

Development for Conservation

Writing Effective Appeal Letters

Prepared for

Pennsylvania Land Conservation Conference

April 2026

David Allen, Development for Conservation



**DEVELOPMENT
FOR
CONSERVATION**

1

“*You’ve got to make this happen,*” Bob Barnum whispered to me on his deathbed.

Barnum was talking about protecting the Point on Camano Island that bears his name – Barnum Point.

It was his dying wish – literally.

Wild beach. Mature coastal forest. Lush understory. Magnificent madrones. Deer, eagles, coyotes, woodpeckers, and frogs.

Now protected forever, right here on Camano Island.

Bob, together with his wife and cousins, are conservation heroes. For several generations, they have done a beautiful job of caring for this land. They provided for the critters that nest and feed here. And they built and maintained miles of trails for humans, too. To Bob, it would have been an enormous tragedy to see the land further divided or developed.

When Conservation Director Ryan Etling and I were first contacted about using private funds to match state funding for Barnum Point, our first instinct was to say “*No way!*” In land conservation, you either need lots of time or lots of money. Whidbey Camano had neither.

But the prospect of protecting Barnum Point was hard to say “No” to.

So we started. We put the word out that this incredible opportunity would be lost if we didn’t act quickly.

Not surprisingly, it turns out that Barnum Point is a pretty special place. It’s in the middle of the Pacific Flyway – a major thoroughfare for migratory bird species between their winter places in Central and South America and summer nesting grounds in Alaska and even across into Siberia. Having roosting and resting places in the Puget Sound area helps a great deal.

But it’s also important for *salmon*. Barnum Point and Driftwood Shores form a narrow waterway connecting Port Susan Bay with Triangle Bay. Triangle Bay is an estuary,

1

meaning that its water is not as salty as ocean water. Fresh water flows into Triangle Bay from Kristoferson Creek to the north.

A freshwater spawning stream.

A protected estuary.

Access to the ocean beyond Barnum's Point.

Perfect salmon habitat.

Juvenile Chinook, chum, coho, and even steelhead stay in these protected waters for a year or more before making their way to the ocean.

It's perfect for humans, too. Barnum Point will become a place where people hike, birdwatch, camp, and beachcomb. A place where children learn and discover outside the classroom. A place where, in the words of Aldo Leopold, people learn to "see the land, to understand what they see, and enjoy what they understand."

2

At some point, it comes down to Whidbey Island stuff.

That intangible quality of life. It's why we live here. The pace is slower. It's forested and beautiful. And it's quiet.

"We live in God's country on Whidbey Island."

Don and Jan love Whidbey Island and their little piece of it. Their quality of life. Their privacy. And they've loved it for 61 years.

They can't imagine seeing it developed. In fact, it's easy for them to see another Don and Jan living here after they are gone. Maybe even a whole series of Dons and Jans tending the rhodies, and enjoying the forest, the wildlife, and the privacy for generations to come.

So Don and Jan made the decision to protect their land forever.

Don and Jan met on a blind date. They were married shortly after and bought their property near Greenbank in 1956. The property came with a small log cabin-style house built on a cement slab at the bottom of the sloping property. The slope actually created a drainage issue into the house.

"That was an adventure," Don chuckles, remembering. *"Every time it rained you'd get up in the morning and put your foot in the water."*

They built their new house over time, finishing around 1970. And right about that same time, they bought the woods behind it. Now, they appreciate the sense that they are living with nature.

"I love the birds," Jan says.

"The wildlife," Don agrees.

"If the deer stay out of the garden, I even like the deer," Jan says with a laugh.

Their woods are all second growth. It was logged at one time, close to 80 years ago. Alders and fir and hemlock. And blackberries and nettles, too.

You know - Whidbey Island stuff.

2

Don and Jan's property is so densely wooded they can't see their neighbors on either side. Just all trees in every direction.

*"We like the woods," Don says. "It's good protection for the birds.
And it's privacy for us."*

I think it's important to acknowledge that Don and Jan have done an amazing job protecting their land for more than 60 years. The land has been protected because they are here. They are self-described nature enthusiasts. They haven't harvested any timber on their forested parcel other than taking downed trees for firewood. They love the mature trees and they are concerned with other development on the island. Their wooded property – the property they have loved for more than 60 years – should be protected forever.

But they can't protect it forever. New homes are going in along the old county road not far from where they live. It's not hard to imagine the wall-to-wall houses that Don and Jan are afraid of.

"A lot of people – I hate to use the term city slickers – but they'll come out and that's the first thing they want to do is cut all the trees down," Don said. "They're just not used to the quiet."

