



Case Study

RENEGOTIATING ROLES AT JEPSON PRAIRIE CALIFORNIA, U.S.A.

A California wonder is transferred to safe hands, lifting a large organizational burden but ensuring continued conservation oversight.

“Vernal Pools” are a globally rare habitat where hard soils create round wetlands. The vernal pools at the Jepson Prairie are filled with 400 life forms, many unique or endangered, from salamanders to migrating shorebirds. The pools are fed by winter and spring rains, and as they dry, concentric circles of flowers and grasses create arenas of changing color that last through the seasons.

In 1980, The Nature Conservancy’s California Chapter bought a 1,566-acre site and created a preserve, the Willis Linn Jepson Prairie Preserve commonly known as the “Jepson Prairie,” named after an early California botanist.

In the 1980’s, “Identify, Protect, Manage” was the mantra of the Conservancy, and the unofficial slogan was: “We protect land the old-fashioned way—we buy it.”

Because the area had such biological distinction, a number of high-level parties entered into a land use and management agreement in 1983, including the University of California Natural Reserve System. Within a few years the National Park Service designated Dixon Vernal Pools – of which the Jepson Prairie was the centerpiece – as a National Natural Landmark. In 1984, the Jepson Prairie Management Committee was established to coordinate the many interests of the multiple public and private stakeholders in the area who wanted to be involved.

By the late 1990’s, advances in conservation biology research showed that only by protecting large landscapes, and not small, discrete parcels, could biodiversity and the ecological processes that support it survive. The Conservancy’s organizational experience also illuminated the high cost of owning and managing land, which essentially freezes capital that could otherwise be used to expand conservation priorities.

These changing conditions, as well as the increasing sophistication and capacity of other conservation entities in the area, enabled the Conservancy to revisit and renegotiate roles and responsibilities of Jepson Prairie stakeholders in the region. In 1997, the Conservancy donated the entire 1,566 site to the Solano Land Trust, retaining a conservation easement. The Conservancy retained a seat on the Jepson Prairie Management Committee, which meets quarterly, and the Conservancy also provides staff to conduct yearly easement monitoring. In this way, the Conservancy can adaptively manage its interest in the project and partnership into the future.

Renegotiating the Conservancy’s long-time role as owner of Jepson Prairie enabled the organization to maintain high protection standards, stay highly involved with the project, and yet divest itself of the financial burdens of direct ownership.

6.A Why Renegotiate?