

Vision: A Plan in Place

The St. Simons Land Trust staff and Board met twice in 2016 to write, adopt and enact an updated Strategic Vision: 2016 – 2018. The excerpt below describes our imagined future for St. Simons Island in 10, 20 and 50 years from now.

*Imagine a **place** where every resident can walk or ride easily from their home to a park or natural area for recreation and respite. Where children can ride their bikes safely from parks to wilderness areas, on trails and to fishing docks. Where visitors experience the natural richness and wildlife of our rare ecosystems, and take home an impression of St. Simons that inspires them to take conservation action in their own community.*

*Imagine a **community of people** who value the natural and scenic character of St. Simons Island, and who care deeply about the natural and cultural assets of the island. These engaged stewards of the island educate others through their actions and their ethics. The St. Simons Land Trust's efforts have impact beyond St. Simons, and our work inspires a conservation ethic in present and future generations.*

This vision is one that is aspirational and exciting and will be the north star for our work in years to come. Today, there is urgency to this vision as well – urged on by the increasing development pressure facing the island and the recently recovering economy. The Land Trust will continue to work in partnership with its members, land owners, Glynn County, other community agencies, institutions and organizations to realize this powerful vision for St. Simons Island.

A Snap-Shot of Projects Completed in 2016

In 2016, the Land Trust completed the following projects:

- Acquired 58-acre Phase 1 of the three phase Musgrove transaction, which will total 260 acres protected upon completion of the \$11 million campaign by the end of 2017.
 - Continued campaign efforts and now have raised \$8.2 million; will close on 90-acre Phase 2 in February 2017.
- Completed upland planting at Cannon's Point Preserve's demonstration Living Shoreline; currently monitored by the College of Coastal Georgia's Conservation Biology class.
- Launched cutting-edge research on Maritime Forest Restoration at Cannon's Point Preserve, led by hardwood experts from New Mexico State University and Purdue University; planted more than 700 live oak seedlings as part of the project.
- Ratified a Strategic Vision: 2016 – 2018 with three main strategies: Land Protection, Land Management, and Education/Outreach.
- Celebrated Ben Slade's retirement as executive director.
- Hired David H. Pope as executive director.
- Celebrated the opening of Harrington Park, a new 11-acre park on S. Harrington Road completed in partnership with Supporters of the Park at Harrington, the St. Simons African American Heritage Coalition and Glynn County.
- Organized a Special Lands Committee, representing varying community interests and stakeholders, to assist in the review of potential land protection strategies.
- Developed a scoring matrix to prioritize potential land protection projects and quantify our land selection process.
- Welcomed over 3,900 visitors to Cannon's Point, despite being closed for seven weeks for Hurricane Matthew clean-up.

- Hosted our 16th Annual Oyster Roast in January 2016, attended by over 750 supporters and raising \$41,000. Just recently hosted our 17th Annual Oyster Roast this month, raising \$52,000 in ticket sales and donations.
- Hosted a number of education groups at Cannon's Point, including but not limited to:
 - Bethlehem Christian Academy
 - Brunswick High School
 - Coastal Georgia Audubon Society
 - Coastal Georgia Historical Society
 - College of Coastal Georgia
 - Georgia Department of Economic Development
 - GADNR Historic Preservation Division
 - Georgia Forestry Commission
 - Georgia Living Shoreline Working Group
 - Governor's South Atlantic Alliance Wetland Workgroup
 - Leadership Glynn
 - Savannah College of Art and Design
 - Sea Island Company
 - University of West Georgia

This is merely a snapshot of the conservation efforts underway at Cannon's Point Preserve and at the Land Trust on a daily basis. Our simultaneous focus continues to be maintaining the properties we already own and seeking opportunities for additional acquisition and preservation.

Membership and Development in 2016

The Land Trust raised \$1,102,000 in 2016 with the help of our exceedingly generous membership and community partnerships. A brief analysis reveals:

- 29 members at the Benefactor level of \$10,000 and above
- 350 members at the *Live Oak Society* level of \$1,000 - \$9,999
- 718 members at the General Membership level of \$9,999 and below
- Earned \$90,000 from our community partners, including Sea Island Company

In addition to membership dollars, the Land Trust raised funds for the *Campaign to Preserve Musgrove*, ongoing projects at Cannon's Point, open pledges to the Cannon's Point acquisition, and other special projects.

