

EARTH SANCTUARY

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY DAN BORROFF

*"It is not enough to understand the natural world.
The point is to defend and preserve it." —Edward Abbey*

Five hundred years from now the restoration of Earth Sanctuary will be complete. Seventy-two acres of woodlands, wetlands and open water on Whidbey Island, Earth Sanctuary is a meditation parkland with the goal of bringing together "ancient art forms, a profound connection with nature and diverse global spiritual traditions."

The inspiration of Chuck Pettis, founder and president of Brand Solutions, Inc., Earth Sanctuary came into being when Pettis chose to turn a financial windfall into a retreat center. Pettis' earlier experiences with His Holiness Jigdal Dagchen Sakya (Rinpoche), Head Lama of Sakya Monastery in Seattle, were inspirational. Rinpoche reminded Pettis that the smallest creatures are of equal importance to larger charismatic species, the insect no less than the osprey. Indeed, without the insects there would be no birds. "I realized that whatever I created in the future needed to be not only a sacred space—but also a space for sacred ecology, for the whole web of life." The result is a place for healing—the healing of nature and of the human spirit.

The site of Earth Sanctuary, near Freeland, which Pettis purchased in 2000, is a "Habitat of Local Importance" for Island County and for

the Whidbey Island Audubon Society. It includes three large ponds: The West and Middle Ponds were created by the US Soil Conservation Service (SCS) in the 1970s. Fen Pond, a post-glacial pond, contains a five-acre floating bog. An area of this bog, about 5 feet above the surrounding marsh surface, is unique, for raised bogs are rare in Western Washington. This is a dangerous and fascinating place. Logs and other woody floating debris support the Fen Pond mat. Bog species make the water acidic enough to keep the logs pickled for

BACKGROUND: In front of Middle Pond, the warmth of the stones of Earth Sanctuary's Labyrinth has melted the snow also dusting the salal. In the still morning air, snow dripping from branches and occasional birdcalls provide the only sound.

INSET: The Dolmen, constructed of Montana sandstone, is surrounded by crushed basalt for meditative walking. Hidden behind the Dolmen is a small arm of West Pond covered in duckweed.



millennia. Some trees found in the fen bog habitat are hundreds of years old. To fall in would be disaster. In addition to trees, similar bogs have preserved people from prehistoric times, their skin tanned like leather.

In the Beginning

The Earth Sanctuary team's first site-visit four years ago was greeted by rain. We felt immersed in the rain, nearly under water. The site seemed to be hundreds of acres, although we covered less than half of its acreage in four hours. At the end of our trek, the weather

beginning to clear, we emerged on the road; the sights, sounds and smells of the woods felt immediately distant, a reminder that convenience comes with the loss of wildness.

Three Years into the 500-Year Restoration Plan

Early morning, late fall 2004: The calls of winter wrens, song sparrows, American robins, chickadees, nuthatches and golden-crowned kinglets fill the air near Middle Pond. We are surrounded by birds. Snags from a drowned forest rise from Middle Pond; a remnant mist



hangs low on the water. On a small peninsula in the pond is a stone labyrinth. Instead of raised stones and turf paths, salal fills the spaces between stone pathways, since native grasses, clump formers, are unsuitable for turf. A dozen species of native plants surround the labyrinth. In a few years these will shield the pond from visitors in summer nesting season.

Middle Pond is ringed on its north shore by swaths of shrubby willows and alders, their branches amber, dull gold and soft vermilion. Next spring's buds and catkins are a haze echoing the mist. Behind them on the hillside is a backdrop of fir and hemlock. Sheltered by the trees, the calm air inspires exuberant flight and song. In spring there will be teals, mallards, mergansers, band-tailed pigeons, flycatchers, cedar waxwings, tanagers, and black-headed grosbeaks, the most lyrical of all. At dusk they will be joined by dozens of swallows.

The cares of the modern world drop away. Wonder at the combination of calm water and animated birds remains. Winter here seems a blessing. The thicket of trees and shrubs calms the wind and quiets the storm. The sound of raindrops on the ponds is a delight. They hang like jewels on the twigs and lacquer the trunks of the trees. Damp earth and the sounds of this environment in winter affect us deeply, something rarely considered in the built environment, with its exposed and windswept pavements. With leaves gone from the alders and willows, the forest opens, and light reaches the forest floor. Winter here is a sweet season.

