



# People Who Make A DIFFERENCE

*Our annual salute to the Wisconsin people and organizations  
who are walking the talk when it comes to conservation*



the lac courte oreilles  
& the trust  
for public land

## FOR PRESERVING THE LAND—AND THE PAST

by Mary Ellen Gabriel

**M**oonshine Island, a tree-studded gem rising above the waters of the Chippewa Flowage in northwest Wisconsin, almost became a floatplane base, anchored by resort homes. But the Trust for Public Land (TPL), a national nonprofit land conservation organization, helped save the island from development after the Chippewa Flowage Area Property Owners Association called for help.

“You’d have had airplanes taking off and landing in the wildest part of the flowage,” says Shaun Hamilton, director of the Northwoods Initiative at TPL. “Naturally, the tribe wasn’t too thrilled about that.”

The tribe is the Lac Courte Oreilles Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, who manage the flowage along with the DNR and the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest. The Lac Courte Oreilles’ history with Moonshine Island goes back much further than the Prohibition-era bootlegging operations that earned the island its name. “Moonshine wasn’t always an island,” explains Jerry Smith, tribal historian for the Lac Courte Oreilles. “Nearby, under the water, lies the village of Old Post, which was flooded when the government built the dam across the Chippewa River.”

Lost forever were homes, a post office, burial grounds, and acres of wild rice beds that the Lac Courte Oreilles people depended on for centuries. Moonshine Island, 17 acres of higher ground, likely harbors unmarked graves and artifacts.

Reclaiming this land and its history was a priority for the Lac Courte Oreilles, but they had no luck challeng-

ing the landowner with the floatplane dream. Enter TPL, which helps protect and conserve not just wilderness areas but places of historical and cultural importance. The organization helped negotiate the \$650,000 price, and last March, the tribe purchased the land.

Smith sees preserving the island as a tribute to the people forced to flee the village that now lies under 90 feet of water. “To keep it wild like that, to see the eagles flying overhead, to hunt, to fish, and not see development—” he says, and pauses. “I can’t think of a better monument.”

Through its Tribal & Native Lands program, TPL is also working to preserve other important sites in northern Wisconsin. In December, Shaun Hamilton, along with several U.S. Forest Service employees and Potawatomi tribal members, received the U.S. Forest Service’s Indigenous Earth Walker Award for helping acquire and preserve Indian Farms, 240 acres of woodlands that once included fields and gardens cultivated by Potawatomi and Ojibwe people.

Indian Farms is also the site of tribal cemeteries that were looted and vandalized over the years. Now that TPL has transferred the site to the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest Service, says Hamilton, the Wisconsin Historical Society can return the body of a native child to the place where it was originally laid to rest, most likely after a smallpox epidemic decimated a Potawatomi community living there in the early 1900s.

“From the tribal perspective, the land is not mine, or yours, or everyone carving up their piece. It’s a shared, collective concern,” says Hamilton.

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Mary Ellen Gabriel writes from Madison.

