

Thamar's Legacy

- By Margee Haines Cooperative Forestry



Forest landowner Thamar Wherrit on Altar Rock. (Photo credit: Kathleen Hitt, Siskiyou Land Trust)

From the vantage point of Altar Rock, Thamar Wherrit's forest stretches out before her; almost 600 acres of conifer and oak along Rainbow Ridge, with fresh water springs and seasonal wet meadows. From this beautiful stone outcrop, she can look over to snowcapped Mount Shasta, an ancient volcanic mountain rising more than 14,000 feet high, which is imbued with mystical energy.

This is a place of beauty, peace and community. This is also a working forest that provides water for drinking and agriculture; timber to build homes; and habitat for wildlife. And this is how it will remain now that it is permanently conserved through a conservation easement.

Private Forests Public Benefits

Thamar has been actively stewarding her forest for watershed health and economic benefits for years. Timber harvests on her property, a certified tree farm, support the rural economy feeding local and regional mills. Siskiyou County generates over 30 million dollars annually from the sale of timber. Located in the headwaters region of California's largest river, springs and creeks on her property feed into the Sacramento River, the source of water for agriculture and millions of people.

Thamar is passionate about sharing her forest with others. She hosts educational classes with local schools and demonstrations with community members on how to take care of the forest and make them more resilient to drought and wildfire.



Fourth through eighth graders learn how to care for the forest. (Photo credit: Kara Baylog, Shasta Valley Resource Conservation District)

All This Was Almost Lost

This forest could just as easily been subdivided and converted to second homes, 40 to 170 to be exact according to a recent appraisal. In her 80s with health problems and no heirs, Thamar was faced with the prospect of selling her forestland to help pay for rising medical expenses.

And there would have been no shortage of buyers in this rapidly developing area of Northern California. The Mount Shasta area is a hidden gem: a scenic mountain community at the base of Mount Shasta with easy access to world-class hiking, biking, fishing, boating and camping yet easily accessible to Interstate 5 and only a five-hour drive from San Francisco.

But Thamar had other plans; “There’s another kind of footprint ... that some people would like to leave when they’re through walking this earth. It’s one that says ‘I was here, I cared, and I wanted to leave something of value.’ It’s called a legacy.”

Other Plans

Thamar approached the [Siskiyou Land Trust](#) about a way to permanently conserve the forest she cares so much about and pay for her medical costs. They suggested she consider a conservation easement. With a conservation easement, landowners continue to own the property while selling a portion of the development rights. This was exactly what she had been seeking.

The Land Trust in turn reached out to the [California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection](#) about submitting a proposal to the [Forest Legacy Program](#). It was a perfect fit. The USDA Forest Service Forest Legacy Program permanently conserves private working forests - that are also threatened – through conservation easements or acquisitions. The Rainbow Ridge Wherit Forest Legacy Project was completed in March 2018.

In the United States, private landowners such as Thamar own over half the forest land. These forests provide the water we drink and use to irrigate our crops; access to hiking, fishing and exploring; timber for building homes; and habitat for fish and wildlife. These forests are also threatened by insects, disease, and wildfire, and are at risk of being lost forever to development.

Because private landowners manage an enormous portion of the nation’s forests, what they choose to do with them and how they manage them matters for all of us – now and for people in generations to come. People like Thamar.