultimately had nineteen cities representing the majority of the metro area sign on. The second was the transfer of development rights."

While Forterra had cut its teeth working on transfers of development rights, the Cascade Agenda turbocharged the innovation. "It was building this as a market-based tool," explained Swenson. "So, we use the engine of growth to generate conservation, having cities and open space work in concert as opposed to against one another."


100 YEARS FORWARD
THE CASCADE AGENDA
Glacier Peak Wilderness
GRANITE FALLS
Alpine Lakes Wilderness
EVERETT
Snoqualmie Tree Farm
NORTH BEND
BELLEVUE
SEATTLE
ENUMCLAW
TACOMA
Mt. Rainier National Park
Ft. Lewis
EATONVILLE
Two futures seem to lie before the region.
In one future, unmanaged growth, sprawl and dependence on the car and the highway have defined a reality in which daily congestion, frustration and the loss of green and open space leave people looking for a better place to live.
In the other future, large tracts of land have been preserved, maintaining the quality of life that will attract people to this better place to live. Our urban neighborhoods and communities are lively, diverse places where there are jobs, stores and spectacular parks and trails all within easy reach.
The large high-level map here shows where we are today, a generally positive view with a high degree of already preserved forests and farmlands and with development focused within or near our urban centers. In a hundred years, we hope this map will look similar.
Two futures. Two choices.
This is the call of The Cascade Agenda – to make that preferred future happen.
cascadeagenda.org
The salmon color indicates land that existing cities and towns occupy within the current urban growth boundary. They range from dense high-rise office buildings in downtown Seattle and Tacoma, to suburban housing and malls, to smaller rural towns. In a hundred years, this area could be much denser, but with more parks and trails.



The Cascade Agenda centerpiece map, 2005. *3D visualization by Josh Livni, CommEn Space*

About the time Tabitha was learning algebra, the Forterra team was realizing the enormity of what the Cascade Dialogues had created and, fitting for an initiative just entering its pubescent years, not everyone was happy about it. Jim Falconer, a self-taught botanist, expert on native plants, investment wizard, and longtime Forterra donor and collaborator, explained how he felt about the change: "I remember going to a Forterra annual meeting where they announced that they're looking at the environment differently, not just trees and rivers and air; they're looking at the environment everywhere including urban communities and how people live. When I first heard that, I probably had the same reaction as a number of other people. I literally said, 'Huh? Let's work on the environment! Why are you getting into housing?'"

In a Q+A with Gene Duvernoy, published in *Seattle Business* magazine in 2017, he explained the transition eloquently: "How do you make the city a place where we can all live lives of dignity so that we don't sprawl into other landscapes? That's why you see us spending so much time not just on the parks in our cities but on small businesses and affordable homes."

Falconer concurred: "I've come 180 degrees around on that point. Forterra was right on, ahead of the curve. With the environmental challenge we have, you can't separate it from the social challenge and economic challenge. You can't have a healthy environment if you don't have healthy housing."

It's not a stretch, philosophically, to understand that nurturing humans and nature is the same thing, but the execution within our growth-driven system is a challenge for the ages. For insight into Forterra's evolution in this effort, I met with Kathi Littman, president and CEO of the Greater Tacoma Community Foundation and board member of Forterra's Strong Communities Fund at the time, a social impact investment vehicle that funds high value community projects with the intent of providing a 2% return to investors. She spoke to the issue from a perspective of vast experience, from building schools to commercial development. "I think they have a really good footprint, and we've talked to a lot of our fund advisors about the value of investing in Forterra," she said. "They've learned a lot along the way regarding community engagement. When they first got here it was like, hold an event—check the box. Or the design peo-

ple will come in and say what's possible—check the box. What I've seen them evolve into is authentic community partnership."



Another motivation for a call-and-response strategy was that influencing land matters without enough community input was a sure way for good intentions to go sideways. One educational example happened in 2007 after Forterra purchased a 240-acre property slated for residential development near Olympic National Park. It was a sacred site for the Makah Tribe and contained sensitive ecosystems and pristine habitat; a no-brainer for Forterra. Duvernoy explained, "Development clearly shouldn't happen there, so we quickly acquired it, planning to transfer ownership to the Park Service, and thinking we'd be heroes, right?" Not quite. If the land became NPS property, it would be off limits for Indigenous use, including hunting, gathering, and ceremony. "We caught absolute hell from the Makah. I thought we were doing good, but we should have known better."

After asking the Park Service if there was a way to accommodate the Tribe and getting a firm "No!" for an answer, the Forterra team realized that perhaps those who had the longest and most intimate relationship with the land would be the best caretakers. Duvernoy and his son spent several days with the Makah. "Reducing those meetings to words doesn't carry the weight and impact of those visits and how much I learned about the key importance of this land being used for purposes as a part of these nations' identities," Duvernoy said. "The meetings were respectful, cordial, but also very pointed. They were very clear on how they'd been dealt with by the Park Service, how important the land was, and how long the community had existed there."

During the visit, a Makah man invited the Duvernoys on a boat ride through the islands off the northwesternmost point of the Olympic Peninsula (Sunh-a-do). "The way he handled the boat through these tiny channels with strong waves and surges was incredible," said Duvernoy. "They were really part of the ocean in a way that was quite astounding." He and his son also visited the Makah's cultural museum where exhibits illustrated the Tribe's connection with land and sea and



The rugged coast of the Olympic Peninsula (Sunh-a-do). *Photo by Christopher Walter*

long sophistication in hunting, gathering, and food storage, their understanding of ecology and stewardship. One Tribal legend tells the story of a man swimming underwater to reach a cave where sea lions lived, harvesting one, and bringing it back to the Tribe. Journalist Malcolm Gladwell suggested it takes 10,000 hours to become an expert. How about after practicing for 10,000 years?

Indigenous consultant Bob Whitener explained why this land-centric foundation is so important to the Natives: "Today, my Tribe has people growing up who are fishermen, hunt in the mountains and not just in the reservations. They clam dig. They dive for geoduck (a clam with a neck that can be up to three feet long and live over 150 years). These are far more important than, say, gaming, in our culture, because it's something that produces an identity. The sense of identity is important because a Tribal member who identifies with (hunting and fishing) regulates their life to be better at it, which helps us with the social ills that we have, from alcoholism or drugs, mental health, suicide. It's really a big deal that these things (hunting, fishing, living off the land) come back."

Seven years after buying the land, Forterra officially transferred ownership to the Makah Tribe. This call and response regarding the property resulted in

a positive outcome for all involved, but the scolding from the Tribe was a harbinger of challenges to come. The team took to heart the fact that the Tribes were neighbors and important collaborators in land management but, as Connor explained, "We did many projects with the Tribes where we mostly got things right, but we didn't deeply institutionalize the practices/expectations in terms of our own governance." That miss would come back to deliver the most educational chapter in the organization's history a decade later.

Traditionally, conservation has been focused on preserving great places; development has been focused on, well, developing them. When Forterra changed the game following the Cascade Dialogues, the organization discovered a vastly underutilized and incredibly potent healing tonic: by engaging the denizens of a place in the conversation about the lands where they live, even places that aren't the usual targets for conservation become high value propositions.

Consider the story of Duwamish Hill, a humble knoll overlooking the Duwamish River in an industrial area of Tukwila, a couple of miles north of SeaTac Airport and just upstream from where the waterway's last natural meanders meet dredged and concrete-walled shipping channels. Other similar hills in the area were flattened in the name of progress. Duwamish Hill had been used as a junk yard, and the flats below were covered with old equipment and a staging area for the landowner's crane business.



A signpost at Duwamish Hill featuring information on the Garry oak, a traditional food source for the Puget Sound Salish.

Photo by Topher Donahue

To the west, a power company treated utility poles with industrial chemicals. To the north, an outdoor shooting range filled the air with sound.

But even trash covered and toxin scented, the hill remained a sacred place. In Coast Salish history, it was the site of an epic battle between the winds that ended a time of ice. Other people living in the area more recently loved the hill as well, particularly Japanese Americans who found refuge there after internment during World War II. In 2003, when word spread that the owner intended to sell the property to a warehouse developer who planned to flatten it, the community put together a group called Friends of the Hill.

Duwamish Hill was in such poor condition that it wouldn't qualify for traditional conservation funding, but Forterra has a reputation



Farmland, forest, town, and the hinterlands—the inseparable tapestry of the Pacific Northwest. Photo by Margot Cheel

for helping to solve land problems that don't fit the usual conservation model. They wait until they are invited into projects before getting involved but, once engaged, exceedingly unusual projects develop. Michelle Connor, tasked with fielding queries at the time, was accustomed to unique pleas for help, but the call from Friends of the Hill was particularly memorable. The voice on the line said, "They're going to bulldoze the Center of the Universe!"

With her attention piqued, and at the suggestion of a legendary land for good rabble rouser, Tim Hatley, Connor invited the neighborhood to a lunch meeting with county, city, and state elected officials representing the surrounding area. Elderly Japanese Americans arrived with savory bento. By the end of the meeting, electeds on all sides of Duwamish Hill were ready to invest in its repair and conservation. Forterra secured funding from a diverse group including King County Conservation Futures, State of Washington, Boeing Company, Cultural Development Authority of King County, City of Tukwila, SAFECO, Muckleshoot Charity Fund, and the owners of the shooting range, the Seattle Police Athletic Association.

Today, a walk through the Duwamish Hill Preserve will take you past interpretive signs and a native plant garden where Indigenous people can pass on the ancestral wisdom of edible plants. The trail winds up the hill to a summit overlook with a view of the site of the battle of the winds. The hill still echoes with the sounds of traffic, gunfire, and airplanes, but is safe from bulldozers and is worthy of ongoing conservation. After all, maybe that humble hill *is* the Center of the Universe.



What you call your resources, we call our relatives.

—Chief Oren Lyons

CHAPTER FOUR

BE MORE THAN *Your Title*

The history of the name *Forterra* offers a revealing glimpse under the hood. To understand how important it was to adopt a name that encompassed a vast range of endeavors, consider a few of the legendary projects and people who helped shape the organization's history.

If you looked closely at the boarded-up entrance to Bothell's historic Wayne Golf Course clubhouse in 2016, you'd see the plywood over the windows didn't fit quite right and some of the nails holding the boards were bent in the characteristic pattern left by people unaccustomed to wielding hammers. At the entrance, you'd be greeted by one of those typical signs placed to reduce owner liability. This one, among the usual warnings, read: *No Streaking.*

What kind of golf course puts a No Streaking sign on their clubhouse?

Almost twenty years earlier, if you were driving through the town of Issaquah, just northeast of Seattle, one hot summer evening you might have seen a couple guys sheepishly leaning on a pair of bolt cutters, breaking into the switchbox for their own railroad crossing gate that had been going up and down chaotically all afternoon and snarling traffic along Gilman Boulevard.

What kind of railroad vandalizes its own switchbox?

In both cases, the perpetrator was the same: Forterra. While the two projects were wildly different, they had important commonalities: one, land changing

hands with the potential to benefit many people; and two, the organization doing whatever it took, even changing its identity, to realize that benefit.

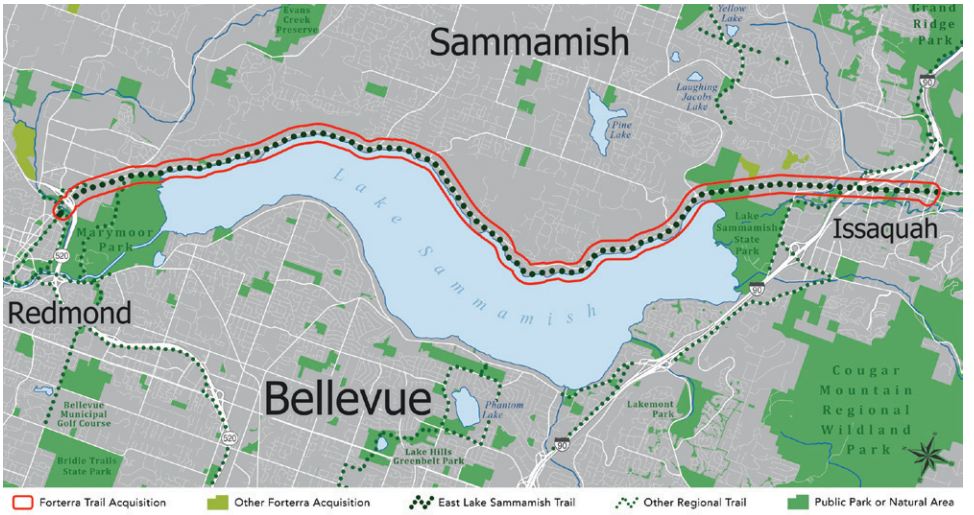
Established in 1931, Wayne Golf Course was spread out over eighty-nine acres (eighty-five of which had been classified as environmentally sensitive) and graced by a stretch of the Sammamish River. After the golf course closed, a plan for a fifty-home development was approved, with rumors of shady dealings around the permit. In 2016, a community organization called OneBothell asked Forterra for help. Forterra purchased the land as a buy-and-hold to give the city and county time to raise funds for acquisition and stewardship and placed a conservation easement on the property that prevented development on everything except the least sensitive four acres.

Forterra staff member Hillary Wilson recalled the project with both pride and laughter: "There was a period where I was going out there every week. The operator left and we had no one on the property. The land manager and I went to Lowe's and got padlocks and nails and boarded it up. We made a sign to be posted on site because we're liable and now the operator. No running, no jumping, no fun, right? All the legal things. Michelle (Connor) was like, 'No streaking' so we put it on the sign."

The property was one of the largest remaining privately held undeveloped acreages in the central Puget Sound metropolitan area and included a historic apple orchard and a long stretch of critical salmon habitat—an undeniable land for good score.



Forterra's time as a golf course operator was light duty compared to its stint as a railroad. The Seattle, Lake Shore and Eastern Railway was built along Lake Sammamish in the 1880s. The line's owner, Burlington Northern and Santa Fe (BNSF) terminated the route in 1996 after stopping its last run, a Darigold milk delivery. BNSF wanted to get rid of the line, King County had ambitious plans for connecting communities through trails, and the National Trails System Act of 1983 created a market for *railbanking*, the preservation of unused railroad right-of-ways by converting the rail to a trail.[30]



East Lake Sammamish trail and the path of Railroad Forterra. *Cartography by Christopher Walter*

At first blush, the Lake Sammamish line seemed like a no-brainer for rail-to-trail conversion, completing a forty-two-mile pedestrian and cycling corridor from Puget Sound to the Cascade Foothills. The thorny issue was that one of the homeowners along the route was president of the National Association of Reversionary Property Owners (NARPO), a group vehemently opposed to railbanking. They claimed that when a railway is no longer used, "the land reverts back to the then existing abutting or adjacent property owner."[31] King County knew the trail would be a valuable community asset but didn't want to deal with the political firestorm it would take to establish it; nor did several of the other biggest organizations skilled in rail-to-trail conversions.

Jim Greenfield, a long-time Forterra board member and historian whose wealth of knowledge greatly informed this book, was working for King County at the time and heard rumors of the last milk run. He called the one organization he knew of that might be willing to take the heat. "I had my eyes on that right-of-way since about 1989," Gene Duvernoy said. "We saw no other option but to step in."

But it was an exceedingly uncomfortable step. As journalist Dan Chasan explained, "the railroad project posed considerable financial and political risk to the

organization, and it was far from the natural area conservation projects that had been the mainstay of Forterra's work to that time."

To buy a railroad, you must be a railroad, so Forterra filed with the Surface Transportation Board to become one. NARPO did the same. "I think an opera should be written about this project," said Greenfield. "It's so epic. There was the guy opposing railbanking, and then one of Forterra's advisors, Chuck Montaigne, whose specialty was rail law. So, we had the two gods of railbanking fighting in court, going after each other."

NARPO had media connections and, according to Duvernoy, a local radio host announced, "Gene Duvernoy stands to make millions of dollars on this scam. This has to be stopped!" NARPO filed a lawsuit claiming Forterra didn't own anything because a railroad was not a real estate asset; the court ruled in NARPO's favor—*after* Forterra bought the property from BNSF for $3 million.

"We kind of went into the belly of the beast on that one," said Duvernoy. It was during the battle that the crossing gate failed, and traffic chaos ensued until the Forterra team broke into the control box. Luckily, Railroad Forterra didn't involve any trains. After the initial ruling, in 2005 Forterra appealed to a high court, and won. Within twenty-four-hours of the court decision, Forterra transferred the trail section of the property to King County and recovered the $3 million to pay back its lenders. One mile of track was sold to Issaquah for a future trolley line for $1 million which was consequently invested in other conservation projects (this was the source of the rumor that Duvernoy was enriching himself off the project, but pocketing the cash was never the plan). "That was when we recognized that we could do conservation," Duvernoy said, "but also support further conservation through savvy real estate knowledge."

The success of the Wayne Golf Course and Lake Sammamish projects revealed the potential for a chameleonlike changing of the organization's skin in the pursuit of a land stewardship goal. Dan Nordstrom suggested that these forays outside the comfort zone were part of the organization's secret to success: "If we did only the stuff we know and do well, our relevance would slowly fade. It's pushing the edge that draws in amazing people and keeps driving us to the next level."



Sunset from the East Lake Sammamish trail. *Photo by Todd Parker*

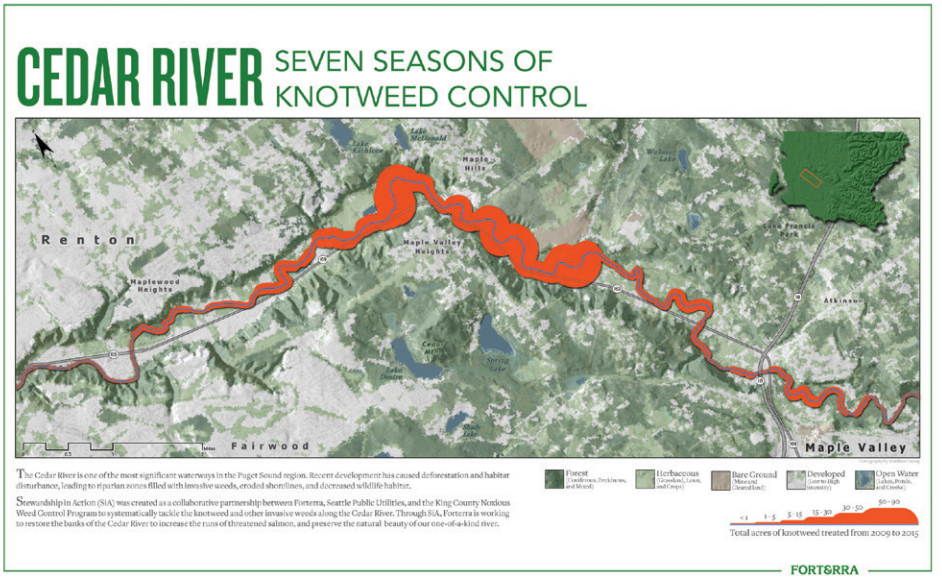
A closer look at Forterra's past and present reveals how the team influenced the diverse projects that came in the door. For starters, Duvernoy was an attorney with a degree in civil engineering and an MBA; law, infrastructure, and business—an exceedingly rare and ideal trifecta for innovative, high-risk land use work. Following Duvernoy's lead, Forterra attracted people with diverse skillsets. Some of the people I spoke with are still with the organization, and others have gone on to pursue the mission elsewhere. "When I started in this work there were almost no jobs doing environmental work in the region," said Michelle Connor. "But now the number of opportunities out there, and the people who have rolled thru and gone on to other good work afterwards, is truly amazing."

Connor is about as homegrown as a white girl can be in the Pacific Northwest. The brutal era of orca kidnapping took place not far from her childhood home. How does it shape a seven-year old's future when one of the net pens used to trap orcas was visible from her window, providing views of people using poles and explosives to separate orca babies from their parents while the sea froths with the panic of orca families trying to stay together, surrounded by activists in small boats and kayaks attempting to stop the terror?

Just down the road, the Fish Wars were raging. Billy Frank and his peers were getting beaten and arrested for exercising their Treaty Rights. During college, Connor curated a Japanese art exhibit and traveled to Japan, bringing home a valuable sustainability lesson from the Shinto religion. Connor recalled, with a caveat that her learnings were a long time ago so her summary is her own, not that of her teachers: "Shinto tradition and Indigenous Japanese knowledge basically says every place has a spirit and every object is a living being; it doesn't matter if it's a stick, a basket made of cane, or a building that you tore down and threw in the garbage. The spirit of the tree is still in that stick, in the building."

After graduating, Connor landed what she described as a terribly boring job at the Japanese Consulate where she was tasked with summarizing current issues in fisheries, timber, transportation, and the Puget Sound business climate, unintentionally preparing herself for a career in complex land issues. In addition, Connor volunteered for local initiatives through which she met a heavily mustachioed guy named Gene Duvernoy who happened to be looking for help with innovative land trust work.

Judy Blanco was a landscape architect at King County. Her job involving riparian corridor restoration began to overlap with Forterra's work, so she left the county to join Forterra and help restore a part of the Cedar River where invasive plants were choking the waterway. A far cry from being tucked away in a county office, Blanco dove into the human side of restoration, working to convince homeowners of the value of a functional watershed. "People were slamming doors in my face," said Blanco. "I just kept talking to them and working with them over a period of years and now, pretty much everyone is on board. One of my main goals with the program, while interacting with so many homeowners along the river, was to instill



Knotweed control progress on the Cedar River. *Cartography by Matthew Creasy and Christopher Walter*

in them that they can play a powerful role on their own, and we saw it happening. They would take on the restoration of other parts of their property that we weren't touching, or their neighbors would get on board and work on their properties." When the Cedar River restoration gathered enough momentum that she was no longer needed, Blanco changed hats again and returned to King County.

Rachel Valdez has bachelor's and master's degrees in communications, a second master's, has conducted doctoral work in psychology, and is a member of the Blackfeet Nation, a Tribe whose ancestral territory includes a vast swath of land from southern Canada south to Yellowstone National Park. She joined Forterra in 2021 as the COO after working in Silicon Valley in people leadership, software product development, and volunteering on diverse boards. To grasp the uniqueness of Valdez's skill set, imagine the LinkedIn listing: *Now hiring: Nonprofit Chief Operating Officer—psychology education, board representation and Silicon Valley experience, Blackfeet Tribal heritage, and a sharp eye for business fundamentals preferred.* With that experience, her take on Forterra was particularly insightful. "Forterra is a place people want to be," she said. "They want to do their best work, grow, and learn. They're telling their friends and family about this place and that

it's fun and feels good to work hard for something so important." Then she added, speaking to her top shelf management skills and Forterra's thirty-year reputation as a solid organization: "We have invested heavily in our people. We are fiscally responsible, have regular audits, and meet our LTAC compliance requirements."

"If someone had told me this is going to be your job," said David Leon, "I'd be like, 'Wow, are you kidding me? I would be so lucky!'" With echoes of Duvernoy's background, Leon's first career was as an attorney working for the City of New York. Moving to Seattle, he took a job with the Port of Seattle before getting a master's degree in real estate. While Leon's primary role with Forterra was in the urban space, his ambition reveals an ecosystem-wide perspective. "Gene and Michelle and many other people worked very hard for a long time to assemble this whole portfolio of land," said Leon. "To me it's about looking at that portfolio and saying—whether it's carbon offsets, conservation thinning, wetland enhancement, or restoration—keeping those ecosystems functioning and healthy has value."

India Clark has a global pedigree in the real estate industry. "I have been mostly in roles that are heavily profit driven," she said. "Sometimes at the expense of people and nature around us." Clark started her career assisting in negotiations in Europe, the Middle East and Africa with a Fortune 500 real estate firm. Realizing she wanted to use her skillset for greater value than profit harvesting, Clark steered her career towards land for good with a stint as fund manager at Mission Driven Finance. "I've worked in office and retail land, hotels, almost everything," said Clark. "But I had never seen anything like Forterra. It was this unicorn of an organization that took on risky, innovative, forward thinking, moonshot projects with great outcomes for the habitat and humanity around it."

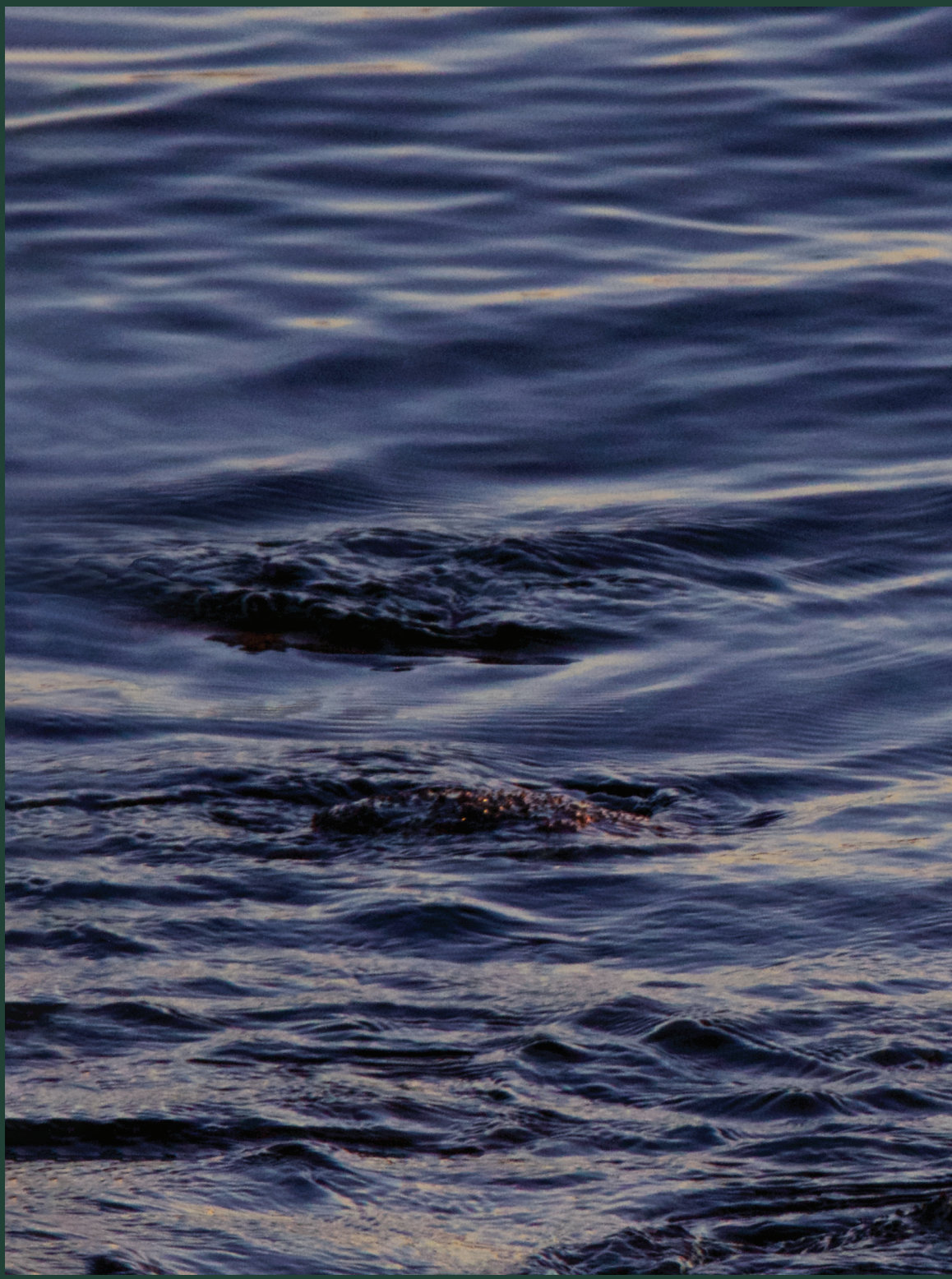
Joe Sambataro worked with Forterra in the early 2000s before moving to Colorado to lead the Access Fund, a nonprofit devoted to rock climbing access. Unable to stay away from his rainy homeland, Sambataro returned twelve years later. A realist and a careful risk taker, fitting to his recreational passion for climbing, Sambataro knew what he was getting into when he returned. "I didn't come back thinking, *this is going to be amazing!*" he said. "For as sophisticated as Forterra is, it can make mistakes in terms of process and all the pieces coming together. They're

amazing, brilliant people, but when you're out in the front taking risks, sometimes things aren't exactly smooth." Sambataro's words, spoken in early 2022, proved prophetic as the bumpiest ride in Forterra's history was about to unfold.

