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Melanie Parker wins Andrus award

American Forests, Spring, 2010 by Jane Braxton Little

When Cecil D. Andrus presented Melanie Parker with his annual leadership award for sustainability and conservation, she accepted it with a typical handoff:

"I see this work as a multi-generational endeavor, and I am proud to be among those grabbing the baton from the likes of you, sir, and preparing the next generation to take it when their time comes."

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

Parker, co-founder and executive director of Northwest Connections in Swan Valley, Montana, thinks in concentric rings. To deal with the threat of timberland conversion in her rural community, she and her co-workers drew circles around their neighbors--a logger here, a real-estate agent there, an environmentalist, a teacher--pulling them into the conversation one by one. Then they reached out to county commissioners and state and, eventually, national officials.

"We just kept drawing bigger and bigger circles, bringing more and more people in," she says. "And we never stopped asking 'what if?'"

The Andrus Award, named for the conservation-minded, four-term governor of Idaho and former U.S. Secretary of the Interior, recognizes Parker for 15 (see "Ensuring a Timberland Legacy," *American Forests*, Winter 2009)). Protecting 310,000 acres of industrial timberlands from development--66,000 acres in Swan Valley--is a landmark example of place-based collaborative conservation, Andrus said.

Parker credits this success to partnerships. Over the years she has worked closely with AMERICAN FORESTS and Sustainable Northwest in Portland, Oregon. "In our policy circles, Melanie is known for her ability to come up with insightful comments at key moments, and we often look to her for help in expressing things that we are all trying to say," says Gerry Gray, AMERICAN FORESTS' acting executive director.

On the Montana Legacy project, she collaborated with The Nature Conservancy and Trust for Public Lands. Building strong coalitions between local and national groups is essential, Parker says. Rural groups need to reach out to people with access to fulfill their visions. National groups need to keep their feet on the ground through local partners.

In accepting the Andrus award, she acknowledged her husband Tom, cofounder of Northwest Connections, their staff, community, and "unending years of toil in community-based conservation." Now that they have prevented the conversion of Swan Valley to a resort community, the challenge is to revitalize the local economy around restoration, land stewardship, recreation, and appropriately scaled biomass. To keep her promise to Andrus and pass the baton on to the next generation, Parker and her partners have to figure out how to help young people and local families stay in the Swan, she says.

She pauses to ponder clearing that hurdle, furrows her brow briefly, then launches into a "wild hair-brained idea" for a Chautauqua gathering of people with diverse interests from across the country. "What if ...?"

The Morton Arboretum in Lisle, Illinois recently opened an incredible exhibit of sculptures by artist Steve Tobin. The exhibit displays his new Steelroots series, which explores the importance of trees and the power of their roots. To underscore the meaning of the exhibit, the sculptures are set among the trees on the Arboretum's Conifer Collection.

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

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