Thank you for your support of our work.

Cannon's Point Preserve

A Snapshot of Recently Completed Improvements

When we acquired Cannon's Point Preserve (CPP) in 2012, our vision for the 600-acre property was to create an outdoor classroom for residents, students, visitors, researchers, and explores of all ages. Our site plan called for \$1,000,000 in capital improvements, including miles of trails, two observation towers, a kayak launch, living shoreline stabilization, a central pavilion, a field lab for water quality work, and the stabilization of 18th century ruins.

Today, four years later, we are pleased to report that we have completed our "Capital Improvements Phase" for CPP. The amenities funded by this Phase have significantly enhanced the visitor experience of the Preserve, as well as provide educational opportunities for partner agencies and groups to interact with the ecology of the maritime forest protected at the site.

The observation towers – sited at the northernmost Couper House ruins and in the southern area – allow for visitors to climb 20 feet into the tree canopy and observe birds and other natural and historical features from above.

The living shoreline site averages about 200 visitors per month. Local research groups, including biology classes from the College of Coastal Georgia, use and will continue to use the site to monitor wildlife recruitment and shoreline stabilization measures. The upland component of the shoreline has been completed with the planting of a native plant garden. Volunteers helped to install the garden which will assist with the stabilization of the living shoreline. We will be participating in the regional Living Shoreline Work Group's creation of a manual for living shoreline projects; the opportunities to showcase this project and our learned best-practices are innumerable and invaluable to the environment.

Remaining Improvements

Shortly after the purchase of Cannon's Point, the Land Trust received a generous capital contribution to construct an onsite Coastal Ecology Field Lab to be used by local students studying tidal marshes, wetland habitats, and other fascinating and important natural systems. Permitting issues have forced the Land Trust to delay construction of the Coastal Ecology Field Lab until a restroom is completed. Glynn County requires the installation of ADA-compliant restroom and sewage facilities to accommodate visitors, researchers, and students.

An adequate restroom facility is estimated to cost around \$150,000, and the Land Trust plans to use money from the Cannon's Point Reserve Fund to complete this project by the end of summer 2017. Tapping this reserve – which was originally set aside in 2012 to cover unforeseen challenges and expenses – allows us to focus our fundraising resources on our current land acquisition and habitat protection project, Musgrove Plantation.

We are also currently working to outfit the Coastal Ecology Field Lab with advanced equipment, a running seawater system, and other educational supplies. These improvements will enhance our ability to examine coastal flora and fauna, monitor ecosystems, and educate guests.

Public Access

In 2015, 3,000 visitors explored Cannon's Point. This year, we welcomed almost 3,900 total visitors to the site.

We hosted a number of school field trips, nonprofit groups, and other visitors to Cannon's Point and will continue to work in partnership with educational groups and other agencies to use Cannon's Point as an outdoor classroom. Our existing partnerships with the Coastal Georgia Historical Society, College of Coastal Georgia, and Sea Island remain in place as well.

Volunteer Program

The Land Trust currently has 121 active volunteers who have been oriented and trained to support our efforts at Cannon's Point Preserve. We also have more than 100 volunteers who worked with us on our annual Oyster Roast event, held on January 14, 2017. This year we asked volunteers to help us with the post-hurricane clean-up at the Alice Richards Botanical Trail, Cannon's Point Preserve and the John Gilbert Nature Trail. As part of our Volunteer Appreciation Program, we hosted a reception at Halyards for volunteers to meet our new executive director.

Current Project: Musgrove

The Land Trust is working hard to acquire a 260-acre portion of Musgrove. Already we have closed on the first 58 acres, and in early February, we will close on the next 90 acres. Towards our goal of \$11 million, we have commitments totaling \$8.2 million.