Rebecca Wold's first career as a public defender showed her the limits of what the law could achieve. "What I really wanted to do was something that was building up community," she explained. Returning to school, she studied real estate development at the University of Washington where she met Peter Orser, the developer behind the Hazel Wolf Wetlands project. Orser introduced Wold to Forterra. "I was drawn to this vision of community-driven development," she said. "I loved the idea that instead of just dropping a concept upon a community, that it grew from community partners coming together and articulating for themselves what a community needs."

Jeff Dade paid his way through college playing trombone and went on to a stint as an "ivory tower banker" before realizing that his calling was to help realize near-term solutions to the racial wealth gap, particularly in historic Black communities. Dade went back to school and, by the time he was trained as an urban planner and geographer, he'd come to realize that "the built environment, communities and nature—it really is one ecosystem." In describing how Forterra functions, he said, "Number one, we only go where we're invited. We come in and say, 'We're good at real estate, but this is *your* neighborhood. You know so much more than we do. After we've helped out in the ways that we can, it will be up to you—you're the folks that matter with this.' My job is to communicate to the community that this isn't just a Forterra thing; in fact, it's mostly not us—it's you."

Dan Grausz calls his thirteen years (so far) at Forterra his "retirement gig" after a career of corporate law in New York and Seattle followed by twenty-five years of legal and management work in the cruise industry and eighteen years on the Mercer Island City Council. Grausz's wife knew Duvernoy, so when Grausz left the cruise industry, he walked into Duvernoy's office and offered pro bono legal services. Duvernoy sent him to Connor, who handed Grausz the Faber Farm project, 140 acres of farmland that had been subdivided for development just in time for the 2008 crash. Forterra was able to un-subdivide it (a Snohomish County first) and rallied banks and neighboring property owners behind the initiative; the





property was ultimately sold, with a conservation easement restricting its use to agriculture, to a local farmer. Grausz's most recent project was in 2025, preserving 113 acres in Pierce County with another unlikely conservation partner—a local gun club. He said, "Forterra is an amazing and dedicated group of people who are able and willing to go where so many others refuse to tread. It has been challenging but for those of us who work with Forterra either while or after pursuing other careers, it is a source of great personal satisfaction to know that we are helping make a difference."

Several of the above folks are no longer with Forterra but, as with many former Forterrans, they have continued to pursue the mission in their own careers such as Sambataro going on to work with the Tulalip Tribe and Dade in community housing.

A series of events in 2022 cost many Forterra staff their jobs, and frustrated Jeff Dade to the point of resigning. At that time, an op-ed in the *Seattle Times*, penned by the newspaper's editorial board, ordered Forterra to "go back to basics and reset its focus on finding and preserving open space." That learning is a story for Chapter 6, Too Good To Fail, but the point here is this: preserving open space was never Forterra's sole focus. The story of Forterra's team, network, and scope of work is one of constant diversification—to the point where even the organization's name was an evolution.

It started as the Seattle-King County Land Trust, with an origin story in transfers of development rights, which allow for increased density in urban areas in exchange for reduction of building sites on rural lands, a complex and innovative conservation tool that continues to evolve. Then, when projects expanded across county lines, the organization changed its name with stints as The Land Conservancy and The Conservancy, before settling for a while with the beloved identity of Cascade Land Conservancy. But having *land trust* or *conservancy* in the name

◄ ***On the previous pages:*** As the organization's scope widened to include coastal and urban initiatives, the name evolved as well. *Great Blue Heron photo by Don Willott*

didn't help when collaborating with the full political spectrum, something the organization does regularly.

Following the completion of the Cascade Agenda and the realization that the organization had an obligation to meet the needs of both people and nature, the 2006 strategic plan called for connecting "conservation to the fabric of our community and thereby change conservation as we know it." In 2007, the board updated its charter to include an obligation to "promote social welfare, lessen neighborhood tension, and combat community deterioration through conservation and development activities, including promoting new models of environmentally responsible and sustainable community planning and design."

In 2011, *Forterra* was selected as a name that retained the organization's roots of being *for-land* but would allow pursuit of projects without geographical or conservation stereotype boundaries. To support the complex partnerships and multi-faceted nature of Forterra's projects, a brand symbol was selected: *the ampersand.*

Not everyone liked the new name. Dan Rankin, mayor of the small western Washington town of Darrington, said: "From a rural perspective, when they changed their name from Cascade Land Conservancy to Forterra, it kind of felt like an abandonment." Rankin's disappointment in the name change, however, didn't keep him from being a key collaborator moving forward.

In this book, to avoid constant clarification of what the organization was called at the time of a given story, all stories refer to the current name, Forterra. For those who prefer the organization's older, more intimate names, they're still out there, on plaques hanging on city government office walls and in the wood etchings carved by Mette Hanson and used for signage at some of Forterra's legacy projects as well as the cover and chapter opener art throughout this book. When I visited Hazel Wolf Wetlands, viridescent moss was living on the welcome sign, tracing the topography left by the sign cutter's intricate knife strokes and accenting the shapes of a dragonfly and merganser, and the words, "The Land Conservancy" in the corner. Like the organization itself, the signage was slowly being transformed by the strong force of life in the Pacific Northwest.



Complexity theory teaches us that major events are the manifestation of maturing and converging underlying trends: they reflect change that has already occurred within the system.

—Economist Orit Gal

CHAPTER FIVE

REAL RISK *VS* PERCEIVED RISK

Over nearly fifty years of mountain adventure, I learned there are few survival skills more important than distinguishing between perceived and real risk. It is essential to notice hazards like climbing upward into a storm, onto rapidly melting ice or through avalanche terrain. Then there is perceived risk, like the fear of falling when hanging from an anchor system strong enough to hold a car.

Thus, when people kept telling me that Forterra had a high tolerance for risk, I was curious as to what flavor they were talking about. Predictably, there were both real and perceived risks in Forterra's endeavors, but what surprised me was that the organization had developed an approach that not only acknowledged and navigated the risks, but also strategically used risk, even intentionally increasing it at times, to optimize the chance of success. When it comes to pushing limits successfully, strategic risk is a critical ingredient. Forterra donor Jim Falconer explained it simply: "We have to take big risks because we have big problems!"

Part of this risk tolerance was due to Forterra's hard-earned experience with projects that had heartbreaking setbacks en route to reaching a satisfactory conclusion. One epic example involved a 90,000-acre tree farm owned by Weyerhaeuser in the Tolt River drainage. This and the stories in the next two chapters involve the Snoqualmie Tribe as well as one of Forterra's biggest heartbreaks.

To be clear, this telling by no means assumes to present the Tribe's perspective on what happened.

The Tolt River property had already been logged several times, so it was hardly an untouched wilderness, but even after several rounds of clear-cutting it was still a more functional ecosystem than it would be full of houses. Located on the western slope of the Cascades, commuting distance from the urban centers, it was the stuff of trophy home dreams. So, when Weyerhaeuser decided to sell the property in the late '90s, Forterra, along with Gerry Johnson's Evergreen Forest Trust and two financiers, Joe Euphrat and Tom Tuchman, hatched an unprecedented plan to raise $185 million and buy it: convince the IRS to let them issue tax-exempt conservation forestry bonds, then pay off the bonds by thinning and selling timber from part of the property in order to pay for the long-term preservation of the rest. This didn't go over well—logging as a conservation tool was a hard sell.

The IRS stance was that, for tax-exempt bonds, you can't deplete the asset the bond is funding. The team researched the situation thoroughly and responded to the IRS. Duvernoy explained: "We said, 'You're looking at the wrong thing. The biomass of the forest is going to be increasing significantly, so the asset is increasing. Because we're not clearcutting, there would be an increase in the biomass over time.'"

The explanation didn't sway the IRS, so Forterra moved to an even more ambitious plan B and enlisted the help of Jennifer Dunn, a high-ranking Republican congresswoman in the Republican-controlled House, to draft legislation regarding tax-exempt bonds. Duvernoy shook his head slowly as he described the challenge: "We had several different runs. Sometimes we'd get it through the House, but not the Senate. Sometimes we got it through the Senate, but not the House. The last time we tried, we got through both and then it was dropped from the conferencing bill, which meant we'd never get the legislation through Congress. We lost the big prize." And it would have been huge; the conservation forestry bonds model could have benefited hundreds of thousands of acres of forest land across the country.

Failure? Not before trying plan C. Then D. According to Michelle Connor, developing negotiation savvy to keep the door open for other options was a cornerstone of Forterra's strategy as well as a key learning from Duvernoy's mentorship.

She said, "He always conveyed to me: *Try to create optionality when you're solving for things.*" The Tolt River project was one of those times.

Plan C was to buy the development rights. It wasn't hard to convince King County executive Ron Sims* that the property was more valuable to the region in an undeveloped state. With his involvement, a $30 million bargain was struck involving Forterra, King County, and Hancock Timber Resources Group that secured a conservation easement preventing development on all 90,000 acres. King County purchased 150 acres of land along the Tolt River to protect Chinook spawning habitat. The rest remained a working forest open for logging. While the transaction fell short of the original vision, it preserved the land's *potential.*

Fast forward twenty years for plan D: the Snoqualmie Tribe acquired 12,000 acres of the property, the largest acquisition of ancestral lands in the Tribe's modern history, with Forterra facilitating the transaction. The Tribe's press release on the purchase reads:

> *The forest has significant cultural, historic, environmental, and economic value to the Tribe and is near the lands originally promised to the Tribe as its reservation by the federal government in the 1930s—a promise the United States did not keep. The lands acquired by the Tribe were managed for industrial timber purposes for over a century. By acquiring these lands, the Tribe is concluding a decades-long effort to reclaim ownership in an area that is enormously important to the Tribe. (…) Going forward, our Tribe will sustainably manage these lands to produce revenue for our Tribe while we steward the functioning ecosystems and thriving wildlife populations that have shared these lands with our People since time immemorial.*

*Ron Sims, adding to the legacy of influential Black leaders from the region, went on to become the Deputy Secretary for the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Services and receive accolades including: HUD's prestigious Robert L. Woodson Jr. Affordable Communities Award for 2005, one of Governing Magazine's Government Officials of the Year in 2007, Leader of the Year by American City and County Magazine, Health Quality Award from the National Committee for Quality Assurance in 2008, and national awards from the Sierra Club, the Environmental Protection Agency, and the National Committee for Quality Assurance.



Snoqualmie Forest, King County, the site of one of Forterra's longest sustainability initiatives. *Photo by Margot Cheel*

Caring for these lands is the sacred duty given to our Tribe by the Creator, and no one can do it better.

At the turn of the millennium, a mixed use commercial development was planned along the last undeveloped ridgeline above Snoqualmie Falls, one of the most spectacular waterfalls in North America and a part of the Tribe's origin story—the place where the first woman and man emerged. In 1898, a power plant was installed which involved tunneling into the wall behind the falls. According to journalist Dan Chasan, one Tribal elder said that when the blasting started for construction of the power plant, some of his people were in the woods nearby, sobbing.

Snoqualmie Falls is magnificent. The extraordinary visage of waters falling, frothing, and mist rising towards a sky heavy with rain set against a cliff hung

with evergreens is the very definition of a space feeling sacred and worthy of protection. When the plan to sell the land above the falls for development became public, a national conservation group tested the waters before shying away due to the eight-figure price tag. Forterra, thanks to its local connections and currency measured in more than dollars, knew the dynamics of the situation and the skin-in-the-game factor for each of the players involved, and concocted a complex plan that would save the developer twenty years of waiting to capitalize on a hundred million dollars they had already invested in the area in exchange for paying for the permanent conservation of the land around the falls. The resulting Snoqualmie Preservation Initiative included Ron Sims, Weyerhaeuser Real Estate, City of Snoqualmie Mayor R. "Fuzzy" Fletcher, Puget Western, and Fruit Growers Supply. A complex negotiation ensued, with Forterra orchestrating the outright preservation of the property, the removal of development rights on 3,000 acres of land that Weyerhaeuser owned nearby along the Raging River, and securing $1 million for eventual trail development.

Three cheers for Forterra? Not entirely. Duvernoy explained, "Looking back, it seems so obvious, but at the time I did not perceive the value of the land to the Tribe. I focused on the deal and didn't realize the Tribe should have been at the table for the negotiation." Afterwards, at the celebration of the closing of the deal in 2001, a representative of the Tribe shared her thoughts with Duvernoy. "She let me have it, deservedly, for not including them," he said. "And after that I made it my mission to make good with the Tribe."

Forterra's work to help the Snoqualmie Tribe regain a stewardship foothold in the Tolt River drainage was in no small part an effort to further the legacy of Duvernoy's personal mission with the Tribe. In 2022, Forterra transferred 156 acres to the Tribe to add to its ancestral forestlands and the leadership team approached the Tribe to explore their interest in assuming ownership of the conservation easement protecting the forests above Snoqualmie Falls. But as time would tell, one man's mission and the earnest effort and intent of his successors to engage productively carried other, very real risks when it came to collaborating with a sovereign nation.





Snoqualmie Falls. *Photo by Topher Donahue*

Forterra's projects involving Tribes have shaped the organization as much as anything in its history. Joe Sambataro explained this change as a part of the progression. "The land trust movement was initially a very white movement that didn't consider the Tribal, ancestral lands, or their Treaty Rights," he said. "It was also very privileged, so there was this evolution of a traditional conservation group trying to be a more holistic, complex organization that does both conservation and community work." Sambataro has since gone on to work as conservation advisor to the Tulalip Tribes.

There is risk in considering others, as well as in inviting them to the table, but Duvernoy explained that embracing this risk is one of the reasons Forterra developed a reputation for taking on projects that other organizations shied away from. "Over time, this empathetic negotiation is how Forterra became very risk tolerant because we understood where the real risks lie in a transaction," he said. "And the real risks were often very different from where they might be perceived as an outsider, especially over time. There's perceived risk and real risk, and the gap between those two increases the better you understand your business."

During one of my first interviews for this book, Bob Whitener shared a perspective on risk that I hadn't considered. He said, "There are worse things than timber companies. Worse things than farmers." I immediately thought of landfills, dams, and industrial zones, but after spending months studying risk through the Forterra lens, I understood better what he was talking about. Arguably the greatest danger to the resilience of the lands in the Pacific Northwest and many other places isn't these classic targets of environmentalist's ire, but rather something we all love and cherish: *our homes*.

Certainly, a quaint cabin on a mountainside is less impactful than a clear cut, but the problem is that everybody needs a home, and residential areas outside of the urban centers pose a particularly significant hazard—just imagine how different the west side of the Cascades would be if the one-acre zoning Maryanne Tagney helped change in the '80s remained, and every available acre had a house sitting on it. No single property would be a problem, but together the consequences would be catastrophic. Wildfire mitigation would be difficult and allowing fires to burn, a beneficial part of forest function, would be impossible. The natural hydrology would cease

to function, and flooding would increase as impermeable surfaces for driveways, rooftops and roads radically reduced water filtration, stormwater absorption, and recharge of the aquifer. Wildlife habitat would be decimated—and would remain that way for far longer than it takes a clear-cut to heal.



Forterra's willingness to step into situations of formidable risk, both real and perceived, to help shape a desirable outcome (even if sometimes it takes twenty years) cultivated a unique value matrix. Michelle Connor explained, "The way I look at Forterra, we are the back office for complicated transactions that realize community aspirations. So, most donor dollars are used for staff because the brain power required—to extract these properties from what's called 'higher and better use' (logging, mining, development, etc.) by appraisal standards—is enormous." This value is hard to measure in dollars, but it created currencies rare among more risk averse nonprofits, real estate professionals, and environmental groups.

Experience working at the highest levels of government taught Forterra how to lobby for favorable permitting rules and optimize tax benefits—two invaluable resources for any developer—and resulted in an increased conservation ethos in the region's urban development. For example, changing building codes to facilitate low-carbon development (that's a story for Chapter 10, Go Big).

Another Forterra currency is the ability to stretch philanthropic dollars. Nonprofits like to advertise with a pie chart to illustrate how much donor money is spent on direct conservation compared to line items like administration, staff, fundraising, and education; the premise is that the more donor money spent directly on conservation, the better. Connor explained how this approach is misleading: "At one point I did a back-of-the-envelope calculation and found that each donor dollar leveraged $10 worth of conservation on the ground. Now, that figure is probably far higher." When fifty thousand donor dollars pays for staff time to win a million-dollar grant, the pie chart model goes out the window.

Finally, there is a Forterra currency that only a few of the people I spoke with mentioned explicitly, but almost every story included: *empathy*. It's been a rare Forterra

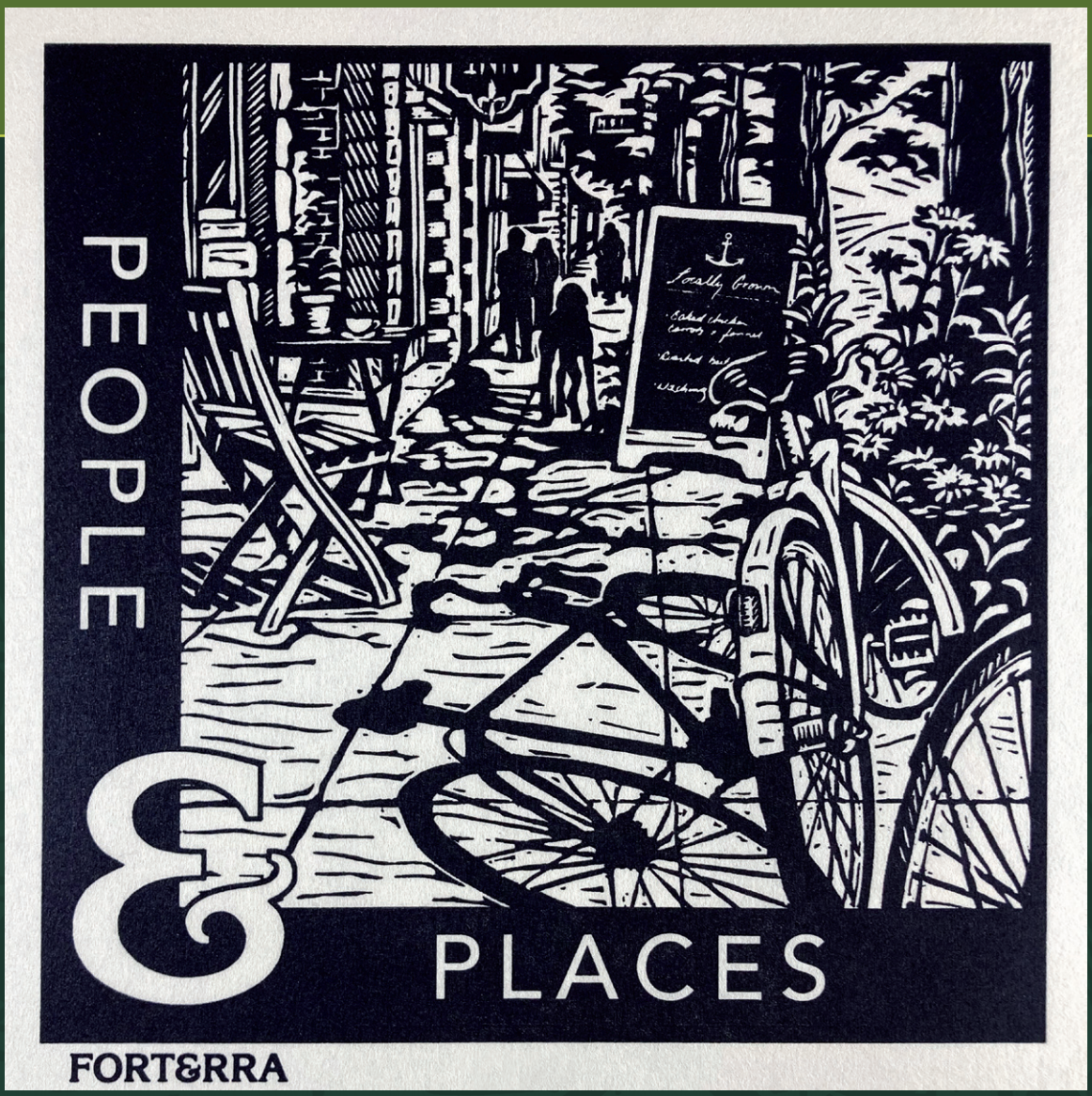


Mount Rainier National Park, a place that shapes perspectives. Photo by Jeff McGraw

negotiation that didn't involve someone stepping out of their official role to help make the best outcome happen. Developers giving up a little profit. Government representatives going outside their job descriptions to get the right people involved. Communities offering flexibility in their ideals to help facilitate a project to improve their future. Philanthropic partners increasing donations to make a project pencil out.

Duvernoy speculated that one of the reasons for this empathy, and why both red and blue politicians in the region have supported conservation projects, is that many of them have climbed in the Cascades or stood on top of one of the great volcanoes and looked out over the land with that summit-induced, long-range appreciation of risk and value. Whatever the reason, empathy has been a critical part of virtually every Forterra project over the last thirty-five years, and the proof is in the thriving wildlands, healthier urban environments, and healing forests that make up the organization's legacy and mission.

Twenty-five years after Forterra donned the cloak of a railroad to complete the Lake Sammamish project, the organization initiated its most ambitious role-playing endeavor: become a developer to build an ecosystem-wide initiative dubbed Forest to Home. The potential was thrilling and the perceived risk significant, but the real risk was greater than anyone anticipated.



In our Tribe, we believe in the importance of everything from the smallest insect to the largest bird and that where we live, everything is connected.

—Elaine Harvey, Fisheries Biologist, Yakama Nation

CHAPTER SIX

TOO GOOD *To Fail*

Starting with the public sentiment revealed during the Cascade Dialogues, that livable cities are critical to the health of natural lands, each of Forterra's projects shaped a vision of what the ultimate ecosystem-wide initiative might look like and Forest to Home emerged. Economist Kate Raworth proposed an overhaul of the economic system to make it "regenerative by design." In her book, *Doughnut Economics: 7 Ways to Think like a 21st Century Economist,* she explains: "Today what we have are economies that need to grow, whether or not they make us thrive; what we need are economies that make us thrive, whether or not they grow."

Forest to Home aligned with Raworth's vision, as well as the Cascade Agenda: a single supply chain that could restore exhausted tree farms into functional forests, improve job opportunities in disinvested rural and urban communities, bolster Tribal economies, and provide affordable housing in places where it was most needed. Additionally, some calculations indicated that local wood construction combined with ecological forestry practices could result in a supply chain that sequestered more carbon than it produced (more in Chapter 9, Better Than Net Zero).

The key ingredient was *mass timber*, specifically *cross laminated timber* or CLT, a construction method that uses a laminate of wood from smaller trees to create

exceedingly strong and durable solid panels made into assembly-ready modular units in a factory. The system was already well-established in Europe, Canada had CLT factories, and facilities in the U.S. had begun experimenting with it. The Forterra team knew that if the proof of concept could be fleshed out in the nonprofit space, capitalism would step in and run with it. In 2022, Maggie Walker, a long time Strong Communities Fund board chair and local legend, explained the big picture vision behind Forterra's CLT endeavor: "It's not that Forterra wants to own the market. Their intent is to create the market."

A few buildings in the region utilized mass timber, but sourcing the product made it hard to meet the goals of net carbon sequestration. The market across North America was still young, with limited products and typical industrial forestry sourcing (i.e., clear-cutting private land). When Forterra built their CLT prototype, ModPro, it was most cost effective to ship the panels from Austria—so much for net carbon sequestration.

One reason Forterra got involved in the entire supply chain was that using the technology in a reparative, regenerative way was far from certain and raised many difficult questions. The material has incredible environmental potential, using solid wood walls, floors, and ceilings in multi-story construction that effectively locks planet-warming gas into high quality buildings traditionally built from materials with a large, embedded carbon footprint like steel, concrete, and spray-foam insulation. But would the wood be sourced in a way that doesn't decimate the forest and the actual carbon equation pencil out as a planetary benefit from one end of the supply chain to the other? Then there was the money factor. The R&D costs are enormous, but the cost-savings potential of modular construction is huge. Would this value help stabilize communities at risk of displacement by offering a healthier, higher quality place to live at a lower price? Or would the value end up sweetening somebody's offshore account?



Forterra caught wind of mass timber while, as usual, seeking the common ground between opposing forces. Connor attended an Urban Land Institute meeting



Milgard Hall, a 55,000-square-foot, three-story building under construction in 2022 using mass timber, University of Washington, Tacoma. *Photo by Topher Donahue*

where architects and developers were talking about how there was an unmet demand for mass timber product. The next week she went to a Washington Forest Protection Association meeting where timber companies, mill owners, and rural town legislators were expressing frustration that their efforts to incent the use of wood in construction weren't gaining traction. Both groups wanted more wood-based construction, but the two worlds were politically so far apart that they had no idea they were both asking for the same thing.

