

# save what you love

Land trusts  
preserve open  
space for all of us

*By Cris Cadiz*

Land trusts are dedicated to conserving open space, natural resources and wildlife habitats. Sometimes lost in this definition is what the work of such nonprofit organizations means to the general population.

Primarily run and led by volunteers, they work to acquire property by purchasing it outright, securing donations of land, or holding conservation easements. These efforts protect land from development, preserve scenic beauty, and offer areas for passive recreation and study of nature.

“Preserving open space benefits us in so many ways,” says Terri Eickel, director of development and programs at Avalonia Land Conservancy, the largest land trust in southeast Connecticut. “This includes the planet, public health and wildlife.”

Since it was founded in 1968, Avalonia has conserved 4,000 acres of open space in perpetuity. Up until this spring, when Eickel was hired, it has been volunteer-run with only part-time staff.

While many preserves have trails and other spaces for people to explore, some are simply open space.





Eickel says a preserve may be too small or marshy for a trail. Even without a recreational benefit, though, saving land as open space has its benefits.

“The average acre of mature forest can sequester up to 15 tons of carbon a year, so it can really help combat climate change,” says Eickel. “That’s a key piece of why we save forests even if we can’t open it up for recreation.”

As climate change, pollution and development have encroached on the land, there are fewer habitats for wildlife, birds and pollinators.

“It’s also good to get people out in nature and separated from their technology,” Eickel adds. “Forests have an impact on neurological health; the more opportunities we have for people to connect with nature the happier and healthier we are.”

Eickel recalls Jacque Cousteau’s words of wisdom: “You save what you love.” This is also part of Avalonia’s mission.

“We help people love the land, love the earth, and hopefully that translates to wanting to help preserve it,” says Eickel.

Groton Open Space Association (GOSA) is another local land trust in southeastern Connecticut, with 536 acres in six different preserves. Similar to Avalonia, its mission is to preserve open space and teach people the value of the land and its “irreplaceable resources.” GOSA President Joan Smith said that this non-profit, all-volunteer organization started out as the “Save the Haley Farm Committee” in 1967. In collaboration with the state, GOSA was instrumental in saving both

Haley Farm and Bluff Point, today’s very popular state parks.

In 2008, GOSA became a land trust when it purchased its first property, the 75-acre Merritt Family Forest. In 2017, GOSA again collaborated with the state to raise funds and preserve the 201-acre Candlewood Hill Wildlife Management Area – one of Smith’s favorite locations.

“Candlewood Hill Wildlife Management Area is a beautiful place, but not for the faint of heart,” she says. “It’s spectacular and wild. It also has a rare, 44-acre pitch pine forest, one of Connecticut’s 13 most imperiled ecosystems.”

She recommends this rugged property for experienced hikers only. Visitors encounter not only steep terrain, but also a dearth of maps, trail blazes, or parking lots.

To help the public understand the benefits of open space, most land trusts offer opportunities to explore and enjoy their properties with trails and programs such as guided hikes, nature walks, and environmental activities. In order to fundraise, acquire and maintain properties and offer programming, land trusts rely heavily on (and truly appreciate!) their volunteers.

“We offer many indoor and outdoor volunteer activities,” says Smith, “including administration, publicity, events, education and trail stewardship.”

Kim Barber Bradley is an ecologist and wetland scientist and has volunteered for several different land conservancy groups for the past 10 years. She currently serves as president of the Avalonia Land Conservancy Board of Directors. For Bradley, volunteering for a land trust is a chance to give back.

“We want to enjoy our natural resources but also do something good for the world and for our communities,” she says. “You get to meet people you may not encounter every day. I’ve enjoyed a range of individuals that get involved and share a passion for nature. You also get a good workout if you are doing trail care – the physical benefits are part of why I do it!”

Kim’s favorite preserve is TriTown Forest, which encompasses nine miles of trails in Griswold, Preston and North Stonington. Her girls (ages 4 and 6) really love Pafford Woods in Stonington, which has “lots of glacial rock formations with a short hiking loop that’s not overwhelming.” She recommends using Avalonia’s online map to target areas to explore and find preserves with trails. Avalonia also has an app for smartphones that provides GIS maps to help you navigate.

“The majority of these organizations are purely volunteer,” says Bradley. “Without volunteers and their engagement, the trails that everyone enjoys wouldn’t be there. It’s not just about acquiring the land, but

