The Story of Jerry Becker
Founder of Wild Rivers Land Trust

by Pamela Berndt

Many of you may already know this story, I wanted everyone to know it. I spoke with Jerry when he announced his resignation, just before he moved on to new pursuits. I asked this visionary activist about his life, his work, and why he started a land trust. He had a lot to say!

1 — The Making of a Conservationist

Jerry’s love of creeks and open vistas began on his family farm in western New York, where his mother taught him to observe his surroundings. Jerry quickly observed that he was happiest when his father took him fishing. However, as the 1960s saw industrial pollution worsening throughout the northeastern US, the Beckers’ favorite fishing and swimming spots became toxic. Jerry was a young boy when he noticed nature’s inextricable connections.

After graduating from University, Jerry traveled west to Port Orford, Oregon, where Jerry's brother-in-law Jim Rogers, was the Timber Manager for Western States Plywood Cooperative. To help Jerry earn money for graduate school, Jim hired him to conduct technical forestry surveys in Elk River watershed. From Jerry’s first glimpse of Elk River’s deep pools and towering forests, he knew he found a place like no other, and he vowed to keep it that way.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Elk River’s ancient forests faced ecological threats from several directions. When Jerry’s crew learned the US Forest Service had plans to clearcut two-thirds of Elk River’s steep mountainsides, they were determined to avert that fate. Jerry became a charter member of Citizens for Grassy Knob. This grassroots group used empirical knowledge of forestry, fisheries science, and the Freedom of Information Act, to stop illegal USFS timber sales and they applied the Wilderness Act right here at home.

**Grassy Knob Wilderness:** A decade of precedent-setting work by the all-volunteer local group, resulted in an act of Congress. In 1984, Congress designated Grassy Knob Wilderness Area our nation’s first wilderness conceived expressly to protect a fishery resource. Although that triumph took ten years, it set the tenor for Jerry’s future activism.

A few years later, Jerry became a founding member of Friends of Elk River (FOER), an ad hoc committee of six tireless activists. Working alongside Jerry, FOER stopped unlawful timber sales throughout the watershed and harnessed state and federal laws to our benefit. By 1988, Elk River was designated a National Wild and Scenic River and a State Scenic Waterway.

In 1992, marbled murrelets were federally listed as a “threatened” species under the Endangered Species Act. Soon, FOER members obtained the necessary certifications and set about locating marbled murrelets in Elk River watershed. Jerry and a couple other FOER surveyors spent summers hiking into dark canyons before dawn, watching and listening for elusive, lightning-fast seabirds. These intrepid surveyors proved that Elk River hosted more murrelets than previous USFS data indicated -- 500% more! FOER data forced the USFS to revise plans to clearcut several areas. FOER data required the Forest Service to protect areas that would provide future murrelet habitat as well. In addition to those USFS policy changes, FOER data also convinced the National Audubon Society to list Elk River as an Important Bird Area (IBA) in 2017.

**Copper-Salmon Wilderness:** It was by demonstrating the economic value of a healthy salmon fishery, that FOER ultimately brought the greater North Curry community into their effort to protect Elk River. Because of FOER’s diligence, the watershed’s ecological significance and widespread community support for habitat protection, resulted in a second wilderness for Elk River watershed in 2009. Jerry said, this time the creation of a Wilderness Area had taken considerably longer than ten years to accomplish. “It was worth it, though.”

2 — Starting a Land Trust

25 years ago, Jerry heard that a logging outfit planned to clearcut a steep riverside property in his neighborhood. Because the only way to control timber management on private land is to own the land, Jerry and Sharyn bought that at-risk 20-acre parcel. Five years later, when the adjoining piece was slated for the same fate, Jerry was in obvious need of a new strategy. So ... Jerry and Sharyn hired a nonprofit support attorney and in March 2000, Elk River Land Trust (ERLT) was formally incorporated. Jerry was the first Board president. When he stepped down from the Board, it was to become Executive Director/Conservation Director/Development Director and
administrative assistant. Working tirelessly, often without pay, Jerry covered all those jobs simultaneously, often working from his pickup truck. Although Jerry aspired to be the Trust's naturalist, holding only the conservation director position, he directed all Land Trust operations for 15 years.