Flexing its honed collaborative muscle, Forterra assembled a CLT Coalition that included over 700 different people representing architects, builders, environmental groups, Tribes, and academics. The Coalition developed workforce training, facilitated building code changes to allow high-rise CLT buildings, and worked with the University of Washington to determine where the optimal timber sources were located and create a matrix for testing the panels for fire and earthquake resistance. To complete the reparative system, the wood was to be sourced using the best practices of ecological forestry.

It was clear that there were enormous challenges and simmering issues from the beginning, including the myriad pitfalls of leading the early commercialization of mass timber in the U.S. and Forterra's lack of experience in construction management, but the idea was just so valuable, and its potential for good so great, that most people aware of the effort agreed that the risks were worth taking. Michelle Connor recounted how renowned investor Tom Alberg commented that it was an aspiration with a long-shot to succeed—but so potentially transformational that he was willing to join in. On top of the project's appeal, Forterra's long history of finding solutions to dangerous, seemingly impossible problems cast an irresistible spell on leadership, investors, and collaborators. As long-time Forterra investor Craig Ueland explained, "It was pretty easy to think you could get a win-win out of things when you were talking to Forterra."



In late August of 2022, I sent Forterra's leadership team a draft manuscript of this book. The storyline culminated with the Forest to Home project which had been progressing steadily. Investment was generous, hiccups in the supply chain were being ironed out, the CLT Coalition was pursuing multiple avenues with resounding success, and large corporations voiced interest in using CLT product to bring down their own carbon footprints. A prototype unit was built and featured in the National Building Museum in Washington D.C. as an awardee in Enterprise Community Partners' 2021 Housing Affordability Breakthrough Challenge. A grant application was submitted to the USDA which would fund startup construction of the CLT factory, break ground on the first housing developments, and provide support for the Yakama Nation and Snoqualmie Tribe who owned lands that had previously been logged and would benefit from ecological forestry while supplying raw material for the panels.

While Forest to Home seemed to be on the hill climb to success, an internal wave of discontent was building, exacerbated by external forces that were coalescing into a disruptive environment the likes of which the nonprofit world had never seen. For decades, nonprofit groups including Forterra had succeeded in part by

capitalizing on the glowing importance of their missions; when people felt they were helping save the world, they were willing to work for a smaller paycheck. An article in E&E News, published in December of 2023, explained:

> *After a wave of unionization in environmental organizations and other nonprofits fueled in part by the Covid-19 pandemic and the racial justice movement following the murder of George Floyd, many green groups still haven't finalized union contracts with their staff unions.* (...) *Across the movement, green groups have grappled with some long-standing systemic issues, said one green group leader who was granted anonymity to discuss organizations' internal dynamics. 'That includes reckoning with the fact that for years, the environmental community—as well as the larger I think progressive community—had under-invested in our people,' the green group leader said. 'For the longest time, I think the nonprofit industrial complex underpaid staff, taking advantage of their idealism. We also under-invested in human resources, management training and career development opportunities, which creates high turnover and conflict.'*[32]

Not long after everyone began working from home during the pandemic, long-simmering grievances boiled over. A group of Forterra staff decided they were not satisfied with, essentially, their ability to work productively with all levels of the organization and decided to unionize. As one Forterran explained, "The character of the relationship between rank-and-file employees and upper leadership, how we treat each other in word and deed, has been an essential motivation for unionization."

An article in *The Stand* explained that the goal of the Forterra unionization effort was "to improve working conditions to reduce turnover, increase transparency and accountability, and have a chance to participate in decision-making that directly impacts their lives at work."

Recent studies into best practices in nonprofits show that there is a bias against covering overhead among donors, nonprofit rating agencies, and government grant sources—which has created what an article in Stanford Social Innovation Review



ModPro, Forterra's prototype for a single apartment unit built from mass timber CLT and designed for use in buildings up to sixteen stories tall. *Photo by Topher Donahue*

called the "nonprofit starvation cycle."[33] In a 2021 article in *Forbes*, explaining how the expectations of nonprofits have caused dysfunction, Kyle Zimmer wrote:

> *Nonprofits are tackling humanity's most complex problems—but without the fundamental infrastructure afforded our private sector counterparts. There is an old saying about Ginger Rogers: She did everything Fred Astaire did—except backwards and in high heels. I believe the same could be said about the social sector—we're the Ginger Rogers to the private sector's Fred Astaire.*

This chronic lack of institutional oxygen, as Connor explained, "led to employee pools that are definitionally not inclusive because talented people who have been excluded from generational wealth creation cannot afford to work for the comparatively diminutive salaries nonprofits offer." Before the unionization

effort, Forterra attempted corrections in these sector-mismatches by insisting on robust recruiting and hiring of diverse candidates as well as funding an organization-wide salary survey that resulted in a pay increase for entry-level and line employees—but the issue ran deeper than dollars.

Michelle Connor described her mind shift around the unionization: "Like most nonprofits, going back to Forterra's founding, we focused on the work and the output. We didn't even have an HR program. I knew we needed to increase compensation to be an inclusive organization, but I underappreciated the need for infrastructure, processes, and systems because I came from a start-up mentality."

In June, just two months before I turned in the manuscript, The Intercept published an article titled *Elephant in the Zoom: Meltdowns Have Brought Progressive Advocacy Groups to a Standstill at a Critical Moment in World History* which read:

> *A looming sense of powerlessness on the left nudged the focus away from structural or wide-reaching change, which felt out of reach, and replaced it with an internal target that was more achievable. 'Maybe I can't end racism by myself, but I can get my manager fired, or I can get so and so removed, or I can hold somebody accountable,' one former executive director said. 'People found power where they could, and often that's where you work, sometimes where you live, or where you study, but someplace close to home.'*

Creating a perfect cocktail for upheaval, Forterra found itself with a stiff serving of these same issues facing nonprofits across the country mixed with the challenges of mass timber, a shot of hubris born of past success, and a dash of naiveté that the inherent goodness of Forest to Home would prevail. In addition, forces on both sides of the political spectrum had been emboldened by political events and anonymizing technology.



Starting a few weeks after turning in the manuscript, I received a series of emails from Michelle Connor that described stunning events occurring along a

timeline that defied organic development and wouldn't have been out of place in a Tom-Clancy-wannabe espionage novel.

September 14th, 2022 • A Forterra press release announced that the USDA's Climate Smart Commodities Grant had been preliminarily awarded to Forterra. A celebratory event occurred the next day in Tacoma's Hilltop neighborhood, at a property slated for an affordable housing development built with CLT.

The announcement started with: "The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and Forterra NW will showcase a new 'Forest to Home' project on Thursday, Sept. 15, which will convert industrial timber and traditional forest product manufacturing to a locally-owned supply chain that supports BIPOC and rural communities for residential and commercial construction."

Listed collaborators included the Snoqualmie Indian Tribe, Yakama Nation Cultural Resource Program, Abu Bakr Islamic Center, RJ Group, Aspect Structural Engineers, Gordian Knot Strategies, Sustainable Northwest, Zaugg and Whitehorse Timber, Snohomish County, Town of Darrington, Port of Portland, Roslyn Downtown Assoc, Town of Hamilton, City of Tacoma, and X-Caliber Rural Capital.

September 23rd, 2022 • The Snoqualmie Tribe sent a letter to Forterra and the USDA withdrawing its support for the grant and requesting that the USDA conduct a full review.

The grant application said the Tribe would contribute $1.5 million "matching funds" for the project—which was news to Tribal leadership. Additionally, it included a proposed timber harvest from the Tribe's recently acquired (with Forterra's help) Tolt River land that Tribal chair Robert M. de los Angeles said was "unsustainable and irresponsible." By withdrawing support, the Snoqualmie Tribe forfeited $3.5 million earmarked for the Tribe; for them to turn away from such a boon indicated a major issue, indeed.

September 26th, 2022 • Forterra engaged outside counsel, the Angeli Law Group, at a price of $150,000 to investigate the issues brought up by the Tribe.

September 30th, 2022 • *The Seattle Times* headline reads: *Snoqualmie Tribe says Forterra misled it, feds in $20M grant application*.

October 18th, 2022 • Forterra received a stern letter from Kathi Littman, president and CEO of the Greater Tacoma Community Foundation, that included: "Given all that has unfolded and transpired in recent months, we do not have confidence in Forterra's executive team and their ability to deliver on the commitments, timeline, budget, and other parameters that have been shared with us and the broader community." This marked a stark change of sentiment from the conversation I'd had with Littman just nine months earlier.

October 19th, 2022 • *The Seattle Times* feature story was titled: *Investors, eighty ex-staffers demand new leadership at Seattle's Forterra*. The cover image was an archival photo of Connor looking distraught in a meeting.

Several people I talked to spoke of a potentially coordinated attack on the organization. This included what appeared to be separate internal and external correspondences, but all of them originated from the same PDF creator. The grant document was stolen by a staff member with access to Forterra's server ahead of USDA approval to distribute, and footage of an internal meeting was surreptitiously recorded, deceptively edited, then released to the media.

October 25th, 2022 • *The Seattle Times* headline reads: *Seattle's Forterra fires executive after tribe, investors, ex-staff speak out*.

November 2nd, 2022 • After multiple attempts to resolve issues with the Tribe, including both legal and informal outreach, Forterra provided Snoqualmie Tribe with advance access to the Angeli findings and Forterra's formal public response, as well as a personal apology from Michelle Connor.

November 3rd, 2022 • Michelle Connor was honored as one of the year's Women of Influence by the Puget Sound Business Journal and Forterra released a statement announcing the findings identified by the Angeli review.

Angeli's overview assessment included:

- Relating to the overall grant process, Forterra's pursuit of the Climate-Smart Commodities Grant was in good-faith and driven by Forterra's mission, without malicious or deceptive intent.
- Forterra's interactions with the Snoqualmie Indian Tribe did not demonstrate sufficient respect for the Tribe's status as a sovereign government.

Specific areas of concern included:

- Discrepancies in the quantity and source of timber to be harvested, as well as a clear lack of communication with the Tribe as it relates to quantity and source.
- Failure to clearly communicate with the Tribe on measurement standards and reporting plan used in the application.
- Inconsistencies in language which did not accurately reflect the reacquisition of the Snoqualmie Ancestral Forest.
- Not obtaining the Tribe's consent to include matching funds in the grant application.
- Providing only generalized statements about the timber expected to be harvested and failure to clearly articulate that timber would be coming from multiple sources while the grant narrative made harvesting from the Tribe's ancestral forest the dominant narrative.

The Angeli review specifically noted that "it appears from a screenshot of track changes to the document that the matching funds were added (…) on May 4, just two days before the submission of the grant application..." The review went on to say: "We do not have concerns that this specific behavior is a systemic problem at Forterra, nor do we have reason to believe that others condoned the conduct that we find to be particularly concerning."

November 11th, 2022 • A *Seattle Times* op-ed followed the release of the Angeli findings. It was titled "*Forterra should go back to basics of preserving open space*" and was written by the editorial board. The fact that Forterra had been involved in urban initiatives for twenty years wasn't mentioned.



As the waves of bad publicity and guilt washed over the Forterra board and team, one thing emerged as the most important response of all. In the months that followed, I spoke with multiple board members and staff and each one, in different words, told me the same thing: *we must maximize the learning from this*. But first, the challenging situation had to be navigated. During the media onslaught, Forterra and community stakeholders received numerous, anonymized, unabomber-style emails claiming insights into misdoings, malfeasance, and making explicit threats. "It was creepy," said Rachel Valdez. "I was genuinely worried for Michelle's physical safety. If you ever watched crime shows where there's a serial killer out there and they're sending letters with cut out letters from magazines glued on a piece of paper. That's what it was like. It was scary and exhausting."

The financial and emotional consequences were severe. To make ends meet, the organization tapped its modest rainy-day reserves, Connor shuttered Forest to Home, gave back a significant share of her salary for several years, and laid off many staff. "The most painful thing I've ever done," she said.

Philanthropic contributions dropped to almost zero and many millions of dollars in awarded grants for both related and unrelated initiatives were walked back. Chase Bank pulled $3 million in direct subsidies for affordable housing on Hilltop. Mitsubishi pulled $100,000 and gave notice that it would not support further Forterra projects unless the Snoqualmie Tribe accepted the apology. Certainly, the collapse of financial support impacted the organization but, in the end, Forterra was merely a conduit through which these dollars and innovations flowed; it was the communities involved in the initiative that stood to lose the most.

Despite the turmoil, the value of the individual components of Forest to Home remained: the properties slated for development were still prime candidates for affordable housing, the progress made by the CLT Coalition had been industry-changing, and the model for involving Tribal leadership in ecological forestry initiatives showed potential to benefit both the forests and the people who had been in the region since time immemorial. In addition, the limits of a land trust, even one as versatile as Forterra, were laid bare for all to see and learn from. A





In the Pacific Northwest, the line between the urban and the wild is a thin one and the inspiration behind twenty years of Forterra's efforts including the organization's greatest learning: the Forest to Home initiative.

Photo by Topher Donahue

multi-year effort ensued to pick up the pieces and shepherd them towards positive outcomes while optimizing institutional and individual learning.



Topping the Forterra to-do-list was formal education on working with Tribal governments. As Forterra board member Gigi Coe explained, "The governance of an independent nation is very important, and we failed to respect it or understand enough about it. Whereas I've been involved with (federal or state) government clients and they're highly negotiable. You put some numbers in, and you think they'll be negotiated later, and that we don't have a final deal yet. That's sort of the mentality that went forward."

Rachel Valdez, herself a Native American, concurred, "I think our biggest misstep was really, truly not understanding how Tribal sovereignty works." To grasp the significance of this error, imagine an American organization presenting a project involving China to the U.S. government based on discussions with a few Chinese people—without China approving of the plan.

In May of 2023, the entire Forterra staff attended an intensive Tribe-led workshop at the Tulalip Tribal offices, thirty miles north of Seattle on the shore of Possession Sound (cringingly named by George Vancouver in 1792 when he claimed the land for Britain). David Leon shared his experience at the training: "I'm a lawyer by training and I've been working in law and real estate for years, and I didn't know anything about Tribal law. They had one of their Tulalip Tribal attorneys give us an overview of how land works in Indian country. There's a whole different set of rules in the way the Treaties operate."

Leon knew he had a challenging job, taking the properties that had been involved in Forest to Home and helping them towards a future as close to the original vision as possible, but the Tribal training gave him reason for optimism. "It's an interesting angle, this innovative land trust working with Tribes to acquire and conserve land and/or return land to the Tribes and help the land back to its more natural state. This relationship has been happening for years. There was very little reason to believe that what happened with the Snoqualmie Tribe

could have flipped over the apple cart. It wasn't unusual for us to work with the Tribes. It was the exception that it went off the rails."

A second key learning involved *community-driven design,* the concept promoted by Forterra during the Forest to Home initiative that had the unintended consequence of raising expectations amidst a project that was as challenging as they come and setting the stage for disappointment. The communities slated for Forest to Home development wanted (indeed needed) home ownership to help families build financial security as well as a place to live. However, for the project to work financially as costs skyrocketed with pandemic-driven supply chain issues and rising interest rates, the price of rented and owned units would have eviscerated the *affordable* from the *housing.*

"Community-driven design is amazing when you can pull it off," India Clark explained. "You empower a community when you give them an opportunity to help design what goes into their neighborhood, but you have to check community expectations along the way." While Forterra had a long history of pursuing land negotiations with lofty goals, in the case of Forest to Home, promises and aspirations were conflated in how the project was presented to, and perceived by, the community.

As any developer knows, hard decisions must be made when idealized design hits the reality of construction costs. For Forterra, lacking experience in managing this inevitability, the project's sky-high expectations faced a painful reckoning. David Leon explained his view of the learning curve: "Gene and Michelle were very successful for a long time, doing land trust conservation work with this *anything is possible* approach. They didn't say, 'We only buy conservation land.' We weren't a narrowly focused land trust. They were like, 'Tell us about your crazy project and we'll figure it out.' They were very successful at that. It was a matter of finding the limit—and I think it was at real estate development."

Skip Swenson, from a perspective informed by a long history with Forterra, said: "Most land trusts define themselves in terms of protecting rural open space. We take a broader view, looking across both urban and rural areas and seeing the interconnections between land and people. We focus our efforts at these points of connection, building projects and programs that have environmental and social impact." Certainly, moving into the construction space was a departure for

the organization, but not as significant a leap as it would be for many land trusts. Thus, Leon's and Swenson's observations are particularly poignant; Forterra had historically found success in efforts involving the development space. Policy? Definitely. Land banking? Yup. Development rights transfers? Always. Urban conservation? Twenty years' experience. Nuts and bolts construction? Best left to the developers.

Then there were the human resource learnings. Going back to Duvernoy's time at the helm, an awkward leadership model had developed. With limited resources, Duvernoy ran the organization like a political campaign, offering inexperienced early-career professionals the opportunity to engage in ambitious efforts to change the world—but consequently all decisions and all the pressure flowed to him as the head of the organization, a not-uncommon characteristic of the founding phase for nonprofit organizations.

Adding yet another twist, it was now obvious that traditional conservation favored people who already had access to healthy lands and lifestyles. Sure, owners of expensive houses pay taxes that support land conservation, but people in low-income neighborhoods also support the economy—and many of them can't afford to visit the beautiful conservation lands their work and taxes help fund. Their homes are often in the least healthy areas of the city, in communities regularly overlooked in the game of allotting dollars for healthier redevelopment. With the cat out of the bag on who benefits from conservation investment, working for a reduced wage to preserve viewsheds and hiking trails for the wealthy became less appealing. A June 2022 *Politico* article explained:

> *…Floyd's death opened conversations over racial justice, police brutality and systemic racism. Many saw connections to the environment: People of color and low-income individuals are more likely to live near industrial pollution and suffer from climate change's effects on health and property.*[34]

This imbalance is illustrated clearly in the Puget Sound area, where a map of air quality indices overlayed by a map of underserved communities shows disturbingly similar lines; Chinatown-International District has some of the worst

air quality in the area,[35] is cleaved by I-5, and the only public park is a concrete slab. A study conducted by University of Washington noted: 'Disparities in concentrations of ultrafine particles (…) were especially stark. Blocks with median incomes under $20,000 had long-term UFP concentrations 40% higher than average. Blocks where median incomes are over $110,000, meanwhile, saw UFP concentrations 16% lower than average."[36]

Similarly, a lifespan expectancy overlay follows similar patterns. In parts of east Pierce County, where public transit and quality of life infrastructure is lacking and a significant portion of the community are people of color living in poverty, one can expect to die a decade earlier than the average.[37] According to the Trust for Public Land, people in low-income neighborhoods in Seattle have access to a third less park space than people in high-income areas.[38]

Clearly, social issues and environmental quality are closely entwined, and Forterra's wide lens approach to conservation made the issue blindingly clear. Twenty years before the Sierra Club decided to include social issues in its mission, Forterra published the Cascade Agenda which read:

> *Two futures seem to be laid out in front of us. In one—a future taken by some other regions of the country—unmanaged growth, sprawl, dependence on the car and the highway have defined a reality in which daily congestion, frustration and the loss of green and open space leave people looking for a better place to live.*
>
> *In the other future—one clearly still available in the Northwest—our streams, beaches and estuaries are restored, functional and accessible to all. Our farms, ranchlands, forests, and orchards are conserved and working, with their owners fairly compensated for taking care of them. Our urban neighborhoods and communities are full of people, lively, diverse and within walking distance of jobs, stores, spectacular parks, and trails.*

This history shows clearly that the organization's efforts to span the environment-urban divide wasn't an attempt to jump on the social justice bandwagon, or a departure from its origins (as the *Seattle Times* scolding would suggest) but

rather a natural progression. Forest to Home was Forterra's most audacious effort to build a robust, self-sustaining bridge between these elements, but it was hardly its first. In one example, in 2008 Forterra helped to secure funding and shape the Central Issaquah Plan which included 7000 new housing units in the city center, transit and multi-modal transportation investments, and an affordable housing and density bonus program.

Despite these efforts, there was much work to be done to institutionalize an HR program that would inspire people to stay and feel appreciated and bring transparency to Forterra's legacy of equitable conservation. On the bright side, in comparison to the beleaguered nonprofit space nationwide, the organization was ahead of the curve. Months before the national upheaval in nonprofits picked up steam, Forterra's union agreement was in the books. "I've been involved in organizations that are in unionization processes and two and a half years later they still don't have a bargain," Maggie Walker said. "Think of the lack of productivity that's creating."

Connor sought guidance from Strong Communities Fund board member Lyle Quasim on how to improve collaboration and he advised that every person in the organization needed to understand "who we are and why we do what we do." Quasim's feedback led to clarification of the organization's mission, vision, and values. Rachel Valdez drove institutionalization of these concepts into calibration of hires, reviews, and promotions as well as helping improve business practices. Forterra's finance team developed a sophisticated method to project and model performance and the management team rebuilt systems and processes aimed at helping every employee understand how to participate in decision-making.

The Forterra board also embraced the learning opportunity provided by the upheaval. "I think it's notable," board member Gigi Coe pointed out, "that during all the drama not a single board member left—nobody walked." Aside from a few statements from board chair Beth Birnbaum responding to media requests, the decision was made to take the media onslaught quietly. This was seen by some people as too defensive, but the team decided there was value in accepting the criticism thoughtfully and taking time before responding. As events unfolded, the board moved to learn from the situation and make real changes in how it guided the organization without shouting anything from the rooftops.



A historic cabin, the original version of Forest to Home, at the Paradise Valley Conservation Area which Forterra helped Snohomish County to conserve in 2000. *Photo by Todd Parker*

It was the most challenging chapter of Forterra's thirty-five-year history, but also a time of profound learning that steeled the organization's collective will to continue along its innovative path. The team could take some solace in the fact that even during this challenging time, Forterra conserved over $8 million worth of land in ten transactions totaling 1,188 acres.

At the time of this writing, it was far too early to draw any conclusions about the final state of Forest to Home. After all, as the next chapters will show, many Forterra projects took decades to reach fruition. Given time, and the decoupling of Forterra from the development aspect, perhaps Forest to Home *is* too good to fail. Based on the massive support the plan generated, and the continuing momentum among the different components of the project, it is quite possible that the story could one day be introduced with Mark Twain's famous misquote: "The reports of my death are greatly exaggerated."



Let's have a bolder approach to Wilderness!

— Peter Wohlleben, *The Secret Life of Trees*

CHAPTER SEVEN

WHEN *Good* GOES VIRAL

If you're fortunate enough to have spent time on a variety of America's public lands, you've surely noticed how the different management styles influence the feel of each one. The vast landscapes, cow patties, and fossil fuel extraction footprint on BLM lands. The impossible scenery and amusement park infrastructure of National Parks. The breathtaking freedom and resultant acne scars of firepits, piles of empty bullet casings, and ever-expanding network of social trails on National Forest lands. The intimate natural and human-made wonders of National Monuments. The humble beauty and confusing signage of County and State Parks. The well-loved pathways of City Parks. When I had a chance to go hiking in the 50,241-acre Teanaway Community Forest, I was curious: would it feel distinct from these other public lands?

In 2014, the Teanaway River Valley, at the headwaters of the Yakima Basin's watershed on the east side of the Cascades, became Washington's first state-owned Community Forest, a designation established in 2011 and overseen by the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) with the specific goal of managing forests for benefits other than revenue generation. In alignment with one of Forterra's guiding principles, that residential development locks the land and throws away the key, DNR's explanation of the Community Forest model reads: *Often, the community doesn't recognize what it is losing until the forest next door is cleared for construction.*

The Teanaway

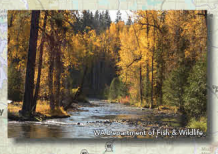
50,272 Acres Conserved

For decades, conserving the 50,272-acre Teanaway River Valley seemed out of reach. But in 2011, the formation of the Yakima River Basin Integrated Plan (YBIP) created an opening. YBIP brought together an unprecedented coalition of public and private agencies to address impacts of climate change on fish and farms in the Basin. For the first time, it looked as though the conditions – timing and funding – were right to secure forever the Teanaway and its many benefits. At the same time a negotiating team of Forterra, the State Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) and State Department of Ecology (DOE) worked with landowner American Forest Holdings on the terms of the land purchase, finally striking a deal in early 2013.

Led by The Wilderness Society, Trout Unlimited, American Rivers and the National Fish and Wildlife Federation, the YBIP coalition worked alongside Forterra, DOE, WDFW and the Washington Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to secure the funding necessary to purchase the Teanaway. Thanks to efforts of this coalition, the leadership of Governor Jay Inslee and members of the Washington State Legislature, lawmakers appropriated $87 million for the purchase in the 2013-15 state capital budget. DNR supplemented that amount with a $10-million loan from its Real Property Replacement Account.

The Teanaway River Valley is the largest single conservation land acquisition in Washington State in the past 45 years and Washington's first ever community forest. The community forest model was designed to empower communities to partner with DNR to purchase forests that support local economies and that have community value through recreation and conservation opportunities. This scenic and varied landscape includes economy-driving working forest land, fish and wildlife habitat, recreational opportunities and headwaters habitat critical for the future of our fish, families and farms.

