



CAMBRIAN: OPINION

Preserving the land is our responsibility and trust

BY CONNIE GANNON

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We Cambrians are blessed with an apparent abundance of open space. The Fiscalini Ranch Preserve, State Parks' Moonstone Beach, Greenspace's various preserves, Hearst San Simeon State Park and San Simeon Cove to our north, and Harmony Headlands a few miles south — quite a list.

Is this enough open space? Why should we protect more land locally? What's the benefit?

In "The Community Land Trust: A Guide to a New Model for Land Tenure in America," the authors address these questions by highlighting an essential truth — the land exists before and remains after us:

"The story of land is older than the story of man. Every society must devise ways in which its members will share this gift and under what conditions that land will be passed on to the next generation. This is continuity."

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Even those families who have lived in the Santa Rosa and San Simeon Creek watersheds for multiple generations are relative newcomers here. The rocks, the native vegetation, the animal species — everything around us not made by human hands predates us, was present and central to this place for millennia, even before the first peoples crossed from Siberia and migrated down the coast.

We tend to think of the place we live in as backdrop to our lives. We are the actors; our surroundings are the stage. But for most of the life story of our local creeks, they had no names. They ran year-round and full of steelhead; they were fished by bears and herons, not people. They had their own story. The question now is, how will we honor that story and how will we keep some of these places at least rural, if not wild? Will we do this preservation work only for a nice view? Or will we take on this trust in gratitude for all that this place has given and gives now to the survival and well-being of every creature — us included — who lives here?

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Well, you may say, I bought my property with a hard-earned nest egg. It was no gift, believe me. And yet, think about your delight when a fox runs across the backyard,

when you look up at a hawk hovering over your garden, or a finch sings in the bushes by your kitchen window. This place gives us such presents every day; it is a gift to our senses, our world-weary minds.

How shall we share it? We share this gift of land by stewardship. We plan wisely for a limit to growth so that human activity doesn't overburden our watersheds' resources, and so that those resources are not used in ways that damage habitats of plants and creatures that have lived here far longer than any of us. We make the land's integrity our bottom line.

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This is the crux of the matter. What do we want Cambria to look like in 50 years, after most of us are gone? Do we want it to look pretty much as it does now, or do we want something like the coastal towns of Southern California, built out from mountains to ocean? If we don't want uncontrolled growth, if we want to pass on the place that we know and love to the future, how do we place limits on a tireless urge to build more and profit more?

One way is by determining what happens to the land we own as individuals. Do we have property that holds environmental value — undeveloped, attached to preserved landholdings, adjacent to creeks, a known wildlife corridor, or a stand of Monterey pines? Are we willing to preserve it intact for not only our own heirs, but the descendants of our neighbors and the other creatures who live here?

"This is continuity."

There are a variety of ways to protect our lands for the future. First, as some local landowners have done, you can draw up an agreement with a local, regional or national land conservancy to place a conservation easement on your property. There are conservancies that specialize in large holdings and in agricultural land. Agricultural land conservation is especially attractive, as most easement agreements allow traditional farming to continue.

With an easement, you donate or sell the development rights to your property — or a portion of it — and the conservancy retires them in perpetuity. This means that anyone who buys or inherits your land cannot develop the conserved portion. There is a federal tax benefit for donating a conservation easement to a land conservancy or trust.

Landowners also may sell or donate their land outright to a land trust or conservancy. Many of Greenspace — The Cambria Land Trust's reserves and pocket parks were donated by the property owners, often as a bequest. Such donations also trigger tax benefits. Please see www.landtrustalliance.org/issues-action/take-action/tax-incentives for more information.