Worse, Whidbey doesn't have adequate water resources to support more large-scale development. Most homes are on their own wells or community wells. But Oak Harbor, the island's biggest city far to the north, already relies on water pumped through pipes under Deception Pass bridge.

Don and Jan could have developed their property. They could also have sold it to a developer. Instead, they carved out a small area for their home and their rhododendrons. And left the rest for the forest – owls, deer, woodpeckers, and salamanders.

You know – the Whidbey Island stuff.

And now, it will stay that way – forever.

3

Dick Brown knew he had a problem. His farm was literally washing away down the stream. Bit by bit, grain by grain, the soil he needed to grow his grass was disappearing before his eyes.

And his ability to feed his cattle was washing away with it.

What Dick didn't know at the time was that the soil in the water was causing other problems as well. Like a soft blanket, it was covering the rocky bottom of the stream. Sunlight was reaching the water directly, warming it up. Not good. But it also *wasn't* reaching the bottom, where it was needed. And that wasn't good either.

Too much nitrogen. Not enough oxygen. Insects and fish couldn't *breathe*. Or lay their eggs. Nothing about that stream was happy. Nothing was working the way it should.

Dick knew he had a problem. So, he turned to the County Conservation District, and the District turned to the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy (WPC). Western Pennsylvania Conservancy (WPC) regularly partners with the Conservation District to bring public and private money together to benefit everyone.

Including farmers like Dick.

It's in everyone's interest to keep the soil on the land where it belongs. Healthy soils grow grass for Dick's dairy cattle, but they also support grassland birds who nest there and other species up the food chain and down the stream – including humans.

It also makes sense to keep the soil OUT of the water. It makes sense for insects and fish who nest there and other species up the food chain and down the stream – including humans.

Clear, clean water benefits everyone.

Some of the smartest people I know are farmers, and Dick is no exception. Now in his 70s, Dick has learned to see little decisions having implications beyond the moment – downstream both literally and figuratively. When you meet him, you notice his hands first. Hardened and gnarled with decades of working on the land, Dick's hands have learned a great deal. Dick's hands are also expressive. And when he talks about his land – the land he loves – they come alive.

In July of 2011, Dick was thinking, "*It's time to get the cattle out of the stream.*"

3

Turns out the answer was quite simple: Dick's dairy farm used grazing fields on both sides of the stream. And the easiest way to get the cattle from one side to the other was *through* the stream.

Cattle also get *hot* in the summer. When they get to the stream, and the cool mud on either side, they stay there for a while and cool off. They *wallow*. And that creates new problems – like filth and disease. Dick's cattle weren't living as long, and they weren't as productive.

When I first saw Dick's stream, it made me sad. It was ugly. Bare, muddy, with cows settling in and flies buzzing everywhere. The stream banks were packed hard and the soil simply washed away every time it rained.

Dick needed to do three things.

- He needed to fence the cattle out of the stream.
- He needed another way to get the cattle from one side of the stream to the other.
- And he needed to rebuild the trees, shrubs, and other plants that stabilized the streambanks.

The fencing went in first. It created a “no cow zone” on either side of the stream – a so-called “buffer.” Then a cattle bridge. And water tanks to capture natural springs so the cows could drink without having to go to the stream.

Then WPC land stewards and volunteers planted grass and wildflowers and shrubs inside the buffer to stabilize the stream bank. They brought in mature trees, too – willows, dogwoods, maple, and pines – to help provide shade and keep the water cool.

Today, you wouldn't recognize the place.

The cattle are out of the stream. They have their own special bridge to get from one pasture to the other. And they're healthier. The stream banks are stable with grasses and wildflowers. The water is cooler with new trees to give it shade. And it's clearer and cleaner, too. More oxygen. Less nitrogen. Look carefully and you'll find big brown trout returning to spawn. (Should have brought my fly rod!)

Dick's story has a happy ending. But it gets even better.

Dick's farm has become an inspiration for others.

4

Cindy was there for the first Earth Day.

Senator Gaylord Nelson of Wisconsin created the first Earth Day, on April 22, 1970. He believed that the environment was not being adequately addressed in politics or by the media.

Cindy agreed.

She grew up in northwestern Pennsylvania in the 1950s.

“I grew up right where the Beaver and Ohio Rivers come together. Both sides were covered with mills in those days. Everything was ugly, and the air was polluted. We would go to a drive-in movie and the sky behind the screen would light up every time they dumped more slag in the river.”

Swimming, fishing, boating? Not a chance.

“I remember once sneaking away upstream in a boat and eating lunch on a slag heap. I can’t imagine doing that today. But that’s all we knew.”

Now Cindy is a conservation partner with Western Pennsylvania Conservancy on land she owns in the Laurel Highlands.