Buried in Blackberry

In 2000, this Middle Pond peninsula was buried in Himalayan blackberry, a discouraging prospect for those responsible for clearing the site. Mike Sweeney, the artist of the team, honored the blackberries' vitality by weaving them into large rings. The rings were then wired together into spheres and hung from trees over, and near, the paths. When Mike fabricated a jig to speed the making of the rings, there was



LEFT: Himalayan blackberries cleared from the site were woven into large circles placed near Earth Sanctuary trails. **RIGHT:** Delicate Llenroc stones, which form the Fen Stone Circle, cast long, dramatic shadows on short winter days.

immediate, tangible and handsome proof of the efforts of the blackberry-clearing crew. Over the period of a few weeks, the spheres turned from green to rich dark burgundy. Everyone was affected by the fact that something so despised could become so striking. Spirits lifted and clearing accelerated.

Late Successional Forest

Kevin Fetherston, wetland ecologist, author of Earth Sanctuary's "500-Year Plan," chose one of the few remaining island groves of mature forest at South Whidbey State Park as the model ecosystem for the Earth Sanctuary restoration. This late successional forest serves as inspiration for all aspects of Earth Sanctuary's design—ecological, spiritual and aesthetic.

The Western hemlock, Douglas fir forests of Whidbey Island take on old growth characteristics between 175 and 250 years of age. The young, dense forest stands grow into a multi-layered forest with understory, mid-story and canopy trees interspersed with an abundant population of snags and downed logs. Understory vegetation includes sword fern, huckleberry, Oregon grape and twinflower, among others. The structural complexity of these ancient forests creates a diversity of plant and animal habitats. Birds fly easily. Similarities

to the Gothic cathedrals of Europe make one wonder if forests like these were the inspiration for architects of the Middle Ages.

An Integrated Design

*“Style is a matter of taste,
Design a matter of principles.”*

—Thomas Church, Landscape Architect

Our first connection to the land is visceral, not intellectual, and many of us find emotional and spiritual rejuvenation in woods, water and mountains. At Earth Sanctuary, the integration of science, spirituality, art and design has presented both opportunity and challenge. Good restoration science is available, but there is little precedent for “spiritual” design, except, perhaps, for soft textures, sacred objects inserted into the design and pretty flowers. This approach to spiritual design seemed inadequate at Earth Sanctuary. Of the seven restoration projects undertaken to date, four centered on “sacred” sites—stone artworks—incorporate three principles key to meditation: focus, clarity and balance.

Sacred Artworks

The Fen Stone Circle site was primarily a species-poor mix of deciduous shrubs and trees, a result of being logged twice. Barren in winter, it lacked typical evergreen shrubs. To create the circle, delicate Llenroc stone slabs have been surrounded by a ring of native evergreen shrubs. These rich green shrubs provide species diversity, add solidity and frame the delicate stonework. The first dark, young conifers, planted in the quadrant southwest of

the stone circle, will replace the alders as they die and will mature a century or more from now. The southeast quadrant will be planted in about 40 years. Eventually the canopy will layer and open, and the Fen Stone Circle will become a well of sky amid the forest.

The Labyrinth’s challenge: its proximity to the most robust and sensitive habitat on the property. Sheltering shrubs of a dozen species allow us to be close to this evocative body of water, Middle Pond, without disrupting the wildlife. The dark salal foliage provides both substance and focus. A bird blind is being considered for viewing birds in summer.

Precisely aligned with the winter solstice sunset, the Dolmen also stands near Middle Pond. The path leads past weeping willows planted by the SCS. Across the isthmus that divides Middle Pond from West Pond, prayer flags flutter in the breeze. The Dolmen sits on a small plateau created by the spoils of the excavation of West Pond in the ‘70s. Delicate red huckleberry and flowering currant, selected to contrast with the massive stone, are the basis for the Dolmen planting. The inward focus of the Dolmen is balanced by the selection of low shrubs that carry us outward to views of the ponds and forest.

