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Room to breathe

Open space shows itself in a wide expanse of conservation-minded ways

By Suzanne Hurt - Special to The Bee

Photo by Paul Kitagaki Jr.

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Hikers traverse a 120-acre, \$700,000 parcel that's waiting for a buyer who would then donate the open space to the Quail Ridge Wilderness Conservancy. The conservancy oversees the 2,000-acre Quail Ridge Reserve near Lake Berryessa in Napa County.

Hiking up an old dirt road, Frank Maurer admires a hill that rises beyond a clearing. The hill is covered with the green of oak trees and the pale California gold of native grasses.

"Isn't this beautiful land?" he says. "When I fall asleep, I dream about this." Maurer has worked for more than 20 years to create the Quail Ridge Reserve, a 2,000-acre preserve containing rare native grassland, savanna, oak woodland and chamise chaparral habitats on a Napa County peninsula next to Lake Berryessa.

If Maurer, a conservationist, can find a way to protect this hill and an adjoining valley above Markley Cove Resort, there will be another 120-acre parcel of valuable open space. Under the right circumstances, generations to come could enjoy the same hike being offered this day.

The reserve is an example of what happens when natural areas are transformed from just pretty private parcels into permanently protected tracts. As land everywhere in California and the West is developed, these set-aside properties

become more important to nature lovers and outdoor recreationists.

The problem with acquiring and discussing open space is that not everyone sees eye to eye on exactly what it is.

"People don't agree on what the concept of open space means, and you get all kinds of friction over that," says Daniel Press, author of "Saving Open Space: The Politics of Local Preservation in California" (University of California Press, \$18.95, 197 pages) and chairman of the environmental studies department at the University of California, Santa Cruz

Traditionally, open space has been understood as:

- Absence of development or major construction.
- Some level of permanent protection.
- At least some public access, especially if the land purchase was publicly financed.

Before surrendering or selling attractive properties to land trusts, parties need to be educated -- and in some instances reassured.

Private landholders sometimes fear that transforming a tract to open space might make it subject to more regulation or loss of value, says Press.

"It takes time for everybody to understand what the term means and to get comfortable with the term," adds Darla Guenzler, executive director of the California Council of Land Trusts, an alliance of community-based nonprofits focused on land conservation.

Even people who work to protect such land shy away from using the phrase "open space."

That's because different communities have different political cultures and geographic perspectives. In Valley communities such as Sacramento, people often value the open space bordering a river, while people living in hilly coastal areas value hills, redwoods and coastal chaparral.

Three types of open space

Open space can be a "passive" preserve meant to protect natural habitat and especially rare or endangered species, allowing minimal or no human contact.

Or it can be "active" land used for recreation and escape.

Farmland, which often creates a boundary between urban areas, serves as a third type of open space, says Bill Allayaud, Sierra Club of California state director and a former city planner in Davis and Salt Lake City.

The benefits of conserving open space include protecting nature and scenic vistas, providing recreation areas, supporting floodplains, protecting water quality, preventing erosion, establishing urban boundaries, and improving people's safety by preventing development of areas prone to landslides, earthquake damage, flooding and wildfire.

Open space also helps maintain ways of life connected to the land, and provides places for personal renewal and escape from crowded city life.

"Open space is room to breathe," says Rudy Jurgensen, public affairs manager for the Los Altos-based Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District.

Examples of open space include half-acre parks in dense urban areas, community gardens, historic sites and huge swaths of national forest or wilderness. About half the land in California -- roughly 50 million acres -- is owned by the public and managed by government agencies, according to Donald Drysdale, spokesman for the state Conservation Department's Division of Land Resource Protection.

Those efforts have been organized by cities, counties, special districts, individuals and local land trusts, which are nonprofit corporations formed to conserve land and water within an area.

Other open-space examples include 5,712 acres protected by the Sacramento Valley Conservancy, the county's first local land trust; the 40,000-acre Cosumnes River Preserve, protected by the Nature Conservancy and seven partners;

and 8,400 acres protected in El Dorado County by the American River Conservancy.

A long and winding road

Identifying and protecting open space is a huge task that can take years, lots of money and sophisticated negotiating.

Just ask Maurer, founder and executive director of the Quail Ridge Wilderness Conservancy. He's waited years for crucial parcels to go up for sale, and then spent several more years negotiating transactions to link the reserve together.

At 6-foot-3, the zoologist-ecologist towers over most visitors who come to learn of the reserve during one of the monthly organized hikes. He wears his salt-and-pepper hair in a pony tail, and his blue eyes come to life each time he introduces people to the tasty nuts of a ghost pine cone or a native plant such as woodland needlegrass that once covered much larger areas.

"It pains me physically to see bulldozers go through open areas pushing down trees," he says as the silence of a hot afternoon is broken by the call of an oak titmouse, a small gray bird with dwindling habitat.

"Our whole concept of land is, if it's not covered with something humans created, it's 'undeveloped land.' "

Maurer is still searching for a buyer for the 120-acre, \$700,000 parcel being toured this day. On the hikes, he invites guests to buy the parcel and donate the land to the conservancy.

Grass can be a hard sell, especially in summer. Yet the mixture of native grasses and other plant life that have largely escaped invasion by non-native plants is what makes Quail Ridge Reserve so special, Maurer believes.

The reserve sits on the border between the northern interior Coast Range and the Sacramento Valley. It's also part of the Putah Creek watershed.

The University of California, Davis supplies a caretaker for Quail Ridge because it's part of the UC Natural Reserve System. As such, it's open for university-level research. The reserve is open to the public only for monthly hikes.

Some open space conserved by private parties -- nonprofits, individuals and businesses -- may not be open to the public because it may still be used for farming, it may protect sensitive wildlife or ecosystems, or funding isn't available to maintain trails, restrooms, trash pickup and supervision, says Guenzler.

Quail Ridge is typical of an open-space transformation. Public agencies or land trust staff members and volunteers -- in this case, Maurer -- identify important land to set aside.

They negotiate a sale, donation or conservation easement, which is a permanent legal agreement protecting conservation uses for the land. Easements usually remove all or most development rights and require future landowners to uphold those conservation uses or values, says Guenzler.

With an easement, the original owner still owns the property, but the land trust or public agency now holds certain rights the land owner agrees to.

"Easements are voluntary conservation agreements. The title can still be sold, but the property continues to be bound by those restrictions," Guenzler says.

If the owner prefers to sell the land rather than put an easement on it, a land trust can buy the land if it has the resources, or find a conservation lender -- someone else who buys the land and holds onto it without developing it.

Then, the land trust either raises the money to buy the land, or finds a conservation buyer. The buyer must be willing to donate the land to the land trust or agree to a conservation easement.

If the land is bought and donated to the land trust, the final step to permanently protect the land is to ensure that a conservation easement is still created. To do this, the land trust must give an easement to another land trust. In the case of Quail Ridge, the easement would be given to the Napa Land Trust, Napa County's only other local land trust.

The 120-acre parcel Maurer led visitors on already has been bought by a conservation lender. But he'll continue to bring people out until he finds one willing to be a conservation buyer. Putting the reserve together piece by piece has taken a third of the 65-year-old Maurer's life.

"It's nice to grow old and have most of this intact," he says. "I think once people understand what open space is and see it for themselves, they really crave it."

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