Part of the reason people decide to help protect nature and natural land is related to land they’ve seen that was not protected.

We sure know what that’s like around here. Many of our parents and grandparents took the land for granted. They dug it up, cut it down, burned it, and dumped it in the river. They divided and developed, divided and developed.

Fortunately, enough people have come together over the years to say *“Enough! We need to protect some of what’s left before future generations forget what this land once looked like.”*

In life, you only have the options you can see.

Fortunately, Cindy learned there were options to eating lunch on slag heaps – something better. It started for her with a small patch of woods behind her house. As a child, she discovered trillium and spring beauties there. And birdsongs. And stillness. And quiet.

It was a magical place.

4

“Then, one summer I got to go to summer camp in the Laurel Highlands. And something – an awareness – started to grow in me that there was something different out there.”

To Cindy, the Laurel Highlands, just south of Pittsburgh, was a **big** magical place – big enough for songbirds and deer – and owls, turkeys, bobcats, and salamanders. Places where the slag didn’t light up the sky at night. Places where the air and the water were clear and clean. Places where you could swim in the river or sit on an old log for hours, just listening.

Cindy went on to college, started a family, and joined the hustle and bustle of adult life. But she never lost that awareness, or her love for the Laurel Highlands.

And she saw that it was slowly disappearing – divided and developed.

As soon as she could, Cindy invested.

“We bought a small piece of property in the Highlands. It had some woods on it and a small pond. We restored an old mountain log home there. Since then we have added to the property, and when we donated a conservation easement to the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy, it was about 150 acres.”

Cindy’s land is now formally protected from subdivision and development by a conservation easement. Cindy and the WPC are conservation *partners* on her land.

“I am so thankful the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy was there. Everything begins with the land. There is no more defining legacy than what we leave on the land. WPC is helping people make this investment.”

Everything begins with the land.

Cindy’s legacy will be unbroken forest and a small pond. A magical place and a part of an even bigger magical place– with songbirds and deer, owls, turkeys, bobcats, and salamanders. Places where the slag doesn’t light up the sky at night. Places where you can swim or just sit on an old log for hours, listening.

A place for renewal.

A place for solace.

A place for people to see options.

5

James wants to be a Naturalist when he grows up.

There are thousands of kids in the Dane County area. How many times do you hear one of them say they want to be a Naturalist? Much less a kid like James – smart, open, engaging but from a household living well below the poverty level.

It makes my heart sing.

I am a Naturalist at Aldo Leopold Nature Center. I work with kids every day whose outdoor experience is usually from the door to the car.

And I worry - every day - that this planet's survival will come down to small decisions *these kids* make as adults. And the values they pass to their children.

That's what makes Aldo Leopold Nature Center so necessary. This is the place where learning about the world happens - because this is the place you touch it.

A bus load of kids arrive and the grumbles start right away about having to go outside, about the cold and the group assignments, and about everything else going on with grade and middle-schoolers.

Four hours later, the shy one who didn't want to be here gives a presentation on how trees breathe – from memory with no notes – smiling and laughing the entire time.

Miracles.

Sure, you get discounts in the Gift Shop and breaks on summer camp tuition, too. ***But your membership also makes miracles happen.***

And that brings me back to James. Actually, I need to stop there and tell you that James is not his real name. Nor are any of the other names in this letter real. But their stories are real! And you've helped make them happen.

Here's what happened with James:

A couple weeks ago, Badger Rock Middle School kids came to the Aldo Leopold Nature Center for a field day.

On the way inside, one of the girls noticed a "dead thing." It was a very small mammal, but I didn't know which one.

5

We studied it in the field with the promise that I would get field guides to aid us in identifying the creature later. During snack, we looked at field guides together, talking about possibilities. We narrowed it down to two shrews based on what we could remember.

Then, we strapped on our snowshoes and headed back out. Our first stop was to see if we could find the "dead thing" and identify it. It was James who found it. Everyone gathered around as I asked questions like, "Is it lighter on the underside than the top? What does its snout look like?" We compared it to pictures in the field guide.

In the end, we decided it was a masked shrew!

Suddenly, another little piece of the world made sense to James – maybe for the first time. Things can be known. They can be named. And we can learn how to identify them.

In the words of Aldo Leopold, James began to "see the land, to understand what he sees, and enjoy what he understands."

Later, when we were gathering again to get on the bus, James told me he wanted to be a Naturalist when he grew up.

It made my heart sing.

6

Margaret Mead is credited with saying “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.”

You can probably add Naleah to that quote. Naleah is now 14 years old. And she is changing the world all by herself.

It all started with a school hike.