Washington's largest single land acquisition in 45 years

















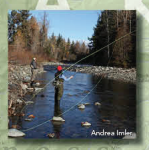


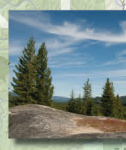


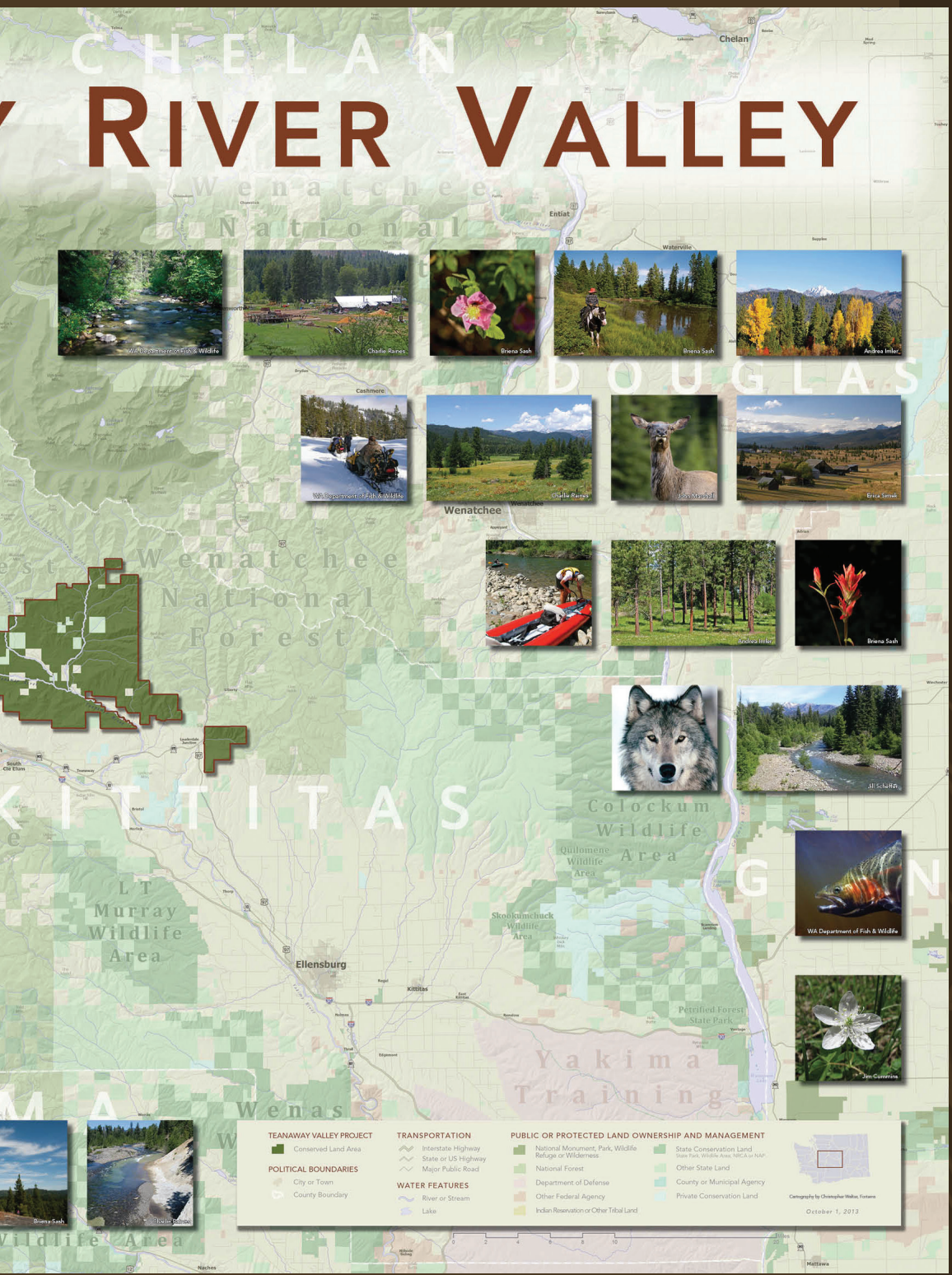











Y RIVER VALLEY
CHELAN
DOUGLAS
KITTITAS
Wenatchee National Forest
Chelan
Entiat
Waterville
Cashmere
Wenatchee
Ellensburg
Colockum Wildlife Area
Quilomene Wildlife Area
L T Murray Wildlife Area
Skookumchuck Wildlife Area
Yakima Training
Petrified Forest State Park
WA Department of Fish & Wildlife
Charlie Raines
Briena Sash
Andrea Imler
Erica Simek
Joan Maycroft
Ali Schafer
Jim Cummins
TEANAWAY VALLEY PROJECT
Conserved Land Area
POLITICAL BOUNDARIES
City or Town
County Boundary
TRANSPORTATION
Interstate Highway
State or US Highway
Major Public Road
WATER FEATURES
River or Stream
Lake
PUBLIC OR PROTECTED LAND OWNERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT
National Monument, Park, Wildlife Refuge or Wilderness
National Forest
Department of Defense
Other Federal Agency
Indian Reservation or Other Tribal Land
State Conservation Land
Other State Land
County or Municipal Agency
Private Conservation Land
Cartography by Christopher Wallus, Fontana
October 1, 2013

One of the requirements for a Community Forest is a diverse advisory committee. For the Teanaway, the DNR lists representatives from Trout Unlimited, County Farm Bureau, The Wilderness Society, Evergreen Mountain Bike Alliance, Yakima Basin Integrated Plan Board, Kittitas County Field and Stream Club, Friends of the Teanaway, Washington Trails Association, Washington State Snowmobile Association, Washington Department of Ecology, Mountains to Sound Greenway Trust as well as a county resident, a fish biologist, the county commissioner, an off-road vehicle enthusiast and several neighboring land owners, farmers and residents. Community forest, indeed.

I visited the Teanaway on a crisp bluebird day in May. My first impression, other than the obvious natural beauty of the forested valleys ringed by the toothy, snow-covered peaks of the Wenatchee Range, was the distinct lack of human impact and tourist infrastructure. At first glance, I didn't realize the more sparsely forested hillsides had been recently logged; there were none of the Abraham Lincoln memorial checkerboard clear-cuts or overcrowded Douglas fir tree farms ubiquitous across the Pacific Northwest. Along the dirt roads, small signs next to pristine meadows remind people not to camp or drive on the grass, and infrastructure and signage at a campground is equally spare but functional. By the time I'd stopped at a place with cell service to buy a day-use permit online, and parked along Jungle Creek, one of the Teanaway's 400 miles of free-flowing streams, the verdict was clear—the Community Forest *is* different.

While hiking along a logging road, I realized there was more human impact than first impressions revealed. The area had been recently thinned, although not clear cut. Some tree trunks were blackened by the 20,000-acre Jolly Mountain fire that burned five years earlier. An hour later I reached a ridge affording breathtaking views of Mt. Stewart's craggy summit, but I was more interested in the forest around me. Fire? Logging? In a forest that appeared to be thriving? I'm no naturalist, but fresh from between the covers of Simard's and Wohlleben's books, I knew that fire resistance, diversity of species, trees of different ages,

◄ ***On the previous pages:*** The Teanaway Community Forest map.

Cartography by Christopher Walter

and a variety of densities were some indicators of a functional forest—and that's what I saw all around me. A bear turd more girthsome than my rock climber's forearms gave me pause, but the story of a healthy ecosystem, where humanity's and nature's needs were in harmony, compelled me onward. The drumming of a grouse receded in front of me. A falcon screamed. In the distance, a low-geared truck grumbled up an incline.

Using the iNaturalist app (which I learned about at a Forterra Green Cities volunteer event a few days earlier) to help identify tree species, I found young fir and pine growing next to each other. In one area, trees were freshly marked with numbers painted on their fire-blackened trunks while their needles and crowns appeared green and healthy. Small, sun-kissed open meadows were interspersed with thick groves of trees shading reluctant snowdrifts. Clearly, the area was being helped along by human hands and, as far as I could tell, it seemed to be working beautifully. I'd read about how ecological forest management can promote biodiversity and forest health, but to see it in action was another thing entirely. At my feet, a tiny sapling poked its needles around the edge of a wayward party balloon. Not a perfect coexistence, but promising. The hike left me feeling like humans could be an important and beneficial part of the natural world—a lovely sensation.

For nearly fifteen years, Forterra patiently courted the Teanaway's owner, a land speculator from New York, who could have easily sold the land for development. At the same time, the Yakima Basin Integrated Plan (YBIP) was being hashed out as Tribes, environmentalists, and farmers tried to figure out how to manage the watershed for everyone's best interest (including the trees, fish, and animals) without going to court. When Duvernoy, who had already taken over a dozen trips to New York to talk with the landowner, heard that a crucial part of the YBIP agreement was to preserve significant riparian habitat, he saw a possible partner—in fact a whole team of partners. He said, "We realized that the Teanaway could be that habitat!"

The Teanaway deal proved to be a critical component of the YBIP. The original agreement was that Forterra would acquire the $100 million property with bank financing, and then the State would buy it over a twenty-year period. But the grand bargain of the Teanaway had developed unprecedented momentum. Duvernoy explained, like a proud father describing his child's full-ride scholarship: "Some of the


2
3



The section of Teanaway Community Forest where the author found signs of logging, fire, and forest vitality all in the same place. *Photo by Topher Donahue*



A male Coho salmon strutting his spawning colors in the Teanaway River.

Photo courtesy of the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife

Republican members of the state legislature were so anxious to kick start the Yakima Basin Integrated Plan that they endorsed the outright purchase of the 50,000 acres. Through this collaborative approach, folks who never support conservation pushed through one of the biggest conservation acquisitions in the State of Washington's history!" Once again, land for good proved refreshingly non-partisan.

Several Forterra projects have taken even longer than the Teanaway, and one advantage of the long game is that initiatives are often buoyed along by changes in cultural, environmental, or economic conditions, sometimes taking on a life of their own beyond the original vision. A shining example of this is the Green Cities Partnership. The program developed because the urban forests in the Puget Sound area were dying. After the old growth was cut, the first trees to emerge from the disturbance were faster growing deciduous species, like the big leaf maples that splash

brilliant colors across the city every fall. In a functional forest, those leaves provide important shade for the slower-growing, longer-living conifers, which eventually take over the canopy.

The cycle starts over with every disturbance, from a single mother tree falling, to the decimation wrought by a volcano, avalanche, flood, fire, or chainsaw. In the cities, however, the seed source for new conifers was cleared to make way for development and, thanks to short-sighted gardeners who thought importing a few new plants was a good idea, thickets of Himalayan blackberry, English Ivy and other invasives made life impossible for young conifers. Meanwhile, the early successional trees began to reach the ends of their lifespans. Well-intentioned but disjointed efforts to cull the invasives were initiated, but nobody had developed the sustained, robust approach that was needed.

The Seattle Urban Nature Program hired a team of experts to conduct a health assessment of the urban forest and produce a color-coded map revealing the condition of the trees. The final illustration was shocking; 90% of the Seattle area was bright red. "The city is on fire!" said Joanna Nelson de Flores, remembering the moment she saw the graphic. "There was a misunderstanding that natural areas take care of themselves, but that was when the stars aligned, and we realized the urban area was critical to landscape-scale conservation."

Starting in 2004, thanks in no small part to the foresight of Mayor Greg Nichols, Forterra partnered with the city to develop a community-based stewardship program called the Green Seattle Partnership with a goal of restoring the park areas over twenty years. The original vision was that Forterra would be an incubator for the concept and support the program through training and a collective strategy based on the survey data, and the city would provide funding, logistics, and labor. The effort proved effective, and contagious. The Green Cities Partnership was born and Forterra was swept up in the enthusiasm. "We weren't even halfway through the twenty-year plan," explained Nelson de Flores, "when other cities were like, *Hey, this is really important to us, too!"* Forterra found itself doing far more than managing the early-stage vision, and was caught up in every step including funding, planning, organizing partnerships, and executing restoration for over a dozen municipalities.

Andrea Ostrovsky, a long-time Green Cities volunteer, noted how the program benefited the humans as well as the trees. "We have this core group of people who, for more than ten years now, have been coming out every single month to help make this little park better. And the same thing is happening in parks across the region. It's not political, and there's something magical about people working together in a physical way. We get our hands dirty, plant trees, remove non-native plants, and build trails. Then we can come back month-to-month, and year-to-year, and look together and say, 'Wow! We made this! We built this together!' It's really powerful. I don't know that the community building was part of the original inspiration, but it's an awesome byproduct."

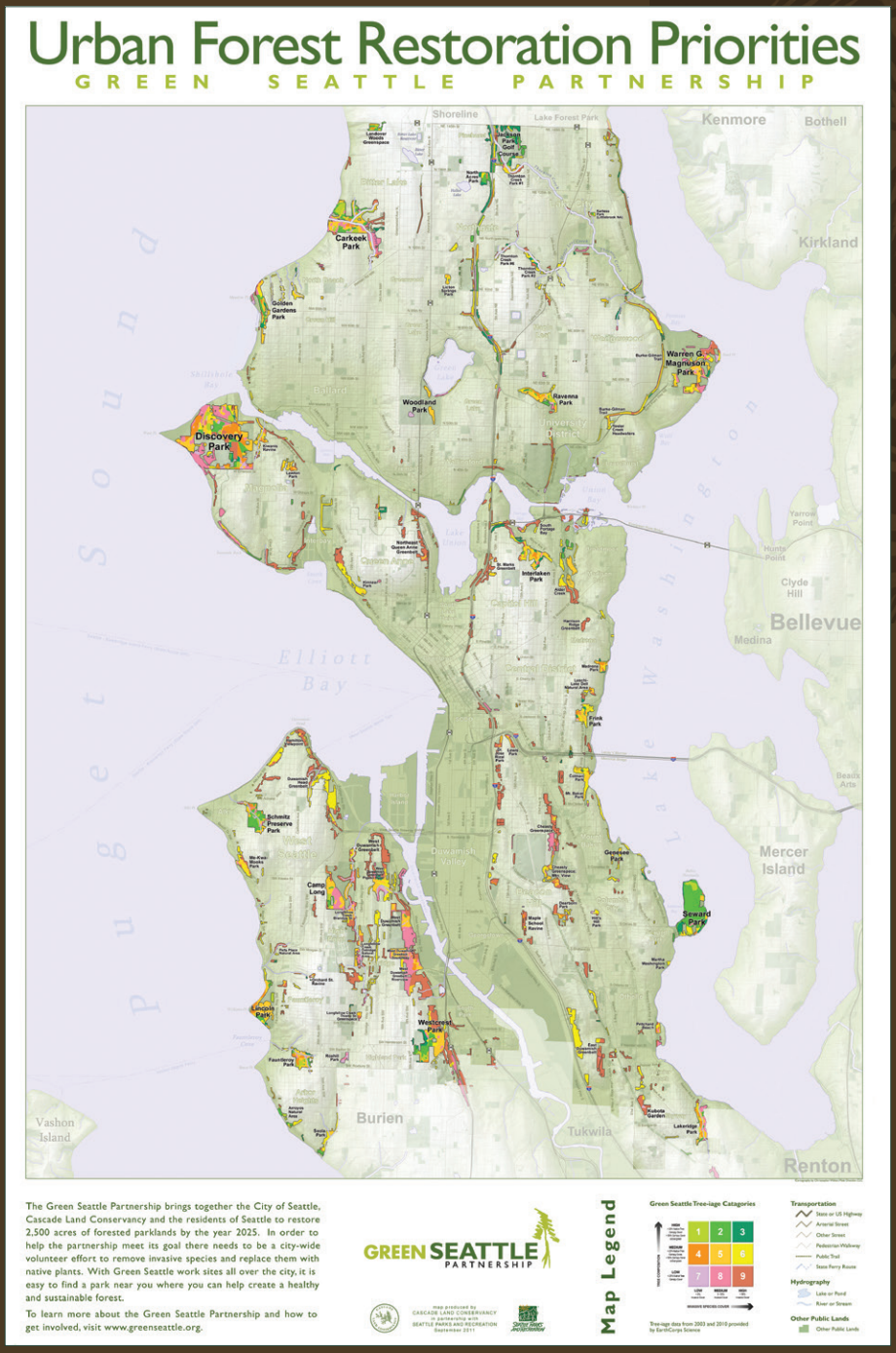
I spent a day volunteering at a Green Cities Partnership event in Snoqualmie, a town nestled against the foothills of the Cascades and named for the Tribe on whose ancestral lands the town now sits. Emilene Castillo, from AmeriCorps, was the event leader. The local expert was Alex McLean, a fifteen-year-old who lived just a few houses away from the park. After showing us images comparing the invasive plants to similar-looking natives, and handing out gloves, snippers, and shovels, McLean said, "We're probably the most invasive species here, but we're already here, so we have to do our part." The experienced volunteers were quick to the task, but us newbies needed guidance from the veterans before our eyes could pick out the troublemakers.

"Sick!" Said a woman named Caroline, fondling a native blackberry.

"The plant is sick?" I asked.

"No, look how it's fought off the Himalayan blackberry. Like, sick as in cool."

Clearly, I was clueless. I sidled up to one of the more experienced volunteers, Janine, and set to work uprooting a Himalayan blackberry. The plant's defenses are formidable—easily an inspiration for barbed wire. Janine and I worked from either side of the prickly adversary, falling into easy jobsite conversation. Her family moved to the area after being priced out of Seattle. "We had a 700-square-foot place in the city," she said, hacking with her shovel at the root ball. "After having kids, we tried to make it work. We stored pots and pans and clothes in the basement." Eventually her family moved out of the city to where they could afford a place big enough for pots to stay in the kitchen, but the domino effect of market



Map of urban forestland restoration priorities from the Green Seattle Partnership that started the Green Cities program. *Cartography by Christopher Walter and Matt Dressler*

pressure wasn't lost on her. "The people who live here hate us because we're now pricing them out; now many of them can't even afford a tiny trailer."

I learned a few things that day. First, aside from napalming the entire region, truly eliminating the invasives is impossible but, with human hands helping the native forest to regain footing, invasives and natives can coexist (there's a lesson in there somewhere), and the old leafy trees can once again welcome enthusiastic conifer saplings to their shady understory. Secondly, the community-building aspect of restoration is indeed therapeutic; every interaction I had that day was the kind from which friendships are made. And finally, Janine's story illustrated that Forterra's Cascade Dialogue-inspired pivot, to embrace urban spaces as a critical factor in conservation, was spot on.

Forterra won national awards for the Green Cities Partnership, but Nelson de Flores was quick to point out that Forterra didn't do it alone. "The model is a partnership in the truest sense," she said. "There are probably twenty or thirty other nonprofits who were hugely influential in the program. In slideshows, I often put up a slide that has like fifty partner logos—it's overwhelming. What we've accomplished has been because others have been willing and been a part of it."

In 2021 alone, Green Cities Partnership events involved over 1250 volunteers who planted nearly 10,000 native plants in fifty-eight community parks across fourteen cities. Fantastic progress was made, but several Forterrans raised the question: *How do we include people who can't afford to volunteer, and neighborhoods that never received the investment of parklands, in the boons of access to natural areas and restorative community collaboration?*

To advance its aspirations for equitable and inclusive urban forest programming, the Forterra board convened a "pulse task force," made up of board members, stakeholders, outside experts, and staff, to assess Forterra's approach to urban restoration, including the Green Cities Partnership, as well as evaluate how to address the scope creep that occurred. After reflecting on what had been accomplished and where the gaps remained, the task force advised that the most effective place for Forterra to engage would be in policy and supporting the network of cities and community groups. As Kristi England explained, "Over time, many participating cities have brought the program 'in-house,' making Forterra's role in these programs less pivotal."



A Green Cities Partnership restoration event tooling up in Snoqualmie.

Photo by Topher Donahue

Daniel Hachet described Green Cities as "my favorite project of all time," then added, "A lot of people would say we were never supposed to be with the Green Cities that long and that it should have been a five-year project and handed over to the cities a lot sooner." When we spoke, he was working on what could be considered the Green Cities spiritual successor: Community Restoration Grants, an initiative providing singular communities with support for focused projects tailored to their urban natural lands.

"We still believe in the Green Cities partnership model," explained England, "But rather than running it, our job is to help the cities connect and share resources and information. We helped show that it can work, and I think that's what Forterra is really good at: coming up with a bright, innovative idea and testing it. But we need other people involved to execute the idea to maximum potential. With Community Restoration Grants, Daniel and I are getting ten times the amount of impact that we did with sixteen staff working on Green Cities."

At the end of my volunteer day, event leader Castillo sent us on our way with a few words of encouragement: "The work you did here today doesn't feel like much,

but it makes a huge difference. This fall we'll be able to plant natives here, which really helps the forest."

In seeking examples of how seemingly small steps can make a meaningful difference in solving huge ecosystemic problems, I spoke with Judy Blanco who'd led Forterra's Cedar River restoration. She explained that such data are hard to extract from all the other influences, but pointed out some good news. Throughout King County there are hundreds of aquatic invertebrate sampling sites that monitor "stream bug" health as a general indicator of ecosystem function. In many places, the data show stream bug decline, but in places where restorative work has occurred, stream bug health often improves.[39]

Blanco referred me to a King County educational video on the restoration of Rainbow Bend on the Cedar River which, while not a Forterra project, was the site of regular flooding that regularly decimated a neighborhood. King County deployed a similar home buyback and floodplain restoration strategy as was used on Chanty Sonnier's old farm in the Chehalis Basin: help flood-weary humans into dry homes and restore the salmon homes. Just a few years after the Rainbow Bend restoration, the data were encouraging enough that, according to Blanco, "the biologists were jumping up and down, and they don't normally do that!"

In the video, senior ecologist Dan Eastman explained that, before the restoration, the river was 100 feet wide, deep, and fast, which is not good for young salmon coming down stream; they need to spend four to six months in the flood plains to properly change from a small freshwater fish to a sturdy saltwater fish. As part of the mitigation, the county built a short side channel to encourage floodplain redevelopment. One year after restoration, in 2013, a survey of salmon redds (nests) found that the channel represented 9% of the redds in the entire Cedar River system—the restored area was a salmon magnet, and it kept improving. The second year the river had doubled in width, and by 2022 it had trebled and was transforming into a functional floodplain, complete with braided channels, shade from overgrowth keeping the water cool (which salmon also

need), and deposits of large woody debris that slow floodwaters and create ideal fish nurseries.

These clear signs of stewardship resulting in tangible ecosystem improvement go far in topping up the inspiration fuel tanks of those folks out there dedicating their time and resources to seemingly Sisyphean sustainability efforts. The little things matter. One of the more eloquent explanations of this are the words of Greg M. Peters in his book, *Our National Forests*:

> *Rarely does one single action cause irreparable harm to the environment. More often, a series of actions whittles away at the integrity and resilience of our natural world—death by a thousand cuts. The converse is also true. No single action—a lawsuit, a social media movement, an all-Black adventure film, or a magazine cover—can heal our degraded landscapes or our fractured society. Just as one errant plastic bag does not make the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, one image of a soot-covered woman on a small nonprofit's magazine* (in reference to a female firefighter on the cover) *does not erase decades of sexism and misogyny. Yet, one less bag floating in the ocean might save a young sea turtle, and one magazine cover might give a girl the confidence to follow whichever path she desires. So we must do many things, even if each feels small and insignificant, because we cannot know the difference that one thing might make. As a diverse group of Americans build physical and emotional connections to the outdoors, they grow the ranks of those who care about our forests and parks—and more people who give a damn is exactly what our outdoor spaces need.*
>
> *Our national forests don't care if we live in a city, a suburb or a rural town of 2,000 people. They most certainly don't care what color skin we have or what gender we are. Wind and rain buffet us equally and bright sunshine warms us all regardless of whom we love or what size pants we wear. In the end, it will take all of us who care about these places—white, Black, brown, male and female, queer and straight, fat and thin, young and old—to see past our small differences and focus on the big commonality we all share: our love of the outdoors.*



I came to the understanding that the economic system is actually the root cause of the ecological crisis, and that finance is what drives the economic system. So as a twenty-year finance veteran hotshot, I had some rethinking to do.

—John Fullerton, former managing director at JP Morgan

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE TRIPLE *Bottom Line*

Financially sustainable regenerative systems are difficult, but this is changing (for example, as renewable energy reaches and exceeds parity with fossil fuels), and Forterra found itself in a unique place to further the game of ecosmart money—in part thanks to not having any in the first place. "Many conservation organizations got started with great wealth behind them," said Gene Duvernoy. "We never had that, so we were always trying to figure out how to make transactions work. We adopted a real cost of capital, bootstrapping approach."

There were times it verged on desperation, and hilarity, like when Duvernoy put out a hat at a board retreat and said, "When there's enough money in there, I'll jump in the lake." I asked him what that fundraiser was like. He replied, "Cold."

In the early days, people intrigued with Forterra's work would stop by Gene's office to inquire about opportunities. He encouraged them to bring forward a business proposal then follow through and stick the landing; for employees eager to grow or leave their own mark, the invitation was a standing one. The requirement of financial sustainability pushed the organization's culture to foster an entrepreneurial spirit where creativity and can-do infused many shoe-string endeavors. As the organization achieved economic success, staffing grew, layers of management increased, and the sense of accountability for the organization's survival diffused.





However, in 2024, COO Rachel Valdez described the new Forterra team as "nimble" and pointed out a new outreach program that involves taking small groups into natural spaces with expert interpreters to help connect people more closely with Forterra's work. The excitement was obvious in David Leon's eyes as he described "natural capital accounting" as a way of determining the dollar value of natural resources left in place rather than only putting a price tag on extracted material. Perhaps the Forest to Home learning was just what the organization needed to reinvigorate its greatest qualities.

One of the more gorgeous examples of this culture of independence is a lesser-known project involving an effort to protect the relatively intact estuaries where the rivers draining the Olympic Mountains and rain-soaked coastal ranges of southwestern Washington reach the Pacific. It started in 1999 when Duvernoy, Maryanne Tagney, and board member Mark Johnsen had lunch with Richard Leeds, one of Microsoft's first employees and co-founder (with his wife, Anne Kroeker) of Wildlife Forever.

The couple were looking for a project where every dollar they donated would go directly to conservation. Johnsen thought Leeds and Kroeker might be interested in Foothills Forest, an initiative helping to protect the forest buffer between the rapidly growing urban areas and the hinterlands of the Cascades. "Maryanne, Gene, and I had talked about it," said Johnsen, "and decided that at the end of the meeting we would ask Richard for twenty-five or thirty thousand dollars."

At the appropriate time during lunch, Johnsen proceeded to give a ten-minute pitch on the Foothills Forest. At the end, Leeds said, "Ehh, there are a lot of people protecting forests now, so I don't really want to do that." Johnsen was crestfallen. Then Leeds said, "What I'm really interested in is rivers and estuaries."

Tagney recalled that Johnsen's fastidious preparation saved the day: "I looked over at Mark, he dropped all the Foothills Forest stuff back into his

◄ ***On the previous pages***: One of numerous estuaries entering Willapa Bay, the focus of a small and out-of-the-box but high-value conservation effort by Forterra. *Photo by Christopher Walter*

briefcase and pulled out a sheaf of other papers he had with him and said, 'We can do estuaries!'"

Forterra had been buying land along rivers but, as Johnsen explained, "We weren't really focused on estuaries (around Puget Sound) because of the condition they were in." Indeed, the Duwamish River estuary had largely been paved over and what remained was a superfund site. Johnsen, a self-proclaimed "conservation junky," did his best to explain Forterra's estuary potential.

At the end of lunch, Leeds said, "Okay, I'll give you $10 million ($19 million in 2025 dollars) to buy land, but I want it to be away from the cities and relatively undisturbed."

"It was the most flabbergasting thing I'd ever heard," said Johnsen. "It was like pouring water in my ear. I couldn't believe it."

"After Richard had gone," said Tagney, "we said to each other, 'Is he serious? Did he say $10 million?!' We're jumping up and down in the back alley behind the restaurant saying, 'Oh my God! Oh my God!'"

