

“Trees do it better”: A peek into the world of land conservation

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Philadelphia's largest land conservation non-profit, Natural Lands, has had a hand in preserving over 125,000 acres. They are also stewards of 44 nature preserves across thirteen counties in Pennsylvania and New Jersey, and directly own over 23,000 acres. To learn more about their accomplishments and plans for the future, we contacted Kelly Herrenkohl, Vice President of Communications and Engagement.

In the challenging work of land preservation, the job is never done. There will always be more stories to tell and people to reach. To avoid burnout, Kelly's approach is going in with a targeted message for each unique project, and being creative.

Land grabbing will wax and wane according to the economy and social trends. From the mid-1990s to 2008, land was taken over at light speed. Today, younger generations want to live in urban centers close to retail and entertainment, and shy away from the quiet suburbs. However, Kelly views this as just another trend. Natural Lands takes a proactive position to reach out to communities and land owners before the natural spaces are at risk of development.

A common theme among Natural Lands employees and volunteers is a passion for the outdoors. This shared interest is key in the effort of making land preserves and gardening accessible to as many people as possible. Kelly made it clear that this is core to public engagement and developing potential partners.

Communicating these efforts to the public takes many forms. Face-to-face engagement events are usually the most effective and attract people with a previous interest. Signage on Natural Lands projects is vital, making their efforts clear to as many people as possible in an easily digestible way. Ultimately, the goal in community engagement is to entice others to love

the natural lands around them and support the goal of the organization, whether that is through Natural Lands or other means. In Kelly's experience she has seen that developing a relationship with and involvement in the community is the best way to gain support and share knowledge about the importance of their mission.

Kelly's passion for natural places overflows with love for the earth and the climate. In her own words, "trees do it better" in terms of established carbon-balancing systems. But not only do public natural spaces serve as a counter weight to climate change, in the midst of social distancing and mass toilet paper buy-outs due to Covid-19 they provide a spacious haven. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends regular exercise to combat pandemic anxiety. Natural preserves offer a place to be physically active, explore, and de-stress while maintaining the vital barrier of empty space and carbon reduction.

When discussing the importance of individuals supporting Natural Lands, Kelly says it is important to figure out what you really love. She provided a personal example of her journey to figuring out where her passion lies. Being a people-person, she naturally worked in sales. However, her interest in a social impact beyond business led to her working for a non-profit, Vetri Community Partnership. Finally, she discovered Natural Lands and due to her passion for being outdoors she ended up in the conservation industry.

Kelly also shared an empowering story of one of their employees, who got a job as a stewardship assistant, cutting the grass for Natural Lands just to get his foot in the door. Now, he makes the deals coordinating conservation easements. She recommends being willing to "take out the trash" for a while, using that time to learn and grow. Eventually, that knowledge can be

applied to advance in your career. Volunteering is one great way to get into something that you really care about, as volunteers will become known entities to the organization.

Kelly emphasized the value of every contribution. Donating, even just a small amount, and volunteering are always appreciated, but not the only ways to contribute. Knowing what is impacting conservation, gardening if you own any land, talking to family members about planting native plants, and advocating for open green space within a municipality are a few more examples of impactful gestures.