Three years ago, Naleah hiked part of the Ice Age Trail near her home in Janesville. The hike was a part of a school program coordinated with IATA’s Saunters program. Between the distraction from other school and social activities, the time spent outside – in nature – and the workout related to hiking, Naleah realized something unexpected. ***She was happy.***

Naleah discovered the Trail through the Saunters Program. The name honors Henry David Thoreau’s essay about the nature of sauntering. Thoreau said the saunterer has no particular home...

“...but is equally at home everywhere. For this is the secret of successful sauntering. He who sits still in a house all the time may be the greatest vagrant of all.”

And that brings us back to Naleah.

One hike on the Trail and Naleah was hooked. Before long, Naleah was a mentor for other young hikers. And then she really took off.

“Naleah is amazing,” says Luke Kloberdanz, IATA’s Education Director. “She understands that programs like this don’t just magically fund themselves. So she started her own program to raise money for the Saunters Program in Janesville.”

Naleah asked for a supply of outreach materials that tell the Ice Age Trail story. She asked for photos and stories that she could include in emails and on Facebook. She started talking to local businesses about donating and spreading the word.

Her energy and dedication were infectious. She’s even coordinating with the Janesville Chapter to leverage their community involvement.

6

She's changing the world.

The children we serve today are the future of our planet. By reaching them now, we make trail builders and stewards of them tomorrow.

One way to Tackle Writing an Appeal Letter

14 September 2021

By David Allen, Development for Conservation

There was a moment in time when I thought writing appeals letters would be a substantial part of my consulting work. I felt like I was good at it, and my letters seemed to hold their own and then some against client efforts from previous years. However, due to state regulatory requirements, I have had to stop writing them.

But if I were to write an appeal letter for you, these are the steps I would take:

1. Find and Write a Story

I would spend an hour or so on the phone with program staff, and I would ask them to tell me stories. The stories could be fictionalized in the sense that the names and details could be obscured to protect people's privacy, but each story needs to either have actually happened in the way it was being told, or be so obviously fictionalized (like a talking bat, for example) that no reasonable person would take it literally.

And I would choose one. One that I could tell in an emotional way, or a humorous way, or both. I would aim for about 400 words. And I would tell the story using fairly simple words and fairly simple sentence structure.

Here's an example:

"Can I help?" asked Hannah. (Are there three more beautiful words in the English language?)

"Sure," said David. *"We need to put these rocks back in the stream, where they belong. So fish can breathe."*

Soon Hannah's whole family was involved. Taking the rock dam apart and putting the rocks back into the stream. So fish can breathe.

Hannah's family was on a hike up to the _____ on _____ Creek when they spotted David moving rocks around in the stream. David had come upon the rock dam that was backing up

water behind it. A summer afternoon project from some other visitor no doubt. And he was putting the rocks back into the stream where they belonged. It looked like fun.

“*Can I help?*” asked the ten-year-old Hannah.

The cool part is that David was *volunteering* his work on the rock dam when Hannah came along. David had come along earlier that year and found a Senior Preserve Steward – Jenny – doing exactly the same thing – taking down a rock dam – on another part of the stream. Inspecting _____ Creek was a regular part of Jenny’s job. Jenny explained that lots of people play in this creek every year. And _____ Creek is a great place to play! The water is cold, but full of opportunities for discovery and adventure. It’s easy to see how putting the rocks together in a dam, and watching the water back up behind it becomes part of the fun. Unfortunately, it’s not so good for the stream. When water slows down, it warms up. Silt collects. Oxygen levels go down. And it gets harder for insects and fish to breathe.

“*Can I help?*” David had asked Jenny.

“*See here?*” said David later to Hannah. “*It’s called a stonefly. If we can find stoneflies, we know that the stream is healthy. Stoneflies are one of the signs that the water is clean and cold.*”

Jenny and the other preserve stewards regularly monitor streams like _____ Creek. They pick up trash and break down rock dams. They look for stoneflies and measure dissolved oxygen. And they also talk to people about stream health. And stoneflies. And rock dams. People like David. And David ends up talking to people, too. People like Hannah. And we bet Hannah will talk to people, too.

“*Can I help?*”

2. Chunk It Up

Next, I’m going to “chunk it up.” Meaning I’m going to separate the story into four or five pieces that I can deliver in between the more obvious pieces. In the example above, I have used indentation to show you where the chunks begin and end.

3. Add in “Connector” Pieces, and Four Asks

The other pieces I will need are a paragraph letting readers know that the story has been fictionalized (to the extent it has).

I need to stop here and tell you that Hannah and David are not their real names. But their stories are real.

A way to relate the story to some part of the organizational mission that is supported when the reader gives to the appeal.