According to Johnsen, Duvernoy said, "This is a great opportunity, but we can't do it because the land is out on the coast." At the time, the organization was called the Cascade Land Conservancy, focused on the urban/mountain interface. "The board just won't go along with it."

With Tagney's support, Johnsen put together a presentation for the board, but Duvernoy was right; Johnsen recalls the board sentiment was that it all sounded "a little squirrely."

Tagney recalls Duvernoy saying, "You can't just be riding around like cowboys on the Olympic Peninsula buying stuff!"

Tagney paused in the telling of the story, smiled, and said, "Actually, we can!"

Johnsen wanted to do the project so badly that he offered to volunteer his time so the project would cost Forterra next to nothing. Duvernoy gave the project a green light with one caveat: "Just don't screw it up."

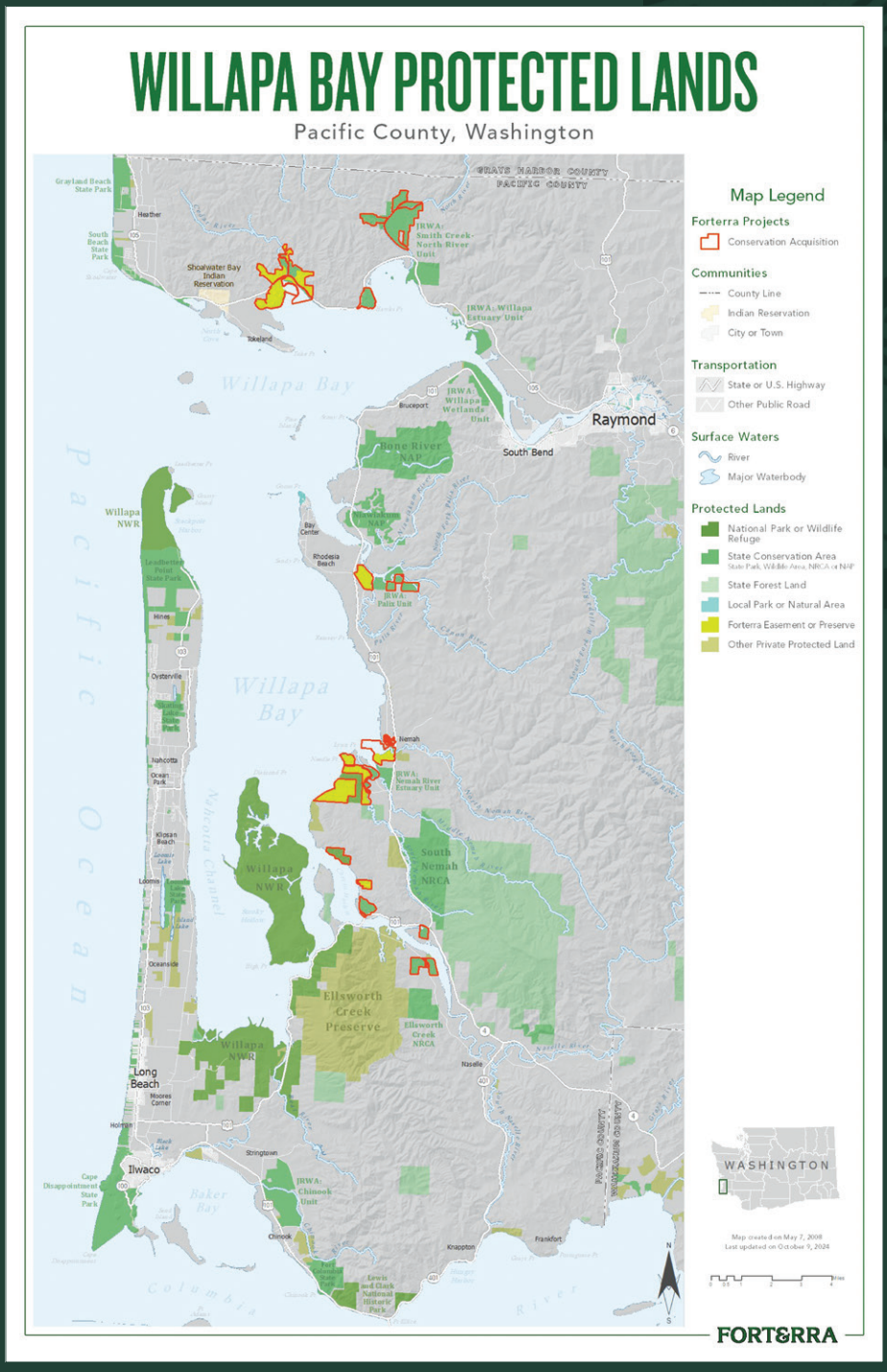
Over the next decade, Leeds, Kroeker, Tagney, and Johnsen collaborated on nearly forty transactions to purchase over 9000 acres of estuaries and surrounding uplands, most of which were quickly transferred to state ownership and, by utilizing matching grants from the feds, they leveraged the $10 million to the tune of two or three times over.

Tagney summarized their estuary adventures: "It was a hilarious project. Richard and Anne would stay in some funky bed and breakfast in Aberdeen, and Mark and I would drive out on Sunday morning and go look at what Richard called *mud*. Sometimes we'd convince our families to come with us and make a weekend of it. Get out kayaking. After Gene's cowboy comment, we joked that Mark was the Lone Ranger and I was Tonto. I'd just tag along and bring a box of chocolate chip cookies. Anne would bring sandwiches." Despite her cookie-carrying claims, Tagney served as Forterra board member and chair and is one of the region's most accomplished forces for community betterment and land conservation, contributing her own funds, decades of time, and political savvy to land for good.

If you drive along the coast of the Olympic Peninsula (Sunh-a-do) through Willapa Bay and look for impossibly pristine wetlands where rivers meet the sea in a gentle collision of saltwater and freshwater life, there's a good chance you'll be looking at an estuary protected thanks to the Forterra cowboys. Go for a walk along the edge of any one of them and you'll enter a world where, as Anne Kroeker said, "It feels like you can watch the green growing in front of your eyes!"

Although far humbler in appearance and reputation, and obscured by a sea of grass that undulates hypnotically in the wind, the estuaries hide a rich thrum of life and produce as much biological material, acre-for-acre, as a rainforest or coral reef.[40] On a lovely spring weekend, Johnsen, Leeds, and Kroeker gave me a tour of several of the estuaries on Willapa Bay, complete with Anne's sandwiches but lacking Tagney's cookies (a family commitment kept her away). Willapa is the second largest estuarine bay on the West Coast, and I'd rank the lush wildlands among the most vibrant exhibitions of life that I've ever seen.

The estuary project, while outside of the organization's historical scope, was one of Forterra's high-water marks for classic philanthropic conservation, but it had the black swan problem—it's not scalable as a business model. In addition, the value of land in the region was increasing at such a rapid rate that, in many situations, by the time the usual conservation funds can be deployed, be it from philanthropic or government sources, the market either sweeps in and buys the property or pushes the price higher and more rapidly than fundraising can match. Johnsen remembers Duvernoy saying, "We've been Land Trust 1.0, we need to become Land Trust 2.0 and 3.0."



Map showing Forterra-protected estuaries in Willapa Bay. *Cartography by Christopher Walter*



The early twentieth century economists' vision, that a free market would eventually regulate itself, its pollution, and its impact—like the mythical serpent Ouroboros eating its own tail while constantly being reborn—has proven delusional. However, there are whispers of a capitalistic metamorphosis; the bottom line is changing, from a single score, *profit,* to three, *people, profit, and planet.* Traditionally, these three elements had been viewed in direct conflict with each other but, thanks largely to a couple of visionaries, Forterra found itself in an ideal situation to help tie them together—the ampersand at work.

Doris Koo was one of the first to suggest Forterra develop a return-on-investment mechanism to boost the horsepower behind conservation funding. Born in Hong Kong, Koo became one of America's most respected and experienced community development leaders and CEO of Enterprise Community Partners, the country's largest affordable housing company. Like many developers, she struggled with conflicts between two historically opposed groups. "We call this the battle between the Housers and the Greeners," Koo told me. "The Greeners want to limit growth, protect the forest, and conserve land for the environment. The Housers fought the battle of urban habitats that have not addressed the needs of low-income people and saw (the Greeners) actively imposing growth limits to be a direct frontal attack. These were not just ideological conflicts, but literal legislative battles where Greeners would put forth legislative policy changes and Housers would oppose them—and vice versa."

A colleague suggested Koo and Duvernoy meet, as well-respected leaders of these opposing armies, to find common ground. At the time, Enterprise was unrolling the Green Communities Initiative, a campaign built on the realization that the greening of affordable housing simultaneously improved the quality of life and lowered living expenses. Transit access reduced fuel costs. The energy savings from efficient buildings lowered rent. Higher indoor air quality improved health indices. It was time for the Greeners and the Housers to play nice.

For two people representing the serious worlds of environmental and human vitality, their first effort was patently absurd—and hugely successful. The event was

held at Seattle's historic 5th Avenue Theatre, ornately modeled after China's Forbidden City, and hosted the region's premier showing of *Hairspray*, a romantic comedy extravaganza of dance and fashion with a strong racial integration message. Koo, a well-kempt professional woman, teased her hair into a lofty beehive hairdo and recalled that "Gene decked out nicely in '60s' fashion."

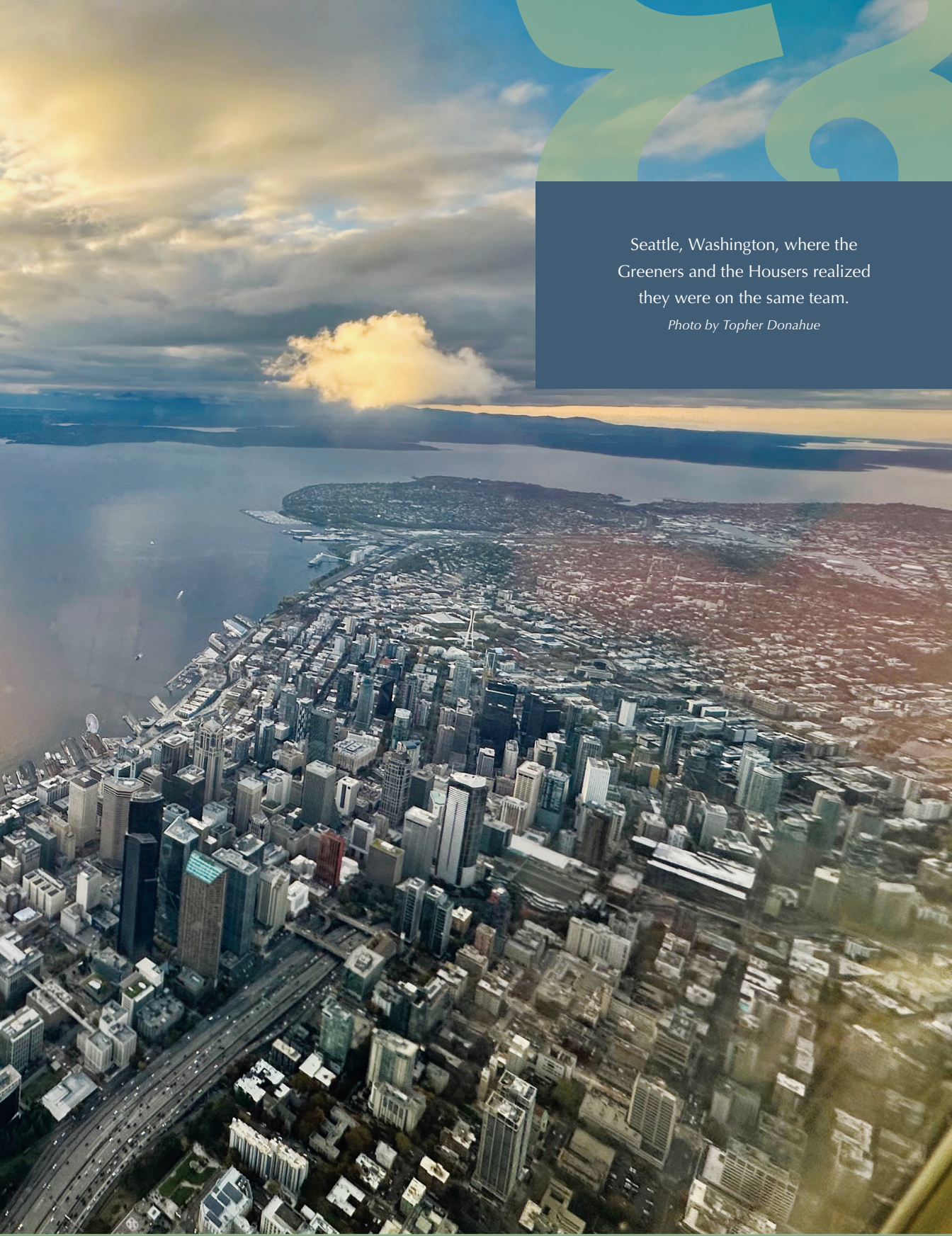
With his mustache, a feature so iconic and sturdy that it was once the cover image on Forterra's annual report, it's not hard to imagine Duvernoy throwing down a bitchin' '60s' look. "It was a very human kind of coming together that brought a lot of laughter," remembers Koo. "That was the real launch between Enterprise Community Partners and Forterra. For a long time, they would consult with us about how they could achieve social and racial justice and we would consult with Forterra on what else we could do besides imposing a green building standard into affordable housing."

One of Forterra's areas of expertise, land banking—buying property and sitting on it until community or government organizations can organize funding to take over ownership—was particularly helpful in neighborhoods most at risk of displacement due to gentrification, many of which were BIPOC communities. Koo suggested that Forterra develop a readily available fund that would allow for quickly purchasing opportune properties.

It's obvious that redlining treated communities of color unfairly, but Koo wanted measurable evidence. She explained: "We did our research, and, voila! Redlining ended up being in sync with the communities with the worst health indicators. The air quality indices told a story, and they mapped precisely on poverty, race, and the least desirable parts of the city. These communities had been burdened by poverty, discrimination, and lack of opportunity versus the well-to-do communities with parks and acres of open space access. The only park in Chinatown, Hing Hay Park, is a paved over concrete park. Compared to Magnuson Park and access to other open spaces in West Seattle, the imagery can't be more drastic to demonstrate the inequity that exists, not just on the income and health indices, but in access to the environment, nature, play areas, and quality-of-life amenities."

This is a little embarrassing for a city that celebrates Olmsted's vision, and it gets worse. As real estate prices increase, the neglected parts of the city attract the


LUMEN
FIELD



Seattle, Washington, where the Greeners and the Housers realized they were on the same team.

Photo by Topher Donahue

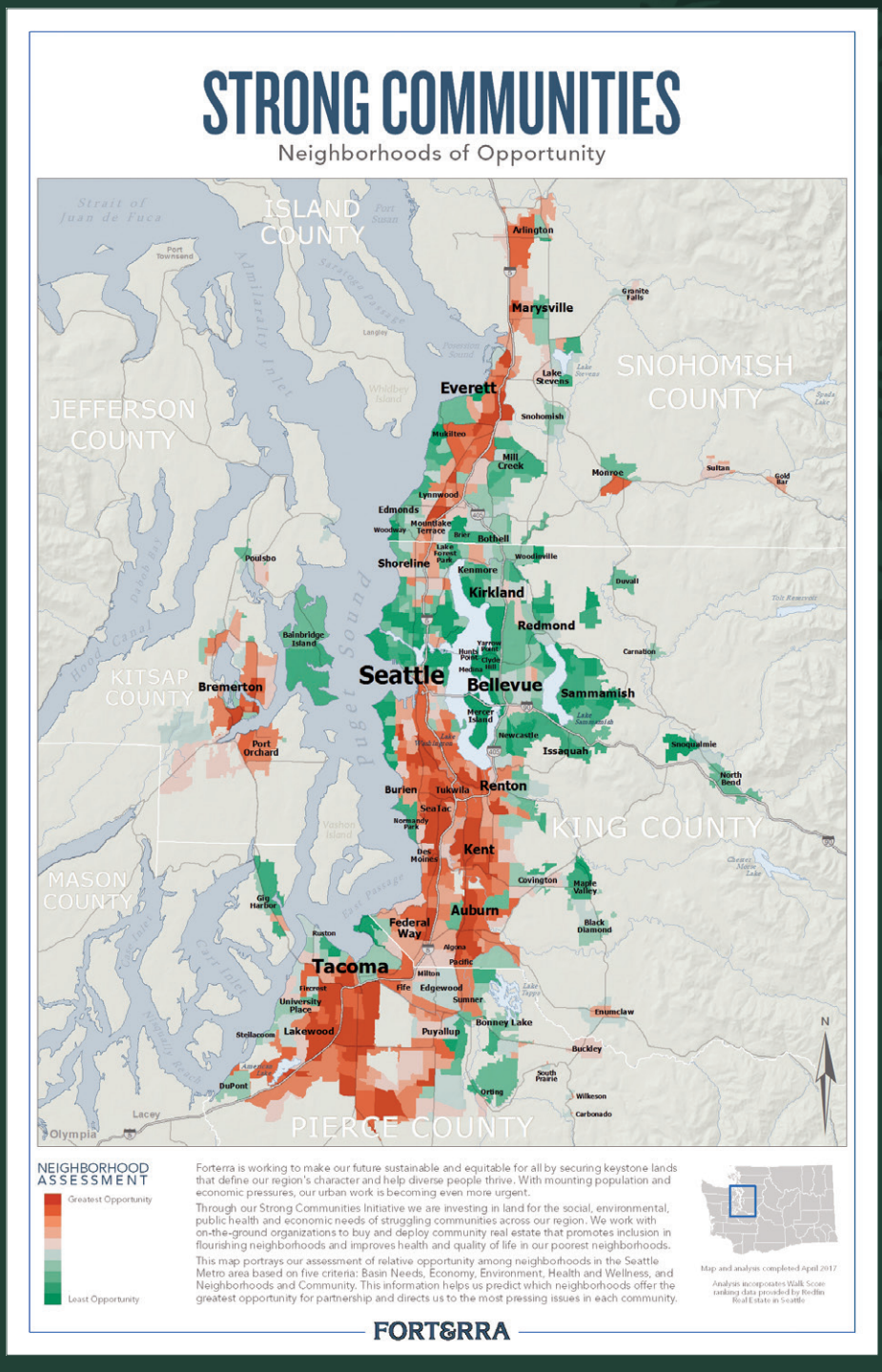
capitalist's eye because disinvestment eventually makes those properties a bargain. With new development, prices increase and the people who lived there, sometimes for generations, can no longer afford their homes. In explaining the factors contributing to the situation, Duvernoy said: "The market is pretty good at putting properties into their appropriate use for so many things, whether it's factories or apartment buildings. But the market does not recognize civic value, the sustainability value. This is where we need to step in and put the property into that use. We have to disrupt the market."



But disrupting the market takes money. And in the Pacific Northwest it must be quick money, and a lot of it. Forterra's first effort at meeting this challenge was when Duvernoy put together a Conservation Investment Fund with Bank of America and other cosigners to allow for a quick deployment of funds to purchase or support the conservation of critical lands in the region, a tool that would become a precursor to one of Forterra's most innovative financial endeavors.

A few years later, around the time Koo was making peace between the Greeners and Housers, Maggie Walker, one-time Chair of the Audubon Society and an entrepreneurial legend selected by the *Puget Sound Business Journal* as one of 2012's Women of Influence, was working with Global Partnerships to develop microloans, a social equity financing tool to support tiny businesses in Third World countries while delivering a small return to investors. "The fallacy of capitalism is that all worth can be measured in terms of currency," Walker explained. "It doesn't measure social value—at all. It's one of the things that capitalism has driven, and it's driven us into a corner."

After the success of the microloan program, Walker saw the potential to deploy a similar mechanism in local communities and pitched the idea to Forterra. "There's a lot of interest because it's not charity," she explained. Walker cautioned that this new model isn't a replacement for philanthropy but rather that it can fill a badly needed societal void. "It's building people's capacity to do great things. What capitalism does at its best is invest. Investors like social equity financing now because so many folks are used to venture funds, which have become a standard



A 2017 map that provided guidance for the Strong Communities Fund based on neighborhoods in the Puget Sound region where investment in the social, environmental, public health, and economic needs would be most beneficial. *Cartography by Christopher Walter*

among more sophisticated investors. They feel it's a better model than straight philanthropy because their money is being put to work in a completely different way; and it's evergreen, so the capital comes back, and you can put it back to work."

Under Koo's and Walker's guidance, Forterra's first Strong Communities Fund was built. It's first use was as a financial backstop that gave assurance of a viable deal for a remarkable community acquisition at a place that was a quintessential example of the disinvestment-cum-displacement cycle: 23rd and Union, once the vibrant heart of the Black community in Seattle's Central Area. The previously redlined neighborhood, with easy access to the hospital district, downtown, the Amazon campus, Washington Park, and open spaces on Capitol Hill, was transforming the area into a choice neighborhood. The very same families that had been pushed in through redlining were being pushed out.

Forterra joined forces with Capitol Hill Housing and Africatown Community Land Trust, an organization led by K. Wyking Garrett, a Black leader selected by *Seattle Magazine* as one of 2019's Most Influential People. Garrett's vision was to leverage the community's combined economic power to help families who would not qualify in the traditional mortgage market to buy homes and begin building wealth and opportunity. In 2016, Africatown approached Forterra for help, and Forterra went big, offering to buy the entire block, which was for sale for $25 million. "It was audacious and bold," said Koo. "Forterra had never built affordable housing in an urban landscape and Africatown had never had the kind of balance sheet that would justify any kind of investment."

In classic Forterra try-try-again fashion, their first two offers were rejected, but Forterra reached out through its network to connect with a third developer, Lake Union Partners. While Africatown drove the deal terms that were critical for the community, Forterra provided the legal expertise and the Strong Communities Fund provided Lake Union Partners the needed financial assurances.

Lake Union Partners agreed to sell 20% of the property to Africatown. Forterra helped orchestrate an agreement to increase the amount of affordable housing in Lake Union Partners' adjacent project in exchange for an ordinance from the city that would allow for adding two additional stories to the building (that policy currency again). Furthering the community development component, Lake Union

Partners agreed to work with Africatown to bring the culturally diverse and colorful character of the Central District to the new development through art, murals, and the inclusion of smaller retail spaces (that empathy currency again).

The cornerstone of the entire effort, however, was community ownership, a factor that Michelle Connor sees as one of those benefits ignored by market forces. "Public health outcomes are driven by who owns the land and the output they are managing the land for," she explained. "In other words, local ownership from people living and working nearby produces different outputs than a distant money investor."

The data support Connor's perspective. According to the Brookings Institute, during the Great Recession, defaults on resale restricted homes like those in Community Land Trusts were as low as one tenth the default occurrence of market-rate homes. In addition, community ownership often improves access to quality-of-life features like parks and community gardens, healthy and fresh food, and even supports climate-resiliency upgrades that would otherwise be out of reach for cost-burdened families.[41]

Studies show home ownership is associated with an increase in quality-of-life metrics. Community ownership programs often require classes and counseling, which is reflected in increased credit ratings and reduced delinquency rates.[42] While association doesn't prove causation, it appears that even at a cellular level ownership is soothing; C-reactive protein levels, a biomarker associated with inflammation, infection, and stress, are significantly higher for renters than homeowners.[43]

With the Strong Communities Fund, a financial tool that Maggie Walker calls "a model by which we can hopefully remodel capitalism to become more humane," all the pieces were in place to harness the colossal power of the land, the people, and the economy for the long-term benefit of all three. It wasn't a moment too soon. The consequences of a global business model where profit trumps all else was causing the rapid degradation of the very biosphere we all rely upon and creating dysfunction far exceeding what even the best of classical conservation could remedy. In the Pacific Northwest, from logging and mining towns deep in the Cascades, to historic urban neighborhoods, communities were being ripped from the land by their roots, and community leaders of all colors were sending out the SOS.



Instead of aiming merely to 'do less bad,' industrial design can aim to 'do more good' by continually replenishing, rather than more slowly depleting, the living world.

—Kate Raworth, *Doughnut Economics*

CHAPTER NINE

BETTER THAN *Net Zero*

In some ways, the origin story of Forterra's mass timber effort began deep beneath the roots of a heavily logged forest, between a couple of slippery layers of clay buried in an unassuming hillside along the Stillaguamish River a couple of hours drive northeast of Seattle. Above the clay, the mountain put unimaginable pressure on the earth between the layers. At 10:36 a.m. on one spring day in 2014, following a period of exceptionally heavy rain, the weight of the mountain overcame whatever weak bond the clay provided, and the land between the layers was ejected explosively sideways. "Like stepping on a banana" is how Dan Rankin, the mayor of Darrington, the town just upriver, described the physics of the event. The sleepy neighborhood of Steelhead Haven was destroyed in a matter of seconds.

Known as the Oso Mudslide, this logic-defying disaster became the deadliest landslide in U.S. history. Land in the area shows geologic evidence of ancient landslides and reputedly a Coast Salish name for the area means "The Land that Walks." The courts, media, and scientists debated if logging activity in the overlying forest could have contributed to the accident, and while no certain causation was ever established, a settlement was eventually reached with the families of the victims. Forty-three cedar trees were planted as living monuments, one for each of the people killed in the slide. Eleven survivors were pulled from the mud, and the community was forever changed.

Like most other logging towns in the region, Darrington had been suffering a slow-motion disaster following the Owl Wars of the early '90s when the demise of the spotted owl, the Endangered Species Act, and growing public support for conservation resulted in the prohibition on clear-cutting public land. While the ecosystem certainly needed a reprieve from unsustainable logging practices, the economic machine that fed families for generations collapsed.

Before the landslide, Mayor Rankin gave about fifteen hours a week to his town, and the rest he devoted to producing custom lumber in his one-man sawmill. Afterwards—an event so traumatic that law-abiding people defied police orders to wade into the lake of mud to search for survivors and Rankin donated his own tractor to the rescue effort—he committed his life to giving Darrington a second chance at being a vibrant, whole ecosystem. In Rankin's mind, that meant neither a bedroom community for the cities, nor a place where the only opportunities were low-wage, seasonal, tourism jobs.

"The consensus was always around wood and timber, this whole industry that is generational in our community," Rankin explained. "We really looked hard at things like fiber." Fiber utilizes wood material that was once discarded as waste, like small trees, sawdust, and slash, for products ranging from fuel for pellet stoves to composite wood materials. Darrington burns fiber biomass to power a kiln for drying lumber at their sawmill, one of the few remaining mills in the region. Excess power is sold back to the grid. Particulates are filtered and ash is collected for use as topsoil. Rankin is proud of his town's renewable power system, but sees that fiber, while potentially profitable, isn't an ideal community business model because "90% of the jobs in a fiber operation are very mundane."