The Cottonwood Stone Circle’s massive stones are set in a bowl near its center. This thicket of alder saplings and Himalayan blackberry has been transformed. It is majestic and intimate at the same time. The delicate foliage and haze of bloom and seeds of several species of *Carex* and *Deschampsia* drift like clouds in the bowl. Eight cottonwoods, their trunks smooth and gray in contrast with the dark columnar basalt, will someday provide an echo of the majestic stones whose dark surfaces seem to weep in winter rains. Someday blue herons may nest in these cottonwoods, among their preferred nest sites. Their proximity to the osprey is a good portent, for ospreys defend their territory from bald eagles, predators of

continues on page 33

THE EARTH SANCTUARY TEAM

Chuck Pettis: Founder.
Kevin Fetherston: Wetland Ecologist.
David Rousseau: Feng Shui Architect.
Mike Sweeney: Artist.
Dan Borroff: Landscape Designer.
Dave Schmidt: Landscaper.
Celia Sullivan: Caretaker.
Dean Rae Berg, Ph.D.: Silviculturist.

EARTH SANCTUARY

continued from page 19

heron chicks. In summer this area is surrounded by green. At leaf drop, the forest opens and the sweep of the fen is revealed. Heavy mist is frequently a gift of the temperature extremes of its singular microclimate.

The Path

The journey is no less than the destination. Since Buddhist tradition honors walking meditation, design of paths is important for both practical and spiritual purposes. The shaping of the earth and the planting design at Earth Sanctuary are not showy, but both reveal more with careful examination. Each site seems dramatically different, and will change each year as plants mature.

To improve the journey, the twisting, dark path to the Fen Stone Circle was rerouted. Its graceful sweeping curves are flanked by tall cedar logs that will, in time, provide homes for cavity-nesting birds. The path to the Dolmen, interrupted at its last few feet by the stairs, a practical solution to the grade change, provides an opportunity to experience several facets of this site. Facing first a small arm of West Pond covered with a coat of duckweed—vivid green in summer, red in fall, then a lichen-covered standing stone set at the summer solstice sunset, the stone steps make us pause and view the Dolmen's environs from different angles. To reach the Cottonwood Stone Circle, the trail ascends to wet forest with beautiful views of Middle Pond. These and other trails traverse diverse habitats—wetland slopes, dry forest, shrub thickets, blow-downs, and ancient trees—and pass near wetlands and ponds, all within less than a mile.

Meditation, a core Buddhist practice, focuses and clears the mind, calms the heart, and brings balance. These same principles, focus, clarity and balance, have guided the design of each site. The sacred artworks provide focus. Plant mixes that mimic native

environments—whether the addition of evergreen shrubs at Fen Stone Circle or deciduous shrubs at the Dolmen—are calming and bring balance to each site.

Ongoing reverence for all aspects of the restoration process is vital. The allure of Earth Sanctuary is not the individual objects or experiences, but the interaction between them—the forest, the water, the animals and plants—and the sculptural quality of the forest and water, solid and void.

Natural States

In Western religions, humans are regarded as being separate from nature. Eastern religions believe there is no distinction. The opportunity of this project is to incorporate philosophical outlooks that address the relationship between humanity and nature in new ways—the opportunity to creatively incorporate wildness into our lives and our selves into wildness with grace and awareness.

Late fall, winter, and early spring, seasons of restoration, are favorite times of year at Earth Sanctuary. The mystical essence of this time of year encourages reflection. Earth Sanctuary is sheltering at a time when we usually retreat behind doors. Low sun and misty days accentuate the beauty of the site.

As restoration projects mature, particularly the forest restoration, summer too will be blessed with sunbeams through the trees and cool, sweet air. With time, the land will be restored. As Chuck Pettis remarks, "This is my way to promote peace, ecological harmony, and well being—to provide a place for meditation, spiritual growth, and rejuvenation." ☞

DAN BORROFF is a landscape designer practicing in Seattle. He may be reached at 206-329-0931. For information regarding visiting Earth Sanctuary, visit the Web site www.earthsanctuary.org or call 425-637-8777. For further information, contact Chuck Pettis at cpettis@earthsanctuary.org