Rock dams slow the water down. Sediment can coat the bottom of the stream – including stonefly eggs – like a blanket. When it moves fast enough the sediment keeps moving. And stonefly eggs have a chance to hatch.

IF the water runs fast enough,

IF the water stays clean enough, and

IF the water has enough oxygen in it,

IF all those things are true, stoneflies will be there. In this way, they serve as an early warning sign for water quality. A “canary” for streams. When stoneflies are in the stream, the water quality is pretty good. When they’re not, it’s a sign that the something isn’t right.

At Land Trust, we care a lot about streams and water. Keeping things IN the water, like fish and stoneflies. And also keeping things out of the water, like garbage, and sediment, and rock dams. Now don’t get me wrong. The fact that kids and families are playing in _____ Creek is super important. Public recreation and enjoyment will help keep these places protected for years to come. And rock dams themselves aren’t the problem either – as long as they are removed when people leave. Like picking up your own trash, or reorganizing any other workspace or playspace, rock dams can be enjoyed and then put back. So stewards work each year with streams and creeks and Hannahs and Davids to maintain and improve water quality. For fish and stoneflies for sure, but for people, too.

Four (4) separate ask paragraphs.

I am writing because you can help, now, too. I am writing to ask you to make a special \$100 gift to the Land Trust this Fall. A gift that will help programs that keep stream water running clean and clear. For people and summer afternoons. And also for fish.

Land Trust needs your help this Fall. Your ongoing membership and additional support are an important part of this story. Your gift of \$100 or more makes a real difference for Land Trust and for Jenny's ability to monitor and care for all those things that live and breathe in the stream. Please consider making your gift today!

Please make a special gift to the Land Trust this Fall. Please write a check for \$100 or more today.

You can help now – Make a gift to the Land Trust. Please consider a gift of \$100. If you can do more, I invite you to be as generous as possible. If not, please find a number that is right for you. No gift is too small to support more of Jenny's work on the _____ Creek. And all the other stewardship work done throughout the county. Can you help Land Trust continue this important work? Will you?

And a PS Note:

Don't forget to make your gift BEFORE December 31st!

4. Put it all Together

Now put the pieces together:

"Can I help?" asked Hannah. (Are there three more beautiful words in the English language?)

"Sure," said David. *"We need to put these rocks back in the stream, where they belong. So fish can breathe."*

Soon Hannah's whole family was involved. Taking the rock dam apart and putting the rocks back into the stream. So fish can breathe.

Hannah's family was on a hike up to the _____ on _____ Creek when they spotted David moving rocks around in the stream. David had come upon the rock dam that was backing up

water behind it. A summer afternoon project from some other visitor no doubt. And he was putting the rocks back into the stream where they belonged. It looked like fun.

“*Can I help?*” asked the ten-year-old Hannah.

I am writing because you can help, now, too. I am writing to ask you to make a special \$100 gift to the Land Trust this Fall. A gift that will help programs that keep stream water running clean and clear. For people and summer afternoons. And also for fish.

I need to stop here and tell you that Hannah and David are not their real names. But their stories are real.

The cool part is that David was *volunteering* his work on the rock dam when Hannah came along. David had come along earlier that day and found a Senior Preserve Steward – Jenny – doing exactly the same thing – taking down a rock dam – on another part of the stream. Inspecting _____ Creek was a regular part of Jenny’s job. Jenny explained that lots of people play in this creek every year. And _____ Creek is a great place to play! The water is cold, but full of opportunities for discovery and adventure. It’s easy to see how putting the rocks together in a dam, and watching the water back up behind it becomes part of the fun. Unfortunately, it’s not so good for the stream. When water slows down, it warms up. Silt collects. Oxygen levels go down. And it gets harder for insects and fish to breathe.

“*Can I help?*” David had asked Jenny.

Land Trust needs your help this Fall. Your ongoing membership and additional support are an important part of this story. Your gift of \$100 or more makes a real difference for Land Trust and for Jenny’s ability to monitor and care for all those things that live and breathe in the stream. Please consider making your gift today!

“*See here?*” said David later to Hannah. “*It’s called a stonefly. If we can find stoneflies, we know that the stream is healthy. Stoneflies are one of the signs that the water is clean and cold.*”

Rock dams slow the water down. Sediment can coat the bottom of the stream – including stonefly eggs – like a blanket. When it moves fast enough the sediment keeps moving. And stonefly eggs have a chance to hatch.

IF the water runs fast enough,

IF the water stays clean enough, and

IF the water has enough oxygen in it,

IF all those things are true, stoneflies will be there. In this way, they serve as an early warning sign for water quality. A “canary” for streams. When stoneflies are in the stream, the water quality is pretty good. When they’re not, it’s a sign that the something isn’t right.