When Rankin heard about mass timber, he traveled to Canada to look at CLT buildings and toured a factory. "The more we looked at it, the more we were like, *This is it!* With mass timber you have a huge array, from entry level to craftsman jobs, and also white-collar roles like architects and engineers. It had everything, which is difficult to find for a rural community."

Years earlier, Rankin worked with Forterra to acquire a piece of riverfront property for Darrington. Positioned along the Sauk River, a designated Wild and Scenic River rich with exemplary salmon habitat, the town had been separated

from the water by a narrow strip of private property; a local kid couldn't even walk down to the river to fish. Forterra purchased the land and held it until the town could assume ownership. Rankin concluded: "The thing I most admire about Forterra is that they don't do it *to you*, they do it *with you*. So many outside NGOs from an urban atmosphere, they want to do it to you, they have the answers, but they don't think, What if it was us coming to your neighborhood and telling you what you needed? Forterra is an urban NGO, but they participate on a level that very few participate on."

Darrington became a key partner in Forterra's CLT efforts and, with the help of Forterra's policy team, received $10.5 million in grants to buy land and break ground on the Darrington Wood Innovation Center to house wood manufacturing and potentially a mass timber research and production facility. With the Forest to Home lesson, Forterra's involvement in this part of the project ended, but under Rankin's leadership, at the time of this writing, a pad-ready site was being built out and marketed to potential industrial partners.



The Sauk River valley, a historic logging area and the planned location for Darrington's mass timber fabrication facility. *Photo by Topher Donahue*



Helping steer America's fledgling mass timber industry towards its greatest potential placed Forterra squarely in those old, familiar crosshairs: *are environmentalists turning into loggers*? The inverse is certainly true. Many forestry scientists, such as Suzanne Simard, were loggers who became fierce environmental advocates and developed forestry strategies that can both provide wood for homes and nurture ecosystem function.

The term describing this method is *ecological forest management*. As applied to CLT, Hillary Wilson explained: "It means heavier management for a healthier forest. It means taking trees that are young, the least healthy, and using those for the internal lamella for CLT because CLT can utilize smaller diameter trees. By taking out the smaller trees, you're letting in light to the healthier trees, and those trees continue to sequester carbon at a higher rate. When you're managing a forest, there is a sweet spot. Selectively harvesting allows you to manage the carbon sequestration and fire risk of the forest, and have longer term, more stable forestry jobs and higher quality timber."

When I first heard the term, I was cynical, having been tainted by dubious green concepts like *clean coal* and *partially zero-emission vehicles*. Was *ecological forest management* just more of the same? Wouldn't it be best to just leave the forests alone and build with recycled organic ocean plastic or something? It turns out, Wilson's explanation was spot on, and my original cynicism came down to a fundamental misunderstanding: *the forests in question are tree farms, not old-growth forests.* Sure, they look similar out of a car or airplane window, but they're not. About 72% of the Pacific Northwest's original old-growth forest has been logged,[44] much of which was replaced by monocultural Douglas fir farms.

Dr. Jerry Franklin, professor emeritus of forest ecosystems at the School of Environmental and Forest Sciences at the University of Washington, also took heat from the environmental community for being a proponent of actively managing forests. He pulled no punches in explaining to me the misconceptions around tree farms: "Foresters had sort of kidded themselves and the public for 100 years that these are functional forest ecosystems. That's bullshit. They are farms. I compare

them to a functional forest in the same way a corn or wheat field might compare with a prairie."

Kirk Hansen, Director of Forestry at Northwest Natural Resources Group, echoed Dr. Franklin's sentiment: "We've taken highly complex forest ecosystems and converted them to very simplified agricultural plantations." With this simplification came an enormous loss. By some estimates, thanks to tree planting, there are *more* trees now than there were 100 years ago,[45] but the ecosystem functionality and fire and drought resilience of a tree farm is vastly reduced compared to the original forest. "As we weigh the logistics and costs of addressing some of the ecological problems we face, such as flood mitigation, climate change, endangered species, and wildfire," Hansen said, "we're beginning to realize that restoring the ability of nature to resolve these problems is not only less expensive and more effective than engineering solutions but also provides a broader range of co-benefits."

Dr. Franklin explained how ecological forestry supports the entire landscape: "Periodic harvest on longer rotation is totally consistent with maintaining the functionality of those systems, with restoring them to a healthier state, a more functional state. We want forests to be resistant to fire, resilient after fire, offer good watershed protection and wildlife habitat; we want them to grow trees, sequester carbon. In fact, that's the way we can use our capabilities and our knowledge to restore those qualities much more rapidly than any passive approach could possibly achieve."

From strictly a carbon sequestration point of view, an untouched forest is best (at least until it burns). Douglas fir has a peak growth period at about fifty years of age. Research indicates that partial harvest every seventy years (industrial logging typically clear cuts every thirty-five years) approaches the carbon benefit of an untouched forest.[46] Factor in the economic stability provided by a robust local source of building products and the increased fire, flood, drought, and habitat resilience of a healthy forest, and the calculation gets exceedingly complicated—with the advantage tipping heavily in favor of selective, periodic harvest.

In *Ecological Forestry Management*, a book co-authored by Dr. Franklin, he summarized the four main carbon-related benefits of wood use:

1. Turning logs into wood products, which provides off-site carbon storage.
2. Using wood products in construction rather than more energy-intensive materials such as cement or steel.
3. Increasing the revenue stream to forest owners which can encourage them to keep their lands in forest (or even expand their forest area) rather than converting their forestland to other uses.
4. Using wood products instead of fossil fuels to create energy.[47]

Dr. Franklin pointed out that not all wood use is a carbon benefit, and that the entire picture, including the age of the trees at harvest and the lifespan of the finished product, needs to be considered in the equation. Then he added, "This is one of the reasons mass timber is of interest—using more of the harvested wood in long-term structures."

The urgent message from these forestry experts is clear: now that we've decimated the natural systems, ecological forest management is the quickest route to a more functional forest—just like the valley I'd stumbled onto in the Teanaway where fire and selective logging had recently occurred in what appeared to be a thriving swath of forest. It's unfortunate that we had to cut down most of our forests to recognize that intact ecosystems benefit us, but these places can heal, and respond vigorously with a little extra help. Human-built, nature-inspired systems, like the artificial log jam on Chanty Sonnier's old farm in the Chehalis and salmon habitat restoration on the Cedar River, show vast potential to greatly decrease the need for, and cost of, disaster mitigation while simultaneously improving biosphere function. Thanks to decades of negotiating with optionality and a broad portfolio of integrated land management, Forterra has worked with the owners of thousands of acres of Douglas fir tree farms that could benefit from ecological forestry practices and potentially supply raw material for carbon-sequestering mass timber construction.



The 3,422-acre Port Gamble Forest Heritage Park is one of those places. Until 150 years ago, the sandy isthmus of Teekalet (meaning brightness of the noonday



Old school logging methods. *Photo by Joe Sambataro*



Modern ecological forestry methods. *Photo courtesy Seattle Public Utilities*

sun) and the surrounding area supported Salish peoples with its abundance, particularly the Suquamish Tribe and the Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe. When Andrew Pope and William Talbot visited the area, they decided it was the perfect spot for a lumber mill, formed an eponymously named timber company, and took advantage of the Treaty of Point no Point to take over the S'Klallam Tribal land. The sad moving day is recorded for perpetuity in a document available on the Tribe's cultural history website that reads: "The S'Klallam did not want to leave their homeland, their fishing sites and hunting territory; unfortunately, they were forcibly moved to the reservation anyway. With their canoes in tow, rounding 'Marrowstone Point, the canoes occupants, looking back at their ancestral homes, could see their village in flames, burning rapidly to the ground—by order of the Great White Father in Washington, D.C."[48]

The sawmill operated until 1995. Driven by simple economics, once a tree farm provides an inadequate return due to decreasing timber quality or political challenges, a common end game is to develop the land. About the time the mill closed, the owner decided it was time to leave their fourth crop of Douglas fir monoculture uncut to build real estate value and rally community support behind a residential development. They platted the land into twenty-acre residential lots—right in the middle of the "usual and accustomed" hunting and gathering areas of the Tribes. Wielding their Treaty Rights, the Tribes sounded the alarm.

Refreshingly, the Port Gamble story ultimately wasn't a fight so much as a quest to find a solution that was tenable to everyone involved. Kitsap resident Judy Willott explained, "The Kitsap Forest and Bay Coalition grew from the Tribe and environmental groups to include, I'd have to say, even the timber company. It included mountain bike people, horseback people, people who just like to drive by and see trees, commercial groups—it's a gigantic group."

From their very first meeting, the coalition took a collaborative approach. A county planner spread out maps on tables for the different groups to mark up and capture their vision. Willott recalled the watershed moment: "We all said, 'No! No! No! Let's all work on one map, right now, together!' So, all these groups gathered around one map. The key thing was that we said we're going to do this together instead of everyone doing their separate thing."

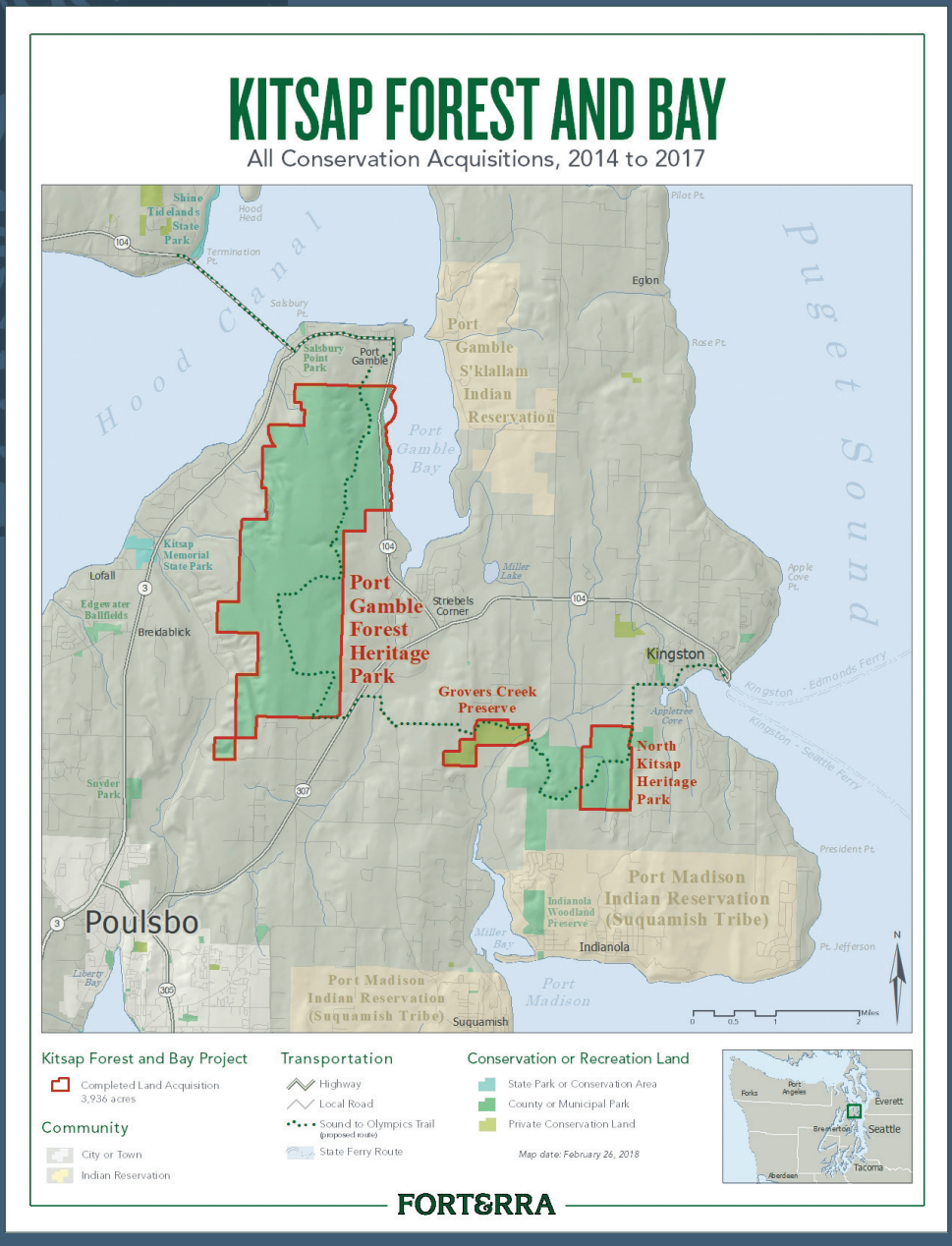
While some members of the coalition wanted to restore the forest to a healthy habitat within 100 years, others wanted trails, and others just wanted a park. The Tribes wanted a place for their age-old practice of gathering, hunting, and fishing. The company still wanted a development, but agreed to a more compact version that wouldn't sprawl across thousands of acres and into crucial habitat. Willott concluded, "Everyone had a different vision, but they all coalesced into one point where we came to an agreement that we needed to buy the land and let the company harvest one more time."

The reason was entirely economic; buying both timber and land was prohibitively expensive (the timber is worth more than the land), so buying the underlying land while leaving the timber value with the logging company was the only feasible option. The coalition invited Forterra to help navigate the complex negotiation. Keeping optionality in mind, Forterra made sure the agreement included the possibility of buying future timber rights.

As is so often the case with Forterra endeavors, plan A—to buy all the timber and harvest using ecological forestry practices to accelerate forest healing and use the wood for community development—hit a roadblock. Market forces are tough to realign and at the time of this writing, the fifth (and final) clear cutting of the Port Gamble Forest began, with the trees heading for the global market, not CLT panels for local housing.

However, plan B worked. A Greek proverb says: *A society grows great when old people plant trees in whose shade they know they shall never sit…* A Pacific Northwest version would add: *…and negotiates for the preservation of forests yet to grow.* In partnership with the nonprofit Our Forest Fund and the Kitsap Forest & Bay Coalition, Forterra was able to raise half a million dollars to purchase 756 acres of timber rights in some of Port Gamble's most sensitive areas, setting the stage for the next generation to help restore the ecological functionality of the Port Gamble Forest.

Port Gamble is just one of numerous forest properties that Forterra has been involved in, through conservation easements, outright ownership, or buy-and-holds, that could greatly benefit from a robust ecological forest management



The conservation acquisitions of Port Gamble. *Cartography by Christopher Walter*

campaign. The potential to combine mass timber construction with ecological forest management into a robust system built on the capitalistic model is ripe for the picking. Mayor Rankin put it best: "This is a great idea, something we all need. The timber industry needs it. The urban core needs it. It's finally this pivotal point where that rural-urban divide starts to soften."



A ringed gull and sanderlings on Port Gamble Bay. *Photo by Don Willott*



Involuntarily taken from a homeland, molded in the crucible of enslavement, forged in the fire of disenfranchisement, and tempered by migration, we all too often remain strangers in the only land that is ours.

—Jessica B. Harris, *High on the Hog*

CHAPTER TEN

GO *Big*

Landscaping for a row of sunflowers in the grassy area outside an old Rite Aid building in Tacoma's Hilltop neighborhood wasn't on my schedule for researching this book, but a combination of rush hour traffic and a good vibe with the folks who'd recently converted the building from eyesore to eye candy led to an evening of shoveling and conversation. Travis Pope, the groundskeeper and a military veteran with stovepipe arms and an easy smile, was breaking ground on a community garden and my visit just happened to coincide with the first planting—sunflowers. Why sunflowers? Had you seen the state of the property a year earlier, you'd understand.

I'd just returned from a walk around the neighborhood with Brendan Nelson, a community leader working to stem the tide of displacement that was threatening to erase the Hilltop of his youth. The stories he told were chilling. When he was a child in the '90s, his father offered to buy the house they'd long rented. The landlord sat in front of the family and said, "I'll rent to a Black family, but I won't sell to one." Years later, Nelson managed to buy a small house at the edge of Hilltop from a man he met at church who offered to sell without putting it on the market.

"A fence had been wrapped around this entire property," Nelson said, pointing to the edges of the Rite Aid parking lot. "The windows had metal barriers on them,

a homicide took place under the little gazebo, there was human feces all over the place—but that's what happens when you block off the community."

Sunflowers were needed, indeed.

The building was still there, complete with Rite Aid's characteristic diamond-shaped windows and single pillar in front of an offset entryway, but rather than a ghastly monument to community decay as it had been for the prior decade, the building was covered with mood-boosting, brightly colored artwork, and murals of influential Black leaders from the region. The parking lot was busy with parents, Black, white, and otherwise, dropping their kids off for gymnastics and dance classes, offering cheery hellos and good-natured razzing.

But the persistent thorn of race was never far from the skin. While Pope and I were working, a couple of guys walked around the corner, looked at us, and one of them said, "Oh, that's great!"

Pope looked up and replied politely, "Thank you."

What we were doing was hardly "great" in that we were simply cutting holes through the turf with shovels, and I was making a bit of a mess, so it's unlikely he was referring to the work we were doing. We looked at each other with quizzical expressions, suppressing giggles. Once the guys were out of earshot, we both started laughing.

I asked Pope, "What's so great about this?"

"Maybe a Black guy working?" he said. "Or maybe a Black guy and a white guy working together?"

It's said the root of all humor is sorrow, and this was certainly a shining example. While we both found the exchange gloriously funny, there was a sadness in Pope's eyes when he offered his explanation, and my own felt a bit moist around the edges. "Maybe thanks to your nice response," I offered, "by the time the guy gets home, his own reason for thinking this is great will have changed." For indeed, the transformation at the old Hilltop Rite Aid was great. The building had been slated to be replaced by a multi-use CLT development as part of Forest to Home, but at the time of this writing Forterra shifted to plan B and sold the property to an experienced affordable housing developer.

The roots of Hilltop's Black community go back to 1869, just six years after Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, when the sixty-seven-acre Hilltop was

purchased by George Putnam Riley, a well-spoken, community-minded Black barber and president of the Workingmen's Joint Stock Association of Portland, a real estate collaborative. Exclusion laws in Oregon prohibited Black land ownership, so Riley and twelve other Black men, two Black women, and one white man put together $50,000 (about $1.2 million in 2024 dollars) and purchased the Hilltop as well as twelve acres in Seattle on what became Beacon Hill.

Riley became well-known in the region for political and organizational savvy as well as oratorical excellence and tenacious advocacy in resolving legal disputes



Hilltop, Tacoma, a legacy of the Black community's contribution to the region.

Cartography by Justin DeVine and Christopher Walter

involving the properties he'd helped purchase, and was instrumental in making home ownership possible for Black families streaming west in the aftermath of emancipation.[49] The foothold that Riley helped create, for a people launched from slavery into an often unwelcoming and discriminatory version of freedom, is hard to overstate. To this day, his name is spoken with awe.

A few days before the sunflower planting, Carol Mitchell, president of the Institute for Black Justice (IBJ), took me on a time-traveling tour of Hilltop that included what had been, what is, and what was hoped to be. Our first stop was the Tacoma City Association of Colored Women's Clubs (CWC) headquarters. With a million-dollar view of Mt. Rainer, and developers regularly knocking on the door with offers to buy it, Mitchell didn't even try to hide her pride in the place being debt free and not for sale.

Along with the churches, the Nettie Asberry House (a 135-year-old home once owned by Asberry, the founder of the Tacoma CWC and likely the first Black woman to receive a PhD[50]), and Ray Gibson's Caballeros Club (at one time the only place in the city where Black people were allowed to gather), the CWC building is one of the Black community's rock-solid anchors on the Hilltop—a patch of old growth forest in the middle of an expanding monoculture and the seedstock needed to conserve the Hilltop's Black legacy. Near the entrance to the CWC, Mitchell pointed out an expansive installation of donor's bricks inscribed with the names of families and businesses who had pitched in $50 each to help fund the original purchase of the building. I asked how many of the families still live on Hilltop. She replied, "Precious few."

During our tour, Mitchell took me past numerous businesses that were, or had been, Black owned, as well as several Hilltop churches. Our visit coincided with Mitchell meeting Ryan Wright, a man who grew up on Hilltop and was interested in using the CWC facility to teach an innovative computer literacy class called Junxbox that starts with the students assembling hardware from scratch. Junxbox.org reads: "Our program teaches the ins and outs of technology, taking kids on a journey of discovery as they design, build, and deploy their own desktop and



Bricks inscribed with a small fraction of the families who donated funds to purchase the Tacoma City Association of Colored Women's Clubs headquarters on the Hilltop. *Photo by Topher Donahue*

network systems." At the end of the program, the kids take their own, hand-built, custom computers with them, often to homes that never had a computer before. Wright's is the kind of ambition a community can inspire—provided it has a place to be a community.

In the conversation that ensued with Wright and Mitchell, I learned that Hilltop meant much more to the Black community than just a bedroom community. This was where little kids played with their grandparents and learned the value of attending school, a quality that had its roots at the end of the Civil War when, as chronicled in the Equal Justice Initiative, "…the ability to read and write became a symbol of freedom in the Black community."[51] During Wright's childhood, a parade marched across Hilltop every year to honor high school graduates and encourage kids to focus on their education. The Mitchells never lived on the Hilltop, but her family became part of the community while attending its churches two or three times per week when she was a kid, a tradition that continues with her grandkids. Mitchell explained how bringing people together, no matter where they live, was one of the factors that makes Hilltop a keystone community in the region.

As with any old-growth community, there were memories of pain. In the late '80s, gangs arrived from California, taking advantage of homes transitioning from owner-occupied to rentals due to the aging and passing of Black homeowners. "Before then, it was a sleepy neighborhood," Wright said. "Nobody was ready for it." Wright's childhood home was shot more than once. He watched TV while lying on the floor to keep a lower profile and be less likely to be hit by a stray bullet.

In 2022, a light-rail track was being laid right down the center of MLK, Hilltop's main street, home prices were increasing by double digits annually, and the Black community was staring down the barrel of the latest challenge: gentrification. It's a culture not unaccustomed to threat, but this latest one was proving the hardest to endure—and that's saying something for a place once ranked as the third most dangerous neighborhood in America.[52] Neither Wright nor Mitchell, a tech genius and attorney, respectively, live on the Hilltop; they've been pushed to the outskirts of the city to the south and east by the cost of living.

Wright described the same pressure now threatening his South Tacoma neighborhood: "It's very blue collar—all day blue collar. I like it. It's very diverse. The demographic is all over the place. I'll go get a Mexican Coca-Cola, then go a block down and get dim sum. The change I've noticed is that families were getting by. I mean, houses weren't always the best looking, but people had okay cars, the windows were in the cars. When the gentrification started taking off in my neighborhood and all the property values started going up, rents started going up. The rental that was $500 per month, now is $1000. I started noticing more families taking their kids to school in cars with plastic over the windows, kids wearing coats that are too small; all these little things where you can see people are having to make life choices."

Mitchell added her perspective from her IBJ experience as an advocate for families: "Two thirds of the child welfare cases I'm working on right now are in East Pierce County. The health department did a study and found that the lifespan is ten years shorter if your zip code is in Parkland than if it's in North Tacoma. There are all these environmental factors. The new road construction is four lanes, edge-to-edge, with no room for bus stops—they're not planning on public transportation so everybody will have to drive."

In comparison, Hilltop was a place people could truly live, with homes, stores, businesses, and culture all within walking distance. Parents kept an eye on each other's kids. Swarms of children pedaling bikes through town were a common sight. Wright said, "I grew up right here. I never even went down the Hill. I hardly ever went anywhere."

I asked Wright if he had a sense of the community reestablishing itself. His reply wasn't what I hoped to hear: "I don't really feel that. No. I feel the Hilltop is getting taken apart. I think it's a historic neighborhood, but it's a historic neighborhood that's losing the connection to all its history. Very rapidly it's being usurped."

Sandra Daniels, a Hilltop local, likened the Black community's legacy on Hilltop to the indigenous respect for the land. "It's like the Tribes say, a spiritual kind of thing," she said. "There are certain things you don't do on Tribal lands because there's the spirit and energy that goes with that land—their souls. There are people who have been lost on the Hilltop, lost their lives. There's a place at 23rd and Wilkerson called the Monument—it's a stone monument to the souls who have been lost."

By the time I left Hilltop, I could see what Daniels meant; the land George Putnam Riley originally purchased is sacred land and for ten years, right in the middle of it, sat the deserted Rite Aid building. "In my opinion," said Dionne Bonner, one of the artists whose work transformed the site, "having buildings that are deteriorating and sitting in a community is another way to say, 'this area has no worth.' When you go into a community and everything is nice and kept together and the buildings are pristine, you have a different sense of that neighborhood—and of the people there."

The transformation of the site from a symbol of disinvestment to a beacon of welcome started when a group of Hilltop leaders, including Brendan Nelson and the Hilltop-based Fab-5 collective—a nonprofit focused on finding, as their website explains it, "relevant opportunities for young people to gather, connect, and create"—saw an opportunity for the community to buy the property. They reached out to Forterra for help with the purchase and redevelopment. An advisory group, the Community Investment Council (CIC), was established to inform Forterra's effort.

"I've gotten great joy and had great accomplishments when I've involved the community in my work," explained Bonner. "I think it works for Forterra the same way. You don't have to do it that way, but when you do, in the same way that my art



The old Rite Aid building, purchased by Forterra, transformed by the Hilltop community, and transferred to an affordable housing developer. *Photo by Topher Donahue*

transforms, you get a richer and deeper piece. It also stems from your intent—if the intent is to really add value. You can do this kind of stuff even if your intent is not to add value, but just look like you're adding value—but that will show itself in time, and you'll feel it. The intention of the builders will go right into the wood, right?"

One of Forterra's first meetings with the Hilltop community was on the day police officers shot and killed twenty-six-year-old emergency medical technician Breonna Taylor in her own home. Jeff Dade, the banker turned racial wealth gap warrior, described the evening: "The streets were hot. The community was hot. At the meeting Chris Jordan, a community leader, was like, 'We just need to talk. Nobody gives a damn about buildings right now. We're talking about existence.' He was dead on, and it really helped. It showed that we were able to move at the speed of trust. It wasn't about Forterra's agenda."

"When we first met with Forterra, for the first six months, we were cussin' and fussin'!" said Nelson. "We were angry! Not necessarily with Forterra, but with what had been done to our community, to understand the significance around this work. It wasn't just a development that was going to happen. (The Rite Aid) had been a source of hurt for a community. So, we came into this conversation really raw and skeptical about what was going to take place. We didn't believe (what) they

said. We were like, 'You need to prove to us what you're saying' and that was a hard battle because Forterra had not been in this type of working relationship before. I think this is one of the first developments they're doing like this, and it's in a community that has a long history of being taken advantage of."