**TOP LEFT:** TriTown Trail. Photo by Terri Eickel

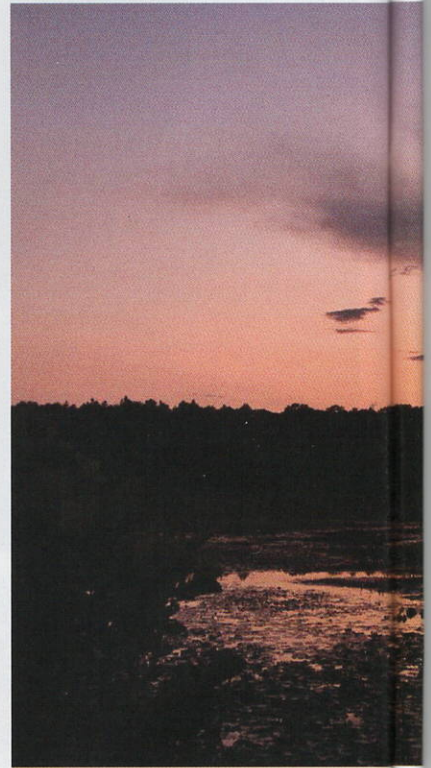
**CENTER LEFT:** GOSA’s all-volunteer stewardship efforts keep the properties attractive as wildlife habitat and available to visitors for outdoor recreation. Photo courtesy of Groton Open Space Association archives

**BOTTOM LEFT:** For many visitors to GOSA’s Sheep Farm property, the highlight is the Fort Hill Brook waterfall. Bill Pratt

**BELOW:** Dick Conant, an Avalonia board member, by the TriTown sign. Photo by Sue Sutherland







making it accessible. When you are out walking the trails, think about what you can do to help. It's pretty awesome if you get into it. You'll never regret your time in the woods."


Eickel thinks that people might be visiting land trust trails not realizing there's a nonprofit behind them. They might instead think it's a town property or a state park.

Land trusts often seek public assistance in raising funds for their efforts. Avalonia is currently in the last few months of a fundraising campaign, with just \$120,000 left of a \$925,000 goal. GOSA is in the midst of an effort to raise funds to add another 104 acres to its 63-acre Sheep Farm property in Groton.

"Trails are well marked on all of our properties, and

feature different degrees of difficulty," says Smith of GOSA preserves. "Children and families seem to prefer the pretty trails at Sheep Farm and Avery Farm. The Sheep Farm is small but you see a lot for the distance: field, forest, waterfalls, rock formations for kids to climb on. It's also centrally located and easy to get to."

Avery Farm has a dirt road closed to vehicles ideal for strollers and motorized wheelchairs and a 38-acre marsh favorite with bird watchers.

Both Avalonia and GOSA preserves are open to the public year-round from dawn to dusk for public access and passive recreation, such as hiking and nature study. Mountain biking is allowed on GOSA properties, and Avalonia is currently working to include this activity biking on some of their properties. 

**TOP LEFT:** Construction of the footbridge over Fort Hill Brook at Sheep Farm. GOSA's properties are managed and maintained entirely by volunteers. *Photo courtesy of Groton Open Space Association archives*

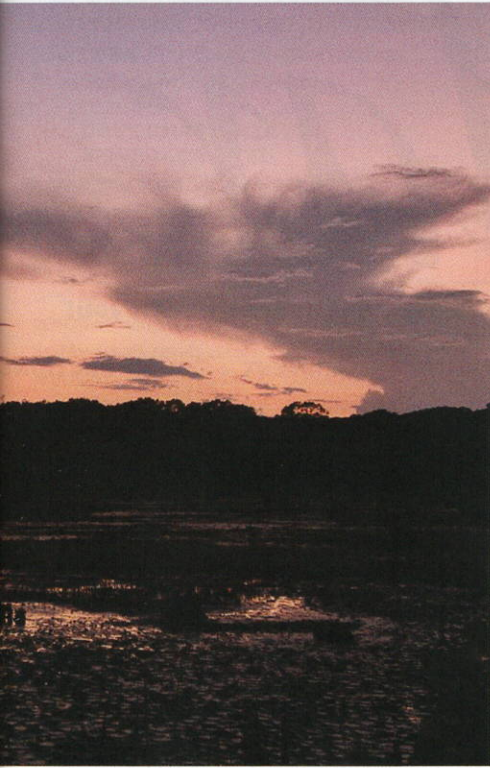
**BOTTOM LEFT:** GOSA volunteers celebrate completion of a work party in a field at the Sheep Farm. *Photo by Carol Connor*

**ABOVE:** The marsh at GOSA's Avery Farm property is a great location for viewing a sunset. *Photo by Bill Pratt*

**TOP RIGHT:** A Monarch butterfly lands on bee balm. *Photo by Bruce Fellman*

**RIGHT:** Children taking part in the Groton Parks and Recreation program in recent years spent time dip netting at the Sheep Farm waterfall. *Photo by Joan Smith*





**For more information, to become a member or donate funds or land, and for trail maps and programming, visit their websites:**

- Groton Open Space Association ([gosaonline.org](http://gosaonline.org))
- Avalonia Land Conservancy ([avalonia.org](http://avalonia.org))

**The following conservancy areas in southeast CT also have property and trails to explore:**

- Salem Land Trust ([salemlandtrust.org](http://salemlandtrust.org))
- Old Lyme Land Trust ([oldlymelandtrust.org](http://oldlymelandtrust.org))
- Lyme Land Conservation Trust ([lymelandtrust.org/](http://lymelandtrust.org/))
- Waterford Land Trust ([waterfordlandtrust.org/](http://waterfordlandtrust.org/))
- East Haddam Land Trust ([ehlt.org](http://ehlt.org))