Long after Elk River Land Trust paid for that riverside forest, Jerry was still hearing from those ‘in the know’ that it wouldn’t work, that a low-population/low-wealth area simply can’t support a land trust. Nevertheless, Elk River Land Trust did grow and Elk River Land Trust became Wild Rivers Land Trust. Today, Jerry leaves the organization in strong financial condition. Recognizing that he built a well-respected regional conservation organization that enjoys strong community support, and strong working partnerships with other NGOs and local regional, state and federal agencies is rewarding. About his leap of faith, Jerry says, “I couldn’t have done it alone. Nonetheless, if I hadn’t done it, it wouldn’t have gotten done!”

Guides and helpers appeared along the way. In addition to Elk River mentor Jim Rogers (whom Jerry has known since he was 12 years old), Jerry mentions being inspired by the lifework of Canadian environmentalist-logger, Merv Wilkinson (Wildwood Forest, Vancouver Island, BC). Jerry is also uplifted by the abiding friendship of Frank and Jeanne Moore (North Umpqua River, Oregon).

When asked, Jerry described the following highlights from his tenure with us. “Our Land Trust purchased three crucial inholdings: Keystone Nature Preserve, Bear Creek Natural Area, and Purple Mountain Natural Area. Each property possesses high ecological significance and exhibited a substantial risk of negative impact to water quality. I especially enjoyed conducting restoration projects on the properties. For hikers, I designed trails through towering forests. For wildlife, I designed a silvicultural project to grow more acorns. For fish (and this one is my favorite), I designed an instream wood placement project.” Jerry says these parcels are now being sold to the Forest Service. He’s pleased the land will belong to all Americans and that the land will be managed to protect water quality.

Jerry also mentions Camp Myrtlewood projects that he and Board president John Jones accomplished. “Not far from Myrtle Point, Oregon, this beautiful, 160-acre ecumenical church camp hosts 2,000 visitors a year. Together, John and I created a sustainable forest plan, a carbon inventory, and a conservation easement to protect Camp Myrtlewood’s beauty and ecological function, while permitting traditional uses (recreational activities, sustainable forestry, educational opportunities) in perpetuity.

When I asked Jerry if he would tell me a couple memorable experiences, he shared two stories. As chance would have it, they’re both about fish. Jerry’s first story is about the instream wood placement at Bear Creek Natural Area. “To improve fish habitat, I’d hired a small crew who carefully placed 50 logs and trees into Bear Creek. When I hiked through the area to monitor that project a year later, I was greeted by 50 full-size salmon! A pool full of actively spawning salmon, where no one had seen salmon in decades! The seemingly instantaneous impact of that restoration project still astonishes me.”

Jerry’s second story is about testifying in front of Congress on behalf of wilderness designation for Elk River. He called it a hero’s journey and it took place in November 2007. At that time, Friends of Elk River were making their final push to establish the Copper-Salmon Wilderness Area and Jerry was called upon to go to Washington, DC, where his testimony was needed. Although Jerry is certainly passionate about protecting Elk River, he is not a fan of air travel or of big cities. Back then he was also uncomfortable speaking in front of groups, not to mention being unaccustomed to knotting a tie ‘just so’. Nevertheless, Jerry found himself needing to do all the above. During his cross-country flight, and while making his way around the halls of Congress, our hero pictured bright silver salmon swimming up Elk River, as he silently recited this mantra: “We can’t let the salmon disappear on our watch.”

To Jerry — Thank you for putting the natural world first. Thank you for your dedication to saving wildlands, wild rivers, and wildlife. And thank you for inspiring the rest of us to do the same. Your love of nature has become our love of nature and we will keep it safe for all generations to come. We’ll watch for more successes going forward ...