Community-driven design is a brilliant concept, but in light of the anger expressed by community groups, including Hilltop, when Forest to Home didn't pan out as envisioned, when faced with the reality of unbending market forces, the mercurial nature of donors and government grants—confounded by a misstep in Tribal collaboration—this approach turned out to be a recipe for another story of broken promises. Connor explained the conundrum of community-driven design: "For members of Forterra's staff, walking alongside communities who have been mistreated and underinvested—the desire to offer solutions was overwhelming. Yet Forterra, for all its energy and creativity, cannot be sure just how much it can turn that tide until a project is completed. Forterra tried to walk the line between promising to give every effort, but tempering expectations. There was always the possibility that in doing so, like Icarus, we might fly too close to the sun.

"If in trying, we bring something less, but still better than not having tried at all, did we break our promises? Yes, if we didn't make sure the community understood when we said we would *try.* Going forward, I cannot allow the organization to refer to its community engagement work as *community-driven* because, in practicality, no matter how hard we listen or how just and inspiring the vision—each project must be reality-driven."

From the beginning of Forterra's work in the urban environment, starting around 2003, it was clear that home ownership inspired stewardship. Forterra was inspired by George Putnam Riley's original group, and more recently from Homestead Community Land Trust and Africatown Community Land Trust. "The program is focused on ownership—that's the game changer," explained Dade. "That's how so many grandparents and great-grandparents started their families' wealth—they were able to start the race earlier with this economic engine called home equity. Just living there for a

while, you gain this wealth that you can pass on generationally or pass onto your next home and grow through it."

The loss of this component as envisioned was heartbreaking enough that Dade resigned. Afterwards, he joined Homestead Community Land Trust, a housing development nonprofit, where he continues to further the mission of affordable home ownership. The vision lives.

Cooperative housing models are not allowed to discriminate but, to give preference to Black families on Hilltop, Forterra made the case to the city of Tacoma that the Black community had been discriminated against. It wasn't hard. As a result, planned development can prioritize Black families and businesses. In addition, Forterra lobbied for state legislation that established a real estate property tax exemption for limited-equity affordable housing cooperatives and helped shape policy critical to future housing initiatives that support the legacy Black community on Hilltop.



While Forterra's plan A for modular CLT didn't happen as envisioned, the construction method is ripe for a mainstream breakthrough. High-rise CLT buildings do use some concrete and steel, but the quantities of these carbon-intensive materials in the build are insignificant compared to typical construction methods. A ten-year life-cycle analysis on mass timber construction, done in collaboration between the Beijing Forestry University and the U.S. Forest Service, found that maximizing wood use in buildings could reduce global warming impact by 71% compared to concrete.[53]

Modular construction makes the numbers look even better. A 2019 report from McKinsey showed the following value potential in prefab modular fabrication:

>60% increase in onsite productivity (building site)
>1000% increase in offsite productivity (supply chain)[54]

Forterra calculated a possible modular CLT supply chain cost savings of 20% over traditional building methods. In the construction world, that's astronomical. Additionally, 2020's modular construction is on par with fine custom carpentry, a



ModPro, Forterra's modular mass timber CLT apartment unit prototype. *Photo by Topher Donahue*

far cry from a 1970s trailer park. It is also well-tested in other parts of the world. According to Ryan Smith from Washington State University, by 2021, mass timber companies in Sweden and Japan were cranking out modular mass timber buildings at a rate of around 100 per day.

To learn from the best, Forterra partnered with Zaugg, a family-owned eighty-six-year-old Swiss company. They sent a team to the U.S. that included their CEO, Stephan Zaugg, to train Forterra in modular CLT construction and build a prototype. In a YouTube clip explaining the process, Zaugg said, "I heard the story of Forterra having their own forests, their own facilities, and their own projects putting up buildings for low-income houses. It's a closed circle. I think this is a fantastic story." (Forterra doesn't own forests in the acreage needed to support the project, but works closely with various partners who do.)

In Darrington, Mayor Dan Rankin gave me a tour of the prototype, dubbed ModPro, a one-bedroom unit for an apartment building. It felt nothing like it. Instead of the acrid new construction scent of paint and carpet, there was the fragrance of fresh wood. A warm light, more akin to hunting lodges or rustic cabins, infused every room. Even the sound was cozier. The walls, ceiling, and subfloor were made of solid wood panels. I thumped a wall with my palm and there was none of the flimsy, hollow vibration of a drywall finish; I might as well have hit a tree.

The juxtaposition of the log cabin atmosphere and the futuristic design is striking. Each room in ModPro has its own heating system and thermostat designed for efficient, intentional energy use. Because of the solid wood construction, the ducting and fire sprinkler system are exposed rather than hidden in the ceiling. The prototype includes a section of hallway, which would be connected to other units in a completed building. Doors along the hall hide additional plumbing and electrical infrastructure that is oriented vertically in the walls rather than in the floor and ceiling as it would be in traditional construction. This cost-saving innovation allows more of the construction to be completed in-factory. To assemble the building on-site, each unit plugs into the others like a giant Lego kit.

After the tour, my first comment to Mayor Rankin was, "I want one!"

Forterra's CLT Coalition, in collaboration with the University of Washington and the American Institute of Architects, lobbied successfully for a change in building codes, and now Washington allows CLT buildings to be as high as eighteen stories—that's a 175-foot-tall, hyper-modern, wooden building that can flex in an earthquake but not collapse, or have a toaster catch fire without incinerating the entire structure. The Coalition was also able to push forward a tax preference for mass timber, which incentivizes logging companies to engage in the fledgling industry.

In April of 2024, the Low Income Housing Institute (LIHI), in collaboration with Sound Transit and the Seattle Office of Housing, announced plans to build a twelve-story affordable housing complex—160 homes for people who earn between 30% and 80% of the area median income—built using mass timber construction facilitated by Forterra's CLT Coalition.



Roslyn is a historic mining town on the eastern side of the Cascades, with a frontier character and scenery so authentic that for five years it was the setting for the fictional Alaskan town of Cicely in the hit TV show *Northern Exposure*. The town's cornerstone building, the Northwest Improvement Company (NWIC) store, was the inspiration behind Merle Travis' coal mining lyric "I owe my soul to the company store" and was recently saved from demolition and renovated by the



The Coal Miners' Memorial in front of Roslyn's historic Northwest Improvement Company store, purchased and conserved by Forterra along with a thirty-acre property planned for community housing. *Photo by Topher Donahue*

Roslyn Downtown Association (RDA) for small businesses, including the flagship tasting room for Heritage Distilling. In 2019, the RDA transferred ownership of the building to Forterra to ensure long term stewardship of the historic edifice. Standing in front of NWIC are two memorials: a statue of a miner commemorating the hundreds of men who lost their lives in the mines, and a monument honoring former Roslyn mayor William Craven, Washington's first Black mayor.

Ask anyone in town to make a list of Roslyn's strongest advocates, and they'll likely include Cheri Marusa. She is the fifth generation of her family to live in the Upper County area, but Marusa is preternaturally open-minded, energetic, and welcoming. Roslyn's known as "where coal is king," she explained. "However, I didn't give any thought to the fact that we are on the lands of the Yakama Nation who were here since time immemorial. I love the histories of this place, how the town came to be from when the Northern Pacific Railroad came into Roslyn to transport coal, growing up in a logging family with my husband working for Boise Cascade; I got all that. But never once in my life did I hear anybody say, '*You know, this is ceded land*.' Prosperity, growth, immigrants—a whole new culture settled in Roslyn. We never even thought about it, but something was conquered before all that culture, and what was conquered was real people, real traditions, real values—people who believe in a creator. I realized I needed to open my heart and my mind and see this through a different lens. I wanted to share the complete history of Roslyn, including the Yakama Nation."

Marusa walks her talk and began working with the Tribe. She explained the process proudly, "We said that the (RDA) would like to have a formal partnership with the Yakama Nation to help them expand their footprint and tell their story. That partnership is underway, signed off by their Tribal council. Then I connected the Yakama Nation with Forterra who then entered into an agreement with the Tribe to help shape conservation easements and land purchases. The easements would be stewarded by the Yakama Nation. We've identified a few key properties for conservation easement, and the stakeholders of those properties have also agreed that the easements will be held by the Yakama Nation."

The latest chapter in the town's colorful history sits just out of sight of main street, over a ridge, where the developer Suncadia built one of the state's most sce-

nic golf resorts, surrounded by upscale homes, a 350-room mountain lodge, and a gated private community called Tumble Creek. We stood together looking over the Tumble Creek golf course where Marusa used to roam with her friends and swim in the river below. With the resort driving up property values the community is being impacted because many can't afford to live there now.

Suncadia also owned thirty acres within the Roslyn town limits, which Marusa saw as a chance to help the community. It was a neglected plot at the edge of town, contaminated with mining waste, intersected by wetlands that collected junk, and used to pile snow during heavy winter storms—like the one in January 2022 that buried the town in six feet of snow in forty hours.

Realizing the property was ideally located for affordable housing and mixed uses, and containing a wetland area that badly needed restoration, Marusa worked with her 13th District legislators and speaker of the House, Frank Chopp, in Olympia for funding. At the same time, she reached out to Forterra. "The thing I like about Forterra," she said, "is they came to the table with a solution-driven attitude: 'What would you like us to do and how can we, collectively, come up with a solution and positively shape the picture of your community and help address your needs?'"

The RDA and Forterra worked together and secured state funding for Forterra to purchase the property from Suncadia and, with architects and community engagement, drafted a plan for an affordable housing development and light commercial business to be built with timbered frames and possibly CLT, designed to honor the community history of mining and ancestral lands of the Yakama Nation. At the time of this writing, the plan was for an experienced contractor to manage the construction component while Forterra focuses on the Brownfield site clean-up and engineering feasibility to prepare the site for the community.

Our last stop was at one of the town's most prized acreages, its coveted twenty-six adjacent cemeteries, listed on the National Register of Historic Places, where a wide array of cultures including Veterans, African Americans, Slovaks, Polish, Druids, Croatians, Italians, among others, each have their own cemeteries representing their traditional language, plot shape, symbolism, and customs to honor their dead. As I left Roslyn, a bit footsore after chasing Cheri Marusa around all afternoon, I realized I'd just visited a town that practices a fine form of patriotism, indeed.



So, we have to come to an understanding that we may have some differences about things, but we still have to share this part of the world. One of the beliefs that we carry is that we don't own this, it belongs to our children, our grandchildren, and we're just taking care of it for them.

—Davis Washines, Spiritual/Traditional Leader, Yakama Nation

CHAPTER ELEVEN

FUTURING FOR *Conservation*

A 2021 database of Forterra projects over thirty-one years includes ninety-six different communities and features seventy-nine acquisitions, twenty-seven trails or recreation projects, nineteen riparian restoration efforts, thirty-nine property transformation projects, fourteen conservation financing initiatives, fifty-nine stewardship programs, and another nineteen endeavors that defy categorization, for a grand total of 266 projects and 275,000 acres (about five times the size of Seattle) conserved for community, habitat, and recreational land.

This scorecard provides some insight into the elusive value assessment of the organization, a factor noted by several long time Forterrans. "Conservation is the most expensive thing we've done, if you add it up," said Skip Swenson. "But the thing that has had the biggest impact is the body of Forterra's work. If we only measured ourselves on projects alone, we would be undercutting the value that Forterra brought to the region in terms of the impact we've had, how land is used, how we think about how people and land interact."

A great example of this is the decades-long legacy of the Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) program and its continued evolution. Thanks to this program, a thread going back to Forterra's origin story, the Amazon buildings in the South Lake Union area are taller than originally zoned and simultaneously

many hundreds of acres outside the city are not developed. Today, other King, Pierce and Snohomish County cities are furthering the concept as part of its modern incarnation, the Landscape Conservation and Local Infrastructure Program (LCLIP). This complex Forterra innovation creates a financial incentive for cities to engage in TDR, supports both urban infrastructure and natural land conservation, and is proving out a model that has national and even global potential.

In support of this wide lens view of the organization's mission to secure keystone places for a sustainable future in the Pacific Northwest, when I asked Forterrans what they envisioned for the future of the organization, there were two common themes: First, sustain effort to help communities, projects, and properties the organization is already involved with to find the best path forward; these included the 17,000 acres already in Forterra's real estate portfolio and half a dozen buy-and-hold properties that were poised for a transition of ownership to the optimal steward or developer. And second, look for innovative tools such as LCLIP to use Forterra's unique currencies to steer both urban and natural areas towards a healthier future.

Swenson noted that a critical land use issue contributing to a plethora of ongoing Forterra projects was light rail expansion. An organization with Forterra's experience in real estate is optimally positioned to help mitigate the unintended consequences of transit hubs built in lower-income neighborhoods: property values skyrocket and the people who live there, and stand to gain the most from transit access, can't afford to stay—so they are displaced towards the edges of the city, increasing sprawl.

Swenson explained the thinking behind Forterra's continuing effort to address the issue: "We started looking at land trust strategies, bringing those skills from the rural area into urban areas for housing purposes and buying up land near light rail investments when it was cheaper. And then having the upside subsidize housing and services and things that support communities that most benefit by living near transit hubs and are most transit dependent."

David Leon shared his view on how Forterra's real estate savvy can continue to support communities in the region: "People need to be able to afford to live in healthy cities, so we raised the Strong Community Funds and bought properties. I think the initial vision was that we would be a land bank for affordable housing developers.

From a developer's point of view, that's a useful service. It is the riskiest point in the development process when you're trying to get land under control for a couple of years before you get your permits, before you get your funding, before you can get shovels in the ground."

Communities that stand to benefit from Forterra's Strong Communities Fund investments include those near the Africatown Plaza property in Seattle's Central District and the Rite Aid site on Hilltop. At the time of this writing, the Africatown Plaza property was in the final stages of negotiation to transfer the loan that Forterra held in connection with the original purchase to Africatown Community Land Trust whose mission specifically includes supporting community ownership. On the Hilltop, the Homestead Community Land Trust (where Jeff Dade is Director of Community Partnerships) purchased the land and is partnering with Aya Community Land Trust (where Brendan Nelson is one of the founding directors) to pursue an affordable housing development on the site. The vision for the old Rite Aid site as an anchor for the community is alive and well.

In another example, in 2017 the Abu Bakr Islamic Center in Tukwila contacted Forterra to inquire about help buying a run-down and crime-ridden hotel, Knights Inn, across the street from their mosque, with the intent of cleaning it up and using it for housing. Tukwila is a town of 20,000 people about ten miles south of Seattle best known for its proximity to the SeaTac airport (it is also home to Duwamish Hill, a story from Chapter 3). About two-thirds of the residents are people of color and half the residents earn less than half of the region's median income.[55] Using the Strong Communities Fund, Forterra bought the property and worked with Abu Bakr to secure state and federal grants to support the effort.

The long-term vision for the property, named Wadijir Residences, was to convert it into 100 cooperatively-owned homes and a Somali-style open market. In the interim, the hotel provided housing for immigrant families, many of them displaced from Somalia due to the ravages of war and climate change.[56] After holding the property for six years, giving the community time to raise funds and organize redevelopment, Forterra sold the property to the Abu-Bakr Islamic Center of Washington.

Supporting the Cascade Agenda's learning, that livable cities are critical to landscape conservation, the following renderings show three scenarios for the Puget Sound area with white indicating the built environment and Mount Rainier (Tahoma) in the distance.

3D visualizations by Christopher Walter



The current build out.



The area if developed under the values proposed in the Cascade Agenda, with diversity, vibrancy, and "complete, compact, and connected."



The threat of development if it continues based on historical patterns.

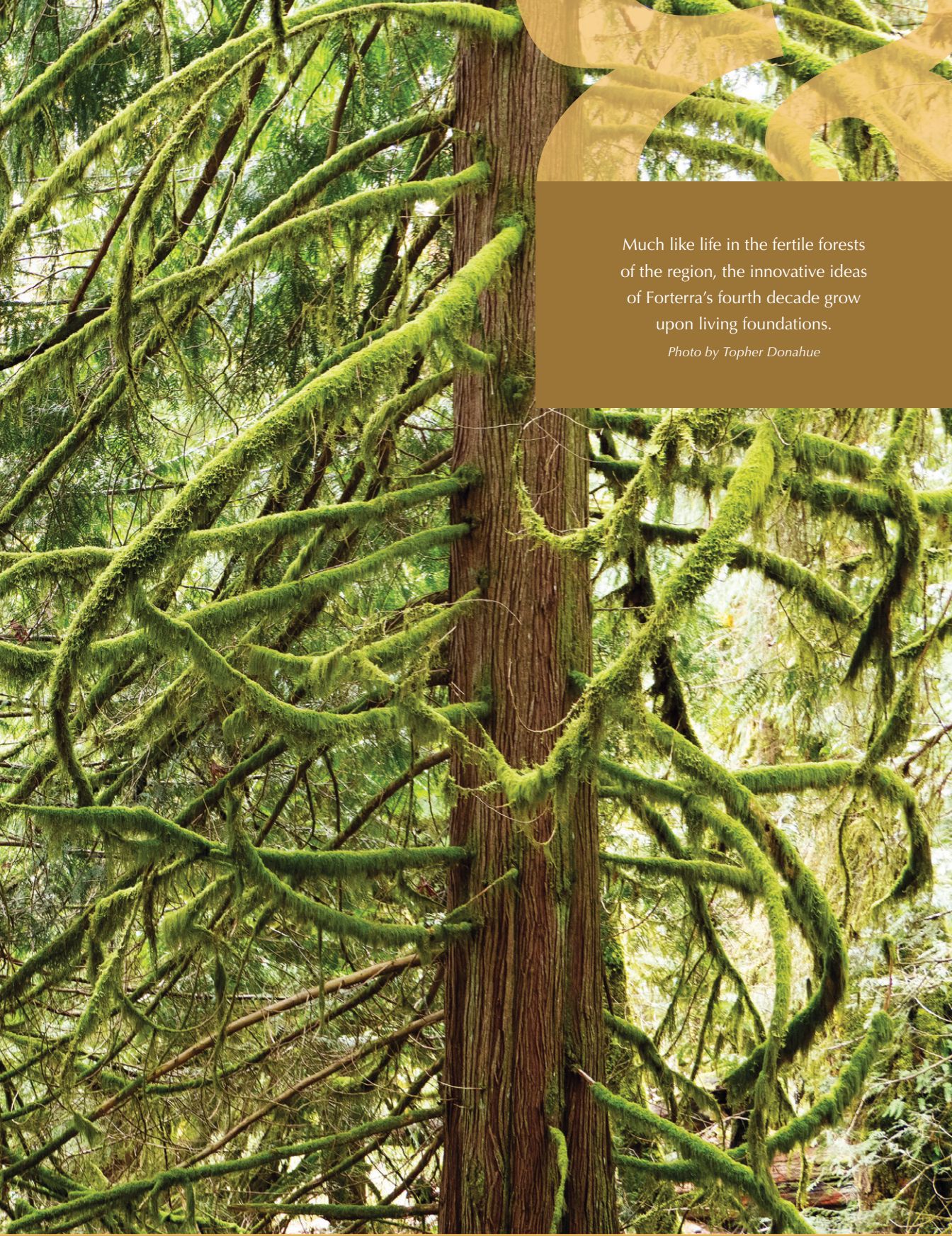


The mass timber endeavor also soldiered on. Forterra reviewed, rewrote, and resubmitted the USDA grant—minus the part where Forterra was going to be manage the entire supply chain, and with an increased role for the Yakama Nation. In 2023, the Yakama Nation expressed interest in ecological forestry and the CLT manufacturing element of the USDA grant, as well as furthering mass timber integration into the affordable housing construction industry.

With the lessons from Forest to Home fresh in everyone's minds, discussions with the Yakama Nation were underway with utmost consideration for their sovereignty. Rather than partnering with the Tribe, the idea was to help the Tribe develop their own ecological forestry program and mass timber manufacturing capability. Forterra resubmitted a revised scope for the $20 million grant to the USDA and received federal approval to transfer final grant negotiations, and ultimately administration of the funds, directly to the Yakama Nation for the development of a CLT manufacturing plant. Again, the funding was tentatively approved, but in the spring of 2025 the federal government pulled all funding for USDA projects not directly involved with farming (as defined by the Trump administration which apparently excludes tree farms). Once more, land for good proved difficult and it was time to be patient and watch for plan C.

On a brighter note, in 2025, the Yakama Nation and Forterra announced a collaboration to raise approximately $1.5 million to conserve Frog's Home, a 180-acre property with critical salmon habitat along the Yakima River, funded in part from a state Recreation and Conservation Office grant. In Forterra's press release announcing the success, Gerald Lewis, Yakama Nation Tribal Council chairman, is quoted saying: "The Frog's Home Property is an ancestral place that we hold in high regards. It is fundamental to the teachings of our people—in our way it relates to how we are to be caretakers for the giver of life. It presents lessons for our people and connects us to our values from young and old. We are honored and deeply thankful for the work that has been done by Forterra working with our staff to protect this important place. In this way, we bring honor to those of the past, present, and future generations of our Yakama people yet unborn. This is very meaningful to us."





Much like life in the fertile forests of the region, the innovative ideas of Forterra's fourth decade grow upon living foundations.

Photo by Topher Donahue

With the celebration of Forterra's thirty-fifth anniversary in 2024, bandwidth was allotted to reenergizing conservation and outreach after the pandemic brought a screeching halt to the iconic Forterra Breakfast fundraiser. After lockdown ended, a less in-person, less *en masse* world emerged, and suddenly sharing breakfast with 1000 other people was cringy instead of invigorating. For a more intimate method of informing potential partners and donors, Forterra began organizing Nature Discovery events, small-group walks through properties owned or protected over the years by Forterra—Hazel Wolf Wetlands, Morse Wildlife Preserve, Port Gamble Forest, Saint Edwards State Park, and more—hosted by naturalists, monks, and other visionaries from the human/nature intersection, with the goal of facilitating a closeness to the vitality of land and accessibility for everyone.

Forterra got back in the game of hosting larger events as well and, following a common theme in the story of land for good, incredible people stepped up to help make it happen. Former Seattle Seahawks defensive end and community advocate, Michael Bennett, keynoted a sold-out event focused on designing communities and hosted at the beloved Mount Baker Community Center, long a hub for civic activism and social justice movements in Seattle. This event was followed by An Evening of Wellness With the Tree, a gathering at wəɬəbʔaltxʷ, the University of Washington's Intellectual House, featuring Lummi storyteller and classical violinist, Swil Kanim.

Further reviving Forterra's history of engagement and dialogue, 2024 featured a series of intimate conversations in a variety of venues with thought leaders from throughout the region. These included UW environmental humanities professor Jennifer Atkinson, an expert in climate anxiety among young people, as well as the editors of Cascadia Field Guide, a collection of art, poetry and science, and Jens Molbak, founder of Coinstar and the creative multi-sectoral nonprofit New Impact.

Then there was the ever-valid, age-old conservation question the organization was always endeavoring to answer: How to realize the value of land without extracting resources or building things on top of it? On average, Forterra increased

its conservation acreage by 500–1000 acres annually—a figure maintained even during the pandemic, upheaval in the nonprofit sector, and Forest to Home efforts. These lands now provide a laboratory, albeit a delicate and precious one, in which to redefine the value of land in the face of rapid, unprecedented global change and biosphere degeneration.

"That's really the story, what I've advocated for," said Maggie Walker. "The government has preserved lots of land. We've preserved lots of land. But what the heck are we doing with the land? Is it being taken care of? Is it serving a societal purpose besides just saying we preserved X amount of land? There's this next step, an evolution of the whole process."

Forterra's take on the next step at the time of this writing was to develop a system that would use the value of natural land to fund stewardship and the expansion of conservation, an initiative that has the potential to influence land management globally. One key to the project was to influence the market for nature asset services, such as selling carbon offset credits from Forterra properties. Selling carbon credits is not new, and the concept has been met with the ire of some environmentalists due to the potential for profiteering and for carbon credit buyers to use the programs to rationalize carbon emissions. The Forterra twist is to use the proceeds from the sales of carbon credits to fund stewardship of distressed properties and the acquisition of new ones. In addition, the idea includes developing a business model to support the selling of carbon credits from conservation easement properties in collaboration with the property owners, further incentivizing conservation—the ampersand at work.

As usual, the fundamental goal is to demonstrate a proof of concept. "I find it super interesting as an economics concept," explained David Leon. "For years, the carbon dioxide pollution that industry was creating was a negative externality that wasn't being accounted for on the books of the companies that were creating it. This is a way to account for that, and at the same time, fund organizations like ours that are working to keep these forests in a condition where they can pull carbon out of the atmosphere. It's a time where the economy and policy at a global level are changing and recognizing these dynamics—and we're well-positioned for the effort."



King County Timberlands, with Mount Baker (Koma Kulshan) in the distance, beg the question: Do resources need to be removed to have value? *Photo by Margot Cheel*

In the fall of 2022, I had a chance to sit down with De'Sean Quinn, a Seattle-born conservation activist and assistant general manager at King County Metro who, a year later, would become Forterra's board chair and then a King County councilmember. His story bridges between the history and future of the organization and answers an important question that is critical to the trajectory of conservation: How does a person learn to appreciate the value of land as more than a commodity?

Like many kids growing up in the Pacific Northwest, Quinn's parents took him into the forest for a break from their urban home. The Quinns lived on Beacon Hill, today a neighborhood that frequently makes the list of Seattle's trendiest neighborhoods, but at the time it was one of the "red zones" where the Quinns and other Black families were allowed to live. Redlining wasn't officially prohibited in Washington state until 1977, when Quinn was six years old (and I heard stories about it surreptitiously occurring still).

Quinn's parents were, in his words, "very tight with folks." His mother was close friends with a woman from the Tulalip Tribe, so the young Quinn spent time playing with kids on the reservation. "That's probably where I really gained my love of natural areas," he said. His father was a Black Panther and community leader involved in the Civil Rights movement and would organize meetings at his home. True to the Pacific Northwest melting pot of people and cultures, the meetings involved more than Black people. "There was a commitment to kind of a rainbow coalition," remembered Quinn. "There would be someone from the Latinx community, someone from the Indigenous community, folks from the African American community. They came together collectively to elevate each other's sense of self and share the struggles of racism and Indigenous people."

With redlining being overtly practiced and the Fish Wars raging, there was plenty to talk about at the Quinn home, but when business concluded, the gathering didn't end. "In the evening, the blue light would come on downstairs and it would turn into a house party," said Quinn, laughing. His parents' community-mindedness was handed down to them from Quinn's grandfather who founded Therapeutic Health Services, the first drug and alcohol treatment facility in the area.