Jenny and the other stewards regularly monitor streams like _____ Creek. They pick up trash and break down rock dams. They look for stoneflies and measure dissolved oxygen. And they also talk to people about stream health. And stoneflies. And rock dams. People like David. And David ends up talking to people, too. People like Hannah. And we bet Hannah will talk to people, too.

“Can I help?”

Please make a special gift to the Land Trust this Fall. Please write a check for \$100 or more today.

At Land Trust, we care a lot about streams and water. Keeping things IN the water, like fish and stoneflies. And also keeping things out of the water, like garbage, and sediment, and rock dams. Now don’t get me wrong. The fact that kids and families are playing in _____ Creek is super important. Public recreation and enjoyment will help keep these places protected for years to come. And rock dams themselves aren’t the problem either – as long as they are removed when people leave. Like picking up your own trash, or reorganizing any other workspace or playspace, rock dams can be enjoyed and then put back. So _____ stewards work each year with streams and creeks and Hannahs and Davids to maintain and improve water quality. For fish and stoneflies for sure, but for people, too.

You can help now – Make a gift to the Land Trust. Please consider a gift of \$100. If you can do more, I invite you to be as generous as possible. If not, please find a number that is right for you.

No gift is too small to support more of Jenny’s work on the _____ Creek. And all the other stewardship work done throughout the county. Can you help Land Trust continue this important work? Will you?

5. And Format

Last, I want to play with presentation and emphasis and a little bit with transitions. I'll indent some paragraphs to draw additional attention to them. I'll add white space. And make it fun.

I will need to leave room on the first page for my Board list. For the other pages I use 1.25-inch margins instead of the more normal 1 inch. And I bump the type size up to 13 pt, instead of 12 – doing so will make it easier for older eyes to read.

When it's all laid out, there should be an ask on every page, and the overall length should be four pages. No matter which page someone picks up, they should still get the message.

It's Fall!

Time to give.

This might be the final result:

David Allen
Development for Conservation

David@DevelopmentForConservation.com

608-239-5006

Madison, WI 53716

www.DevelopmentForConservation.com

You can raise more money for your Land Trust. I can help.

ADDRESS BLOCK
ADDRESS BLOCK
ADDRESS BLOCK

Dear _____:

“Can I help?” asked Hannah.

(Are there three more beautiful words in the English language?)

“Sure,” said David. *“We need to put these rocks back in the stream, where they belong. So fish can breathe.”*

Soon Hannah’s whole family was involved. Taking the rock dam apart and putting the rocks back into the stream.

So fish can breathe.

Hannah’s family was on a hike up to the _____ on _____ Creek when they spotted David moving rocks around in the stream. David had come upon the rock dam that was backing up water behind it. A summer afternoon project from some other visitor no doubt. And he was putting the rocks back into the stream where they belonged. It looked like fun.

“Can I help?” asked the ten-year-old Hannah.

I am writing because you can help, now, too. I am writing to ask you to ***make a special \$100 gift to the Land Trust*** this Fall. A gift that will help programs that keep stream water running clean and clear. For people and summer afternoons. And also for fish.

I need to stop here and tell you that Hannah and David are not their real names. But their stories are real.

And the cool part is that David was *volunteering* his work on the rock dam when Hannah came along.

David had come along earlier that day and found a Senior Preserve Steward – Jenny – doing exactly the same thing – taking down a rock dam – on another part of the stream.

Inspecting _____ Creek was a regular part of Jenny’s job.

Jenny explained that lots of people play in this creek every year. And _____ Creek is a great place to play! The water is cold, but full of opportunities for discovery and adventure.

It’s easy to see how putting the rocks together in a dam, and watching the water back up behind it becomes part of the fun. Unfortunately, it’s not so good for the stream. When water slows down, it warms up. Silt collects. Oxygen levels go down. And it gets harder for insects and fish to breathe.

“*Can I help?*” David had asked Jenny.

Land Trust needs ***your*** help this Fall. Your ongoing membership and annual support are an important part of this story. Your gift of \$100 or more makes a real difference for Land Trust and for Jenny’s ability to monitor and care for all those things that live and breathe in the stream. Please consider making your gift today!

“*See here?*” said David later to Hannah and her family. “*It’s called a stonefly. If we can find stoneflies, we know that the stream is healthy. Stoneflies are one of the signs that the water is clean and cold.*”

Rock dams slow the water down. Sediment can coat the bottom of the stream – including stonefly eggs – like a blanket. When it moves fast enough the sediment keeps moving. And stonefly eggs have a chance to hatch.

