

EAMON O'BYRNE, SONOMA LAND TRUST'S NEW EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

By Laurie Wachter | Photo by Laurie Wachter

Eamon O'Byrne is passionate about conservation and its role in securing the future for coming generations.

"The next generation will ask us, 'What did you do to give us a future?' I want to be able to tell my nieces and nephews, and the sons and daughters of my friends, that the job I did was part of the movement that helps save the world."

Eamon's path to conservation began in a working-class public housing development in Dublin, Ireland. "I would take the bus 3 miles to the beach to breathe and see a big sky. From there, I could see little red dots out on the ocean. They were sailboats and, at 12 years old, I decided to get one for myself."

He went to college and became a mariner and later a charter boat skipper in the Caribbean. He and his wife, Stephanie Linder, met over their shared passion for hiking and nature. On their trip across country to San Francisco, where they planned to live, they visited national park after national park. The scale and size of the vistas and seeing raw, wild nature in the flesh awed and inspired them to choose careers connected to nature.

Stephanie is now the Executive Director of the San Francisco Botanical Garden. Eamon went to work for the San Francisco Maritime National Park Association and then the The Nature Conservancy. It was there that he worked with an award-winning team to save an endangered fox on the Channel Islands.

"The fox was both a terrible problem and an ideal opportunity, because the problem was part of the solution. We got rid of what was attractive to the predators threatening the fox. We captured those predators and moved them to the mainland, and then replaced the part of ecosystem that was missing."

In Sonoma County, Eamon points to Sonoma Land Trust's 2014 acquisition of Pole Mountain. The long, strenuous hike from Jenner to vistas that stretch to Mt. Diablo passes through cow pastures grazed by Galloway cattle. The Land Trust brought this small breed in to fill the Elk's traditional role of grazer and help restore the natural grasslands.

Eamon's appreciation of Sonoma County began many years ago. "The county has a raw, wild coast, deep lush conifer forests, Mediterranean savannahs, rivers, wine country tradition and culture, agriculture, and also a significant urban area." He relishes the opportunity to live here and continue the Land Trust's work of the past 40 years.

"Conservationists all stand on the shoulders of giants. Our solutions are multi-generational, with outcomes that may not show up for 40 or 50 years. My job is to keep the projects my predecessors started going, add any new ones, and continue the forward momentum."

He also loves the distinct sense of place that almost everyone who lives here shares. "I appreciate how much Sonoma has, over the past 40 years, invested in protecting what is so special about it. The Land Trust staff counts on that."

Eamon's goals in his new role cover the gamut of conservation challenges: A better way to manage forests to prevent tragedies like the 2017 wildfires. A response to areas of rapid urbanization to make cities more livable. Solutions



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that use water more efficiently and improve ocean health to ensure clean water and clean air for all people. A sustainable, nature-friendly approach to agriculture to protect it from the stress of climate change.

"The best solution we have for climate change is nature," he says. "We'll start to lose a lot of the plants and animals that make our world livable and put at risk whether humans can survive into the next century. Think of the redwood forests, whales breaching off the coast, butterflies in our backyard. When you try to imagine the world without them, without flowers and plants, you realize it isn't a world where anyone would want to live. Conservationists think about all these things. We bring people together to create long-term solutions for a healthier, sustainable future."

Or, as they say at Sonoma Land Trust, "In Sonoma County, it's all about the land."