When Quinn was in elementary school, his family moved to Mill Creek, a community twenty miles north of Seattle. Going from the most diverse neighborhood in the region at the time, Beacon Hill, to a place where the Quinns were the only family of color in the neighborhood was a transformative experience for the little boy. Mill Creek Elementary was located near a conservation area with a creek and a unique salmon hatchery. In 1980, J.W. Lively donated the property with the directive to use it for educational purposes; the Lively Environmental Center is now available to all students in the Everett School District. Living in a privileged neighborhood with easy access to natural areas further shaped Quinn's future. A seed was planted that combined the sense of responsibility of his grandfather, the activism and community-mindedness of his parents, environmental sensibilities born of playing with friends on the Tulalip reservation, and grade school education that included field trips to the neighborhood salmon nursery.

Quinn graduated from the University of Washington with a dream of working in public service and landed a job in the office of King County Executive

Ron Sims. Quinn's grandfather had been a mentor to Sims, so he was happy to return the favor. "Sims' focus on conservation blew my mind," said Quinn. "I very much appreciated his passion and fearlessness to step out and advocate for the environment. I would go to these functions and was very excited about all of it—but I was surprised I didn't see more people involved in the environmental movement that looked like me."

Sims worked closely with Forterra on numerous projects where Quinn met Gene Duvernoy and Michelle Connor, striking up a years-long conversation about the future of conservation that influenced the creation and deployment of Forterra's Strong Community Fund and Quinn joining the Forterra board. "I would always talk about how there's a need for diversity in the environmental movement because the reality on the ground is that those concerns are shared by all communities. How do we partner to really empower the seven generations? How do we shift thinking from a view of conservation as kind of an elitist movement?"

Quinn recalled telling Duvernoy, "Gene, what made sense in the '90s around the urban growth boundary didn't factor in the suburbanization of poverty. We're not gonna be able to conserve or preserve anything if we can't figure out a way to make the urban areas effective." With his focus on people and nature, Quinn was elected to the Tukwila city council and became a driving force in community conservation initiatives in the area, collaborating closely with Forterra on several of them including the Abu Bakr project and the unique Namaste Gardens. Quinn described the motivation for the Namaste Gardens simply: "In Tukwila, we have a lack of nutrition."

Michelle Connor gave me a tour of the Gardens and explained, "The refugee community here, mostly from Burma and Bhutan, didn't want handouts; they wanted a place to grow food." The St. Thomas Catholic Church provided the land and the International Rescue Committee helped secure funding. At Quinn's urging, the city of Tukwila reached out to Forterra to help establish the Namaste Gardens, where dozens of small family plots grow just below the stained-glass windows of St. Thomas. Nearby, a couple of tables beneath the shade of a mother tree provide a park-like atmosphere and give people a place, irrespective of where they were born or what language they speak, to be a community.



The Namaste Gardens are tended by, and provide sustenance for, refugee families on land donated by the St. Thomas Catholic Church (the building in the background of this image).

Photo by Topher Donahue

In many ways, Quinn's influence on conservation in the region, and the state of Forterra in 2025, is best summarized by the ideology behind the Sankofa Bird, a symbol from the Akan people of West Africa: a bird looking backwards towards its history, and an egg of knowledge in its beak representing how experiences and learnings of the past are important to pass on to the generations yet to be—looking back to look forwards.



Through wise management we can recover, sustain and share the original abundance of resources entrusted to us by the Creator. We have a common future and all must work to leave behind us a heritage of abundance.

—Dennis Anderson Sr., Tribal Councilmember Muckleshoot Indian Tribe

CHAPTER TWELVE

Don't GIVE UP

While conducting research for this book, I formed the opinion that Forterra isn't as innovative or risk tolerant as legend suggests. Instead, I'd venture to say that the organization is more of a natural product of its era and place, and its unique qualities are in persistence, taking a broad view of land issues, and disregarding stereotypes in pursuit of a mission. I would even argue that the Forest to Home CLT endeavor, complete with the media drama and institutional learning it inspired, was an incremental step in trying to change the world from inside the box, from within the parameters of capitalism and the awkward system of land ownership handed down to us over the last 150 years.

Thus, in a nod to what I found truly exceptional about Forterra, this book concludes with two stories of inconceivable perseverance. The first is about a tiny piece of land on a very small island that was at risk of being consumed by industry. The second is about a town being slowly devoured by a river. Both stories capture the colossal difficulty many communities are facing, or will be soon, and the tenacity necessary to address the most significant issues of our time.



Orcas breaching near Maury Island, the source of one of the most improbable conservation success stories in Forterra's history. *Photo by Ray Pfortner*

In the late '90s, a third runway was planned at the SeaTac airport, which would need vast quantities of gravel and other resources. A local mining company, owned by a multinational corporation based in Japan, found itself with a suddenly valuable asset: a small gravel mine on the archipelago of Maury and Vashon Islands, just across the water from the airport. To serve the planned increase in gravel production, an industrial dock needed to be built. Representatives from the mining company attended a town council meeting to inform the community of their plans. Islander Amy Carey recalled, "It seemed they thought they were going to be getting a round of applause for some reason. They said, 'We're fully permitted. We'll be mining in ninety days.'"

Applause did not follow. Carey was part of a very engaged community of about 10,000 people living on the two islands. Growing up in the Midwest, Carey saw the ocean as an almost mythical place, particularly after her parents brought her a

dried-up starfish. "At age five, in the middle of the cornfield, I was mesmerized by it," said Carey. "It was all brown and icky looking, but I used to put it to my mouth to taste the salt—that was my introduction to the ocean. My friends used to joke and call me the starfish licker."

Many other islanders loved the sea as much as Carey and were willing to put money and time into preserving their ocean home. In addition, the old rubber stamp approach to environmental assessment was nearing its end, but the gravel company was counting on it working. And in their defense, why wouldn't it? Much of Seattle was built on razed hills, filled-in tidal flats, and vast estuaries smothered with concrete. Entire salmon runs had been eliminated. A gravel mine was nothing.

Another islander at that fateful meeting was Sharon Nelson. She shook her head at the memory: "When we heard that the third runway was being built and the gravel was coming from our island, I asked the council, 'What are you going to do about it?' They looked at me and said, 'Tag, you're it.'"

Nelson's kitchen and cookie jar turned into the command center for a small group of concerned residents. They founded a nonprofit, Preserve Our Islands (POI), and set about trying to understand the impacts of the mine and dock. "We'd meet at our house every week or so," Nelson recalled. "We just divided it up—looking at the shore, the forest, the arsenic, the water supply. Everyone had a small area of expertise and part of it was educating people that this was a serious risk. A local artist made graphics to show how large (the mine and pier) would be and what it would do to the island. From there it started getting people's attention."

At first, the gravel company tried to paint POI as just another NIMBY campaign. To prevent this, the POI team, working with the Vashon Maury Island Land Trust, conducted exhaustive testing on the flora, fauna, toxins, soil, and water to establish a baseline from which to evaluate the potential impact. The dock site was on state land, so at low tide they could legally walk down to it to take pictures and collect samples for testing. A couple of people had boats. A pilot offered to fly over for photos. For arsenic (a concern for groundwater following mining disturbance), they had testing permission from the Japanese owner, Taiheiyo. "They tried to rescind (the permission) the night before, but I already had an engineer coming," remembers Nelson. "Everything was being done according to protocols. Activists are often

told they've gone too far, too NIMBY, so to keep our partners in the environmental community we were doing our best to make sure we were following protocols—and yet still raise the temperature."

A strategy emerged. "We challenged every permit we could," said Nelson. "We'd challenge it, and we'd lose." The legitimacy of the resistance, however, increased. Respected conservation organizations including WCV (Washington Conservation Voters), Audubon, and People for Puget Sound allowed POI to list them as plaintiffs or defendants, so the initial cookie jar effort grew into a regional partnership. Of note, Forterra intentionally kept its name out of the lawsuits, preferring to engage based on, as usual, seeking a win-win conclusion.

Every time the POI team failed, they succeeded in delaying the opening of the mine and, as years passed, the circumstances changed. "During this battle, salmon became threatened, orcas came into play as being endangered, and more things were happening on the shoreline," explained Nelson. "More people on the island were concerned about our water supply because the mine is right over the sole source aquifer; if they punch it, there's a community that relies on the springs."

The fight was transformed into anything but a NIMBY issue—and it got ugly. The gravel company wrote a fat campaign contribution check to a politician, who then issued a quick permit. An important POI document was reputedly hidden in a drawer at the county office to keep it out of the official record. During one of Michelle Connor's meetings with the gravel company, she asked what they would take for the property.

"A hundred million dollars, cash, in duffle bags," was the offer.

After fifteen years, four different POI presidents carrying the torch, and a federal case archive that had grown to 20,000 pages, POI was no closer to stopping the mine. Carey explained, "At that point, all kinds of groups were involved. We're talking EarthJustice. Everybody had some skin in the game. But we were dismissed so many times with: 'Give it up. There's no way you're gonna win this fight. No way. It's done. Pack it up. Just stop!'"

In 2010, the new dock was being built and equipment was staged on the property—mining was literally days away. Carey, the fourth POI president, recalled those last adrenaline-fueled days: "Part of my work at that point was with an orca-sighting



Against all odds, the Maury Island shoreline lives. *Photo by Ray Pfortner*

network. I knew the research guy who was out on the boat and I'm sitting on the beach and I can see the whales right where they're building the dock. I'm calling him, 'Get a picture! Get a picture!' So, we were able to document the whales with the dock being built in the background—pile driving while the whales were there (noise hinders the orca's hunting sonar). I remember one day I had to go check with binoculars to see if somebody was monitoring for orcas. There's this huge bluff area. It's pretty exposed. I did this belly crawl up to this overlook so they wouldn't see me. It's hysterical when I look back on it."

At the same time, the activism had gone pro. The Backbone Campaign showed people how to chain themselves across the roadway, holding hands with their arms in pipes to make separation nearly impossible. The Ruckus Society trained others to use kayaks to get in the way of the pile driving. But in the end, it was what Carey calls "Mother Nature's injunction" that turned the tide. Established protections around herring spawning provided a hard stop to the work season, and a ten-day ice storm sidelined the dock construction. After the storm, testing identified a forage fish for salmon, the sand lance, in the sea grass around the dock, which resulted in a stop work order and triggered the requirement for a federal environmental impact statement (EIS).

A decade later, Cary recalled those last days with as much excitement as if it were last week: "We're exhausted. We're trying again to get an injunction. I'm helping the attorney with declarations from salmon and orca experts. We're in the thick of it. We're all sleeping maybe two hours a day. I lost my voice from working so much. I got a phone call from Dave Mann, our attorney. His voice was unlike anything I'd heard before. It was this odd, rapid-fire, breathless voice and he's just saying a bunch of words at me. 'Orca! Salmon!' Basically, he's calling with the (federal) decision, but he's not saying what the decision was—these words are just coming out of his mouth. I remember yelling into the phone, 'Yes or no, Dave! Yes or no!' Then there was a ten-second pause. He sucked in air, he couldn't get it out, then I hear, 'Yes!'

"We'd won. I honestly don't think I've screamed louder in my life. I ran out into the street, yelling and whooping. Because there were so many in the community who were so invested in it, once they learned what had happened it was this instant party."

POI and their partners weren't going to stop with a wounding blow; it was a chance to go for the jugular. Left as it was, someone else could buy the land and restart the mining effort. By this point, Sharon Nelson had become a state senator and, along with Forterra, had connections at the highest level of government. "We built this really crazy strategy to go around (the local gravel company)," said Carey. Congressman Jim McDermott sent a letter to the head of the Japanese company letting them know that Gene Duvernoy from Forterra was coming to Japan to speak with them about buying the Maury Island mine.

"We didn't give them the opportunity for a straight *no* for an answer," Carey said. "Instead of, 'Will you meet with us?' it said, 'We will be there on this date.' Think of how ridiculous that sounds—we had a federal elected official send a letter to the head of the largest cement company in the world saying, 'Gene's coming to see you.'"

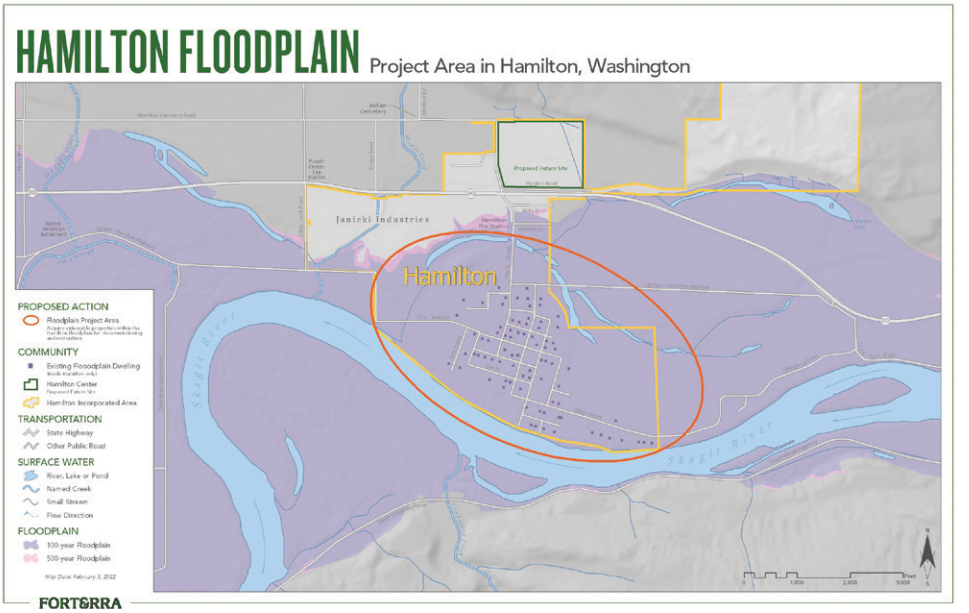
The letter got their attention, and the strategy worked perfectly—the Japanese company offered to send a senior executive team to Seattle to talk about it. "Gene and Michelle very purposefully planned the meeting to be on a boat so nobody could get up and walk away," said Carey. A Forterra supporter loaned them a yacht for the occasion. Now, the tides had turned; gravel prices were down, the third runway was long since built, and a successful federal EIS was far from certain. Once on the boat, coincidentally named *Determination,* Connor and Duvernoy drove the deal home.

"The news exploded!" said Carey. "It was fascinating to see the public reaction. It was a fight everyone thought had already been lost, a remarkable moment and a reminder of the power of people coming together." King County finalized the land purchase right around Christmas so Carey and Nelson put a giant red ribbon on the property gate. "Then we had the biggest party ever. We booked a performance space, open doors, catered, open bar. Congressman McDermott was there. Every elected official. People from all over the state came."

One journalist wrote: "If POI had had a mascot, it would have been the barnacle, hanging for dear life onto the bottom of its boat."[57] But even the fifteen-year epic of Maury Island is light work compared to the story of Hamilton, a community facing a foe that couldn't care less about letters from Congress or duffle bags of cash.

Hamilton has been called *The Most Flooded Town in Washington,* a hard designation to quantify by any measure but, name-calling aside, residents frequently see a whole lot of water in their homes and increasingly severe weather threatens the town's very existence. Leah Jones, the town clerk, bought a house in Hamilton in 2000. Within a week, the mayor stopped by and said, "I'm so glad you moved into town—you finally brought us into triple digits in population." There had been ninety-eight residents, and Jones' family of four made it 102.

During the logging and mining heyday of the early twentieth century, 3000 people called Hamilton home. "It was said that Hamilton would be the 'Pittsburgh of the West, with enough iron to go around the world,' explained former Hamilton mayor Joan Cromley. "Instead, the mining went away. The train tracks weren't continued. I-5 happened instead. The floods kept coming. We



The red circle indicates the part of Hamilton with properties vulnerable to flood. The purple shading is the floodplain. The green square is the property acquired by Forterra with the intent of helping property owners who want to move out of the floodplain.

Cartography by Christopher Walter

started to lose population." To deal with the frequent floods, numerous homes, sheds, and outbuildings are perched on stilts. Houses have been jacked up and new rows of cinder block retrofitted to the foundations in an effort to keep the homes above the water line in the next flood.



The propane tank outside the Hamilton town hall; ready for high water. *Photo by Topher Donahue*

I sat down with Jones, Mayor Travis Patrick, councilman Tim Morrison, and Forterran Daniel Osterhage at the Hamilton town hall. Like all the buildings in the lower part of Hamilton, town hall is elevated—even the propane tank outside is perched on concrete pillars to let floodwaters flow beneath it. Before we discussed the town's project involving Forterra, conversation drifted to the last flood, just months earlier. Far from the angst you might expect, the tone was casual. "These logs keep moving around my property," said Morrison. "Every time it floods, they move. That huge one moved again. I keep telling myself—go stake a rope to that log so, when it floods, I can pull it to where I want it. I look over, and it's floating, it's moving, but I don't have any control over where it's gonna go next."

Based on my visit, I'd say Hamilton could also lay claim to the *Town Least Stressed Out by Natural Disasters*. Building authorities and FEMA—after spending over $5 million on town, not counting the most recent flood, and designating it a Special Flood Hazard Area (meaning it has a 100 percent likelihood of recurrent flooding)—would prefer people don't get used to it. Many homes have been red-tagged by FEMA so if a house is damaged over 50%, in terms of square-foot value, a building permit will not be issued for repair. In 2006, knowing the situation was precarious, the town established the Hamilton Public Development Authority with the goal of purchasing a piece of property above the floodplain and giving residents the option of moving onto higher ground.

When a forty-five-acre property came up for sale, Cromley, who was mayor at the time, saw a chance for her town to dry out long term. "The owner gave me a deadline," she recalled. "'Buy it by this time or I'm going to put it on the market.' It was a mad scramble. We had a little funding, but not nearly enough." Cromley approached Forterra to see if there was any way they could help make it happen. In 2018, Forterra supported Hamilton in purchasing the property.

Older town documents call the property "new town" and referred to the process as "moving the town." Forterra had consulted with the Quinault Tribe on the Olympic Peninsula in moving their village uphill to escape rising sea levels, so confidence was high that seeking higher ground was a feasible solution. Local media caught wind of the idea and, in 2019, the *Seattle Times* published an article titled: *Floods have ravaged Hamilton for over a century. Can outsiders persuade the town to move?* The story explained how Forterra was planning a cutting-edge eco-community of up to 200 homes with solar power, a community-scale composting sewage system, a bio-filtering wastewater processor, and modular CLT construction. Not only could it help people escape the floods, but it would also create a triple net-zero community (water, energy, and carbon).

"That's when the shit hit the fan," said Rebecca Wold. "What the community heard was that they were going to be forced to move. That had all sorts of ramifications. They thought there were all kinds of judgments being put on them. The joke at the time was that we were going to be measuring their living rooms for fish."

Joan Cromley lost her mayoral seat over the issue. "Hamilton is a small community and anyone who is an outsider is looked at with suspicion, especially anybody who comes in with big money or big dreams—especially when they have both," she explained. "It's not unusual for many small Washington communities to feel that way."

The resistance was also pragmatic. Why would people who own their homes debt free and have lived on their spacious property for decades want to take on a new mortgage to move into a smaller space surrounded by other people? As Jones put it, "People are like, 'I'm not giving up my family farm to go live across the street in an apartment complex!'"



An outbuilding in Hamilton, elevated atop a flood ready foundation. *Photo by Topher Donahue*

Mayor Patrick added, "I feel that Forterra should be concentrating on proper education on the fact that we're not moving the town, we're simply giving the residents an option if they want to get out of the floodplain. There are a lot of people who are saying, 'Forterra's not making me move!' and I'm like, 'Hold on, they're not making you move, they're giving you options.'"

Whether the response was emotional or logical, combine government buyout dollars with another flood or two, and dry ground starts looking mighty good. And Forterra is a patient partner. "I think a lot of people who were initially up in arms, even before (the 2021 flood), had started to come around and realized Forterra is not a fly by night group," Cromley said. "They're not going to force you out of your home and all these other rumors that were flying, initially."

Rumors aside, selling change, even if it's presented with optionality, is an uphill climb. "People purchase homes here for the quiet, for the lack of neighbors," Jones said. "You just want your little piece of the planet. Now, we're suddenly asking folks to accept something that is the complete opposite. A new water system. Living next door to neighbors. And you're like, 'If I wanted to do that, I would have stayed in the city!' Then there's alternative energy and all those things. The technology is there, but it hasn't had 100 years to mature, so it's scary for people to change their ways of thinking. Fossil fuel vehicles vs electric vehicles. Who's gonna give up their diesel truck?"

Morrison laughed, looked over at Jones knowingly, and said, "I'm not giving mine up!"

"I'm not either!" Jones said.

"Not until the dinosaurs are gone!"

"Right!"

A few minutes later, as the meeting was winding down and we were making characteristic Pacific Northwest small talk about driving in the rain, Morrison, an electrician who drives thousands of miles each month to work in the city, mused quietly, "I sure could use an electric car." Morrison's comment didn't strike me as a contradiction; a diesel truck *and* an electric car would be a pretty sweet combination—perhaps there is more harmony between futuristic and tried-and-true technologies than the hype would have us believe.

After the meeting, Osterhage gave me a tour of the property that could be the key to a drier, more resilient Hamilton. Half of the site has the potential for residential use, and the other half is a riparian corridor in need of restoration. As was common in ranchlands in the region, a stream meandering across the property limited cattle grazing, so the rancher built up the riverbanks to maximize pastureland. With the stream's wandering tendencies limited, the water cut downwards, creating a deep gash. This increased the speed at which water crosses the property and, while it's only one tiny piece in the vast Skagit River watershed, contributed to downstream flooding and habitat destruction.

At one point, I lost Osterhage in the undergrowth when I stopped to take a photo of a colossal tree stump from a used-to-be mother tree, and to envision kids of a future generation hiding from each other and playing in the stream. The next chapter of Hamilton is in flux. At the time of this writing, Forterra had backed off leading development of the site and was looking for a partner to take the next step in using the property to help people and nature thrive together—plan B ongoing.



Since the days when Gene Duvernoy jumped in the lake to fund another few weeks of conservation work in his attic office, Forterra has been undergoing metamorphoses. It's not that the land trust of Forterra's origin story is gone, but rather that the rapidly increasing pressures on both land and community are moving the goalposts. The organization's response to this change has the potential to redefine the human relationship with nature for the better, but no matter how much I wanted to write a blue-sky ending to this book, the task is herculean, and the story isn't over. Like legendary mountaineer Jim Donini once said, "Survival is not assured."

The time is ripe for someone to do what Suzanne Simard did in proving forest networks benefit from differences, and show how diversity can improve human ecosystems; to take Jerry Franklin's lessons on ecological forestry and harvest cycles and demonstrate that, if we extend the investment horizon, we can increase economic security, resilience, and productivity in both natural and built environments; to learn from the Native American's long view on making decisions for the



Mette Hanson's original woodcut sign at Hazel Wolf Wetlands showing some character after spending three decades in the Pacific Northwest. *Photo by Topher Donahue*

benefit of generations yet to be—human, salmon, orca, and trees alike—and build our infrastructure and land management strategies accordingly. And if that isn't challenge enough, it must happen within a system that is loath to change.

So, while the storm is still raging, there are patches of blue showing through the clouds as the demand for regenerative systems inexorably moves from luxury to necessity. Real change is happening. Inevitable. Contrary to what the media often suggests, many things are improving. In 2022, I asked Bob Whitener how the Tribal situation today compares to the Fish Wars of his youth. He replied, "It's a little difficult, every once in a while, for me to wake up and think about how much better relationships are now than they were. People understand that we take care of the fish, that it's a declining resource and we're trying to stop its decline and Tribes are a big part of that."

Legacy communities are finding footholds amidst the pressures of gentrification. When Carol Mitchell told me about the Tacoma CWC acquiring the Nettie

Asberry House, with Forterra helping to secure a state grant for the purchase, and the property's nomination to the city's Historic Register, the excitement in her voice was palpable: "The Asberry project is like this beacon of light when you're out on the ocean, way out, and you see that light house and you're like, 'Oh my gosh, there's a little flicker of light and hope that maybe people of color could actually come back into the Hilltop, have a presence there, be proud of it, and own it… again. The Asberry project, and the Rite Aid project as well, to some degree, are clear indices of what's possible. But it's taken us five years. It's a long game, not a sprint. You have to have patience and a clear vision of what you're trying to do."

When Maggie Walker explained the evolution of Forterra's Strong Communities Fund, she had that I've-seen-this-movie-before tone in her voice: "Social impact investing is becoming a big deal, a big area of investment. Of course, when there's a big area that people want to invest in, the big guys want to get involved, right? They always want to come behind where there's capital deployment that's proven to be somewhat risk-adjusted. Like micro-lending. Micro-lending was a big deal fifteen years ago, and it's proven that it works. Even during the pandemic there was a 98% repayment. Micro-loans work better in the third world than regular loans here, so it's much less risky. So, the big guys have followed behind, and now they're occupying it, which is what you want. You want them providing that capital—you want capitalism to come behind you."

At the time of this writing, the future of regenerative systems was tenuous and the appetite for short-term profit above all else was as insatiable as ever. Would America's infant mass timber industry help repair people's relationships with the land and each other? Would capitalism tap into the colossal market potential of social impact investing and nature asset services while the biosphere can still support their development? Will Chief Se'alth's multi-ethnic experiment in his homeland succeed? By the time Maryanne Tagney's granddaughter is 100 years old, will there be more places in the Pacific Northwest worthy of conservation? Or less?

Forterra board chair, Ruth True, an entrepreneur with an appetite for doing big things (like an innovative textile recycling company), explained her perspective on one of Forterra's greatest potential contributions moving into the future: "The risk taking and the lessons around understanding of the challenges of

non-profit, the benefits of for-profit, and how we marry the two in life—that has long been part of Forterra's approach, but it is just starting to scratch the surface in mainstream culture."

In 2008, Gene Duvernoy wrote, in a Progress Report on the Cascade Agenda:

> *We must find ways to protect our environment that work with and not against our economy; that enhance and do not impoverish our communities. In short, we must learn to grow with grace. One hundred years is a long time. There will be ups and downs along the way but working as a community, I know we will succeed.*

This sentiment is as core to Forterra's mission as ever—as is the challenge.

One thing is certain: in any bold effort to make significant, lasting, positive change to our relationship with land, someone is sure to mutter that old, tired curse: "Give it up. There's no way you're gonna win this fight. No way. It's done. Pack it up. Just stop!" The counter curse is to cheer and realize that struggle is part of progress, a salute to Maury Island, and an inspiration to keep working towards land for good.

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