IF the water runs fast enough,

IF the water stays clean enough, and

IF the water has enough oxygen in it,

IF all those things are true, stoneflies will be there. In this way, they serve as an early warning sign for water quality. A “canary” for streams. When stoneflies are in the stream, the water quality is pretty good. When they’re not, it’s a sign that the something isn’t right.

Land Trust can help. Jenny and the other stewards regularly monitor streams like _____ Creek. They pick up trash and break down rock dams. They look for stoneflies and measure dissolved oxygen.

And they also talk to people about stream health. And stoneflies. And rock dams.

People like David.

And David ends up talking to people, too.

People like Hannah.

And we bet Hannah will talk to people, too.

“Can I help?”

Yes! you can, and your help is needed.

Please make a special gift to the Land Trust this Fall.

Please write a check for \$100 or more today.

At Land Trust, we care a lot about streams and water. Keeping things IN the water, like fish and stoneflies. And also keeping things out of the water, like garbage, and sediment, and rock dams.

Now don't get me wrong. The fact that kids and families are playing in _____ Creek is super important. Public recreation and enjoyment will help keep these places protected for years to come.

And rock dams themselves aren't the problem either – as long as they are removed when people leave. Like picking up your own trash, or reorganizing any other workspace or playspace, rock dams can be enjoyed and then put back.

So Land Trust stewards work each year with streams and creeks and Hannahs and Davids to maintain and improve water quality. For fish and stoneflies for sure, but for people, too.

You can help now – Make a gift to the Land Trust. **Please consider a gift of \$100.** If you can do more, I invite you to be as generous as possible. If not, please find a number that is right for you.

No gift is too small to **support more of Jenny's work on the _____ Creek.** And all the other stewardship work done throughout the county. Can you help Land Trust continue this important work?

Will you?

If you have any questions about the Land Trust or any of these projects or programs, please contact us at the office – XXX-XXX-XXXX.

Thank you!

Signed

PS: Don't forget to make your gift BEFORE December 31st!

Last Minute Appeal Letter Editing

1 December 2020

By David Allen, Development for Conservation

It's that time of year, and we are pinning a lot of hopes on the letters we will mail in the next few months. For some, this will be your only letter. For others, it is one of two or three. Whichever camp you're in, the following list may help you with last minute editing. These are tips you can do quickly that will make a difference in your returns.

Pay attention to the first sentence and the PS.

Research shows that people who glance through appeal letters tend to read the first sentence and then skip to the PS note. Their decision to go back through the letter depends on their reaction to those two pieces. Does the first sentence grab you?

In 2020, we celebrated an important milestone. (Yawn)

Coming down the trail, I saw her approaching – eyes wide with excitement. (Good!)

Pro tip – Look at the second and third sentences. Often they are more compelling than the first. But if the reader doesn't get that far.....

Replace the word “need” with the word “opportunity.”

This is as much editing for tone as it is for the specific words. Avoid asking because you “need.” Offer the reader an “opportunity” to give, instead. An opportunity to protect, conserve, restore, or steward. An opportunity to make a difference.

Pro tip – For people who have already given this year – whom we are asking for an extra gift – consider highlighting how their previous gift has already made a difference. This could even be the subject for a lift note.

Highlight your use of the pronouns “we,” “us,” and “our.”

Literally – print out the draft letter and use a highlighter to mark every use of these pronouns. Notice the frequency – the weight – of their use. And then go back through, and in each case, ask yourself whether the pronoun explicitly includes the reader. If not, change the sentence to either eliminate the pronoun or rewrite it so that it does.

Your gift today will help us save this land for future generations.

(Does not include the reader – consider simply removing the word “us.”)

We can protect the rural character of the landscape we all love. (Good.)

Pro tip – In many cases, you can simply eliminate the pronoun. Try that first.

Circle each number.

Effective fundraising letters appeal to the heart rather than to the intellect. Numbers get in the way. I recommend simply taking them out. All of them. Consider that only a tiny percentage of your readers know how big an acre is. So, forty acres – or worse, 27.6 acres – is doubly meaningless! If you absolutely must use a number, make sure to present it in relation to another number. For example, perhaps you found three of something this year where there was only one last year. But most of the time, *metrics are not helpful* in fundraising letters.

Pro tip – Use “lots” or “most” instead of the number.

Use the Flesch-Kincaid Reading Level test.

Few people will actually read your letter. Most will scan it if they spend any time with it at all. Smart people scan 6th grade reading material very quickly, and consequently, effective fundraising letters are written at a 6th grade level. The good news is that the reading level is easy to test. In Microsoft Word, run the spell check. At completion, you’ll get a pop-up box with “readability statistics.” Toward the bottom is the Flesch-Kincaid Reading Level score. Most college-educated writers will naturally write at an 11th-14th grade level. For effective fundraising letters, you will need to break up compound sentences and simplify word choices. (It gets easier with practice!)