In December 2016, we mailed a year-end appeal to over 1,900 people seeking gifts to the Campaign to Preserve Musgrove, and at the time of this mailing, we've raised \$30,000 from the responses. This marked our first official public appeal for the project.

Under our agreement with the current owner of Musgrove, the Land Trust cannot open the property to the public until all 260 acres have been purchased and protected via conservation easement. This final \$2.8 million left to raise to complete Phase 3 of the Musgrove project is the key to our vision for a park open to the public and outdoor classroom, where residents and visitors can learn about nature through direct experience.

The Georgia Department of Natural Resources has been an invaluable partner in our efforts to protect this property, helping to earn \$3 million in grant funding from the U.S Fish and Wildlife Services for the project. The Ga. DNR will hold the easement on Musgrove.

Looking Ahead to 2017: A Message from the Executive Director

North End Vision

For the north end of the island, our vision going forward is to have a protected and connected corridor of property from Musgrove to Cannon's Point. To this end, we will be working with other conservation groups, including the Georgia Department of Natural Resources and The Nature Conservancy, to develop a conservation plan for the north end of the island. We are already in talks with some major landowners in the corridor to secure conservation easements in which we can provide walking trails and access to the marsh from Musgrove to Cannon's Point.

South End Vision

A major challenge for the Land Trust has been developing the financial capability to act quickly on smaller, sometimes iconic properties as they become available on the south end of the island. We are often in competition with commercial buyers willing to pay high prices for the properties. We will be working to energize a team of board members and others to assist us in identifying and prioritizing these types of properties. We will also be working on a plan to have funds available for quick action as these properties come on the market.

The Future of St. Simons

Channeling development pressure into thoughtful and responsible land use is by far the most important factor in the future of St. Simons Island. In 2017, the Land Trust will continue to strengthen our role as a thought-leader in the community, promoting the benefits of conservation to the island and standing for high-quality future land use planning that will be beneficial, not damaging, to the character and living conditions on the island.

Thank you once again for your partnership and support of our work.



Why preserve land on St. Simons Island?

The enjoyable quality of life on St. Simons Island is due much in part to the natural scenic beauty that surrounds us – marshes, beaches, the tree canopy, maritime forest, wildlife. Preserving greenspace on the Island helps to maintain the integrity of the St. Simons lifestyle and experience.

Georgia's barrier islands have some of the highest levels of biodiversity in the state and the southeast (which is already one of the most biodiverse temperate regions in the world). St. Simons Island is one of the only islands on Georgia's coast that is not protected from development, but still has significant area left to potentially protect – particularly the northeastern end.

St. Simons Island is one of the most visited areas in coastal Georgia, and land protection here is very visible and accessible to the public. Protecting land on St. Simons gives the public the opportunity to experience first-hand the wild coastal Georgia landscapes that make the other, less accessible islands so special. Without some level of public exposure and education, we can't expect the citizens of Georgia to continue to care for and protect this region.

The properties especially on the north end of St. Simons have a diversity of rare natural communities. These communities provide great examples for the public to visit and there are opportunities for restoration. Rare communities include live-oak maritime forests, shell midden woodlands (these areas include several species of rare plants), longleaf-pond pine flatwoods, and other barrier island freshwater habitats.

Protecting land adjacent to salt marsh is a key conservation strategy when considering sea level rise. There have to be areas for salt marsh habitat to migrate in order for us to continue to have high quality marshes when sea levels rise.

St. Simons is adjacent to a world class estuary and large amount of protected land along the lower Altamaha River corridor and along the immediate coast, north of St. Simons. Protecting St. Simons provides a buffer between the more developed areas of Glynn County and this important estuary and areas of protected land.

The Glynn County Convention and Visitor's Bureau, One Hundred Miles, SSLT and others are working towards Glynn County becoming a model for sustainable eco-tourism. Setting aside Cannon's Point Preserve on St. Simons Island and creating a system of parks and greenspace connected by trails for people to enjoy has the potential to really change and enhance tourism in Glynn County, and would be an important step in creating a model for eco-tourism here.

For More Information

With questions or comments, please contact the St. Simons Land Trust at (912) 638-9109 or visit www.sslt.org.