Pro tip – Repeating one short sentence with just a few different words can be more effective than using the string. For that matter incomplete sentences are OK, too.

Ask for money.

Seems obvious, doesn’t it? Nonetheless, I still receive waaaaay too many letters every year that never really ask for money. They ask for “support.” Some ask for renewal. And some don’t really even ask for anything. Ask for money. Ask for money!

Please consider a gift of \$100 today to help protect this special place. You’ll be glad you did.

Pro tip – Multiple-page letters need and ask on each page.

One last note: I get pushback every year from people who have “done it their way” for years. Much of it relates to one-page letters versus four-page letters, but some comes from people who love embedding photos. After all, “their way” has worked well so far. Why change something that is working?

That something has “*worked well so far*” usually means that people have responded. At best it relies on this year’s results compared with last year’s. But that’s not the same thing as saying that it’s working. If not embedding photos would increase responses and raise 10% more money, wouldn’t you do it? Even if it’s not the way you’ve always done it?

The answer lies in testing. Mail half with photos and half without. (Making sure the two samples are statistically identical of course.) Or test four versus two pages. Or specific asks versus “soft” asks. Or lift notes versus plain. Or ...

If you are testing this year, I am explicitly interested in what you are testing and in your results. If you will send them to me, I will share them on this blog.

David Allen

Development for Conservation

David@DevelopmentForConservation.com

608-239-5006

Madison, WI 53716

www.DevelopmentForConservation.com

You can raise more money for your Land Trust. I can help.

Renewal versus Appeal

Renewal Letters

- 1-1.5 pages
- Assumes renewal
- Communicates “It’s time”
- Member since ...
- Last year’s gift
- This year’s ask
- Followed by up to 4 reminders

Appeal Letters

- 4 pages
- Assumes nothing
- Communicates importance & urgency
- Based on a STORY
- ONE specific request
- Ask on each page
- Followed by at most 1 reminder

Cadence - Renewals

- ONE Renewal sequence – could be mix of letters, email, and phone calls
- At least ONE Appeal letter asking for project support or a second gift

Cadence - Appeals

- At least THREE (could be four) Appeal letters asking for project support or a gifts in support of the mission
- Those who respond to one do not receive the next one

Find Your Appeal Story

- Self-Reflection – Find three
- Small Group Sharing – Select one
- Getting it Written – 1.5-2.0 pages

Next Steps

- Disclaimer (if needed)
- Connect story to mission or values
- Four ASK paragraphs
- PS Note

Final Touches

- 13 pt type
- Leave room on first page for Board list
- Find places for scanners and skimmers to land – use **BOLD**, underlining, indenting, color, and extra spaces
- RePaginate if needed
- HOLD your nose and send it

DAVID ALLEN

I am a non-profit fundraising consultant. I work with nonprofit boards and staff to help them learn how to be better leaders and advocates. I work almost exclusively with conservation organizations because that is where my heart is.

My background includes more than 35 years working in membership fundraising, major gift development (including capital campaigns), communications, and marketing. I worked for about half that time for Nature Conservancy (TNC) chapters in Oregon, Texas, and Wisconsin. In addition to my duties for the individual chapters, I served TNC as an internal fundraising consultant and major gift development trainer.

In 2000, I served as the vice-president of operations for the Wisconsin-based, international conservation organization Sand County Foundation, a position I held through mid-2009.



Gathering Waters Conservancy, a land trust service agency based in Wisconsin, called me in 2004 to ask whether I would be interested in teaching a seminar for Wisconsin land trusts on major donor development. From 2004, then, through 2009, I consulted on a nights and weekends basis with just a few clients each year.

In March of 2009, I launched my consulting business full-time using the name **Development for Conservation.**

Most of my consulting work is related to fundraising, but I also help conservation organizations with strategic planning, Board training, and governance. I consider myself a strategic thinker, problem solver, facilitator, educator, and program developer who brings a particular passion for conservation and the environment.

Practice Competencies

Fundraising

- Development Audit
- Strategic Fund Development Planning
- Staff/Board Training and Development
- Major Gift Coaching
- Capital Campaigns: Feasibility, Planning, Management

Organizational Development

- Strategy Development
- Practice & Process Assessment
- Problem Solving Facilitation
- Marketing

David Allen

Development for Conservation

David@DevelopmentForConservation.com

608-239-5006

608 West Dean Avenue
Madison, WI 53716

www.DevelopmentForConservation.com