



**2021-2023**

# STRATEGIC PLAN





## OUR MISSION

Sonoma Land Trust protects the scenic, natural, agricultural and open landscapes of Sonoma County for the benefit of the community and future generations.

## OUR LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENT STATEMENT

As we pursue our mission of conserving land in Sonoma County, we recognize that we stand upon the unceded ancestral lands of many Indigenous peoples. We honor their knowledge, care and stewardship of this special place across the ages and acknowledge the deep and lasting damage that colonization has inflicted on them. We embrace our responsibility to learn from and protect their cultural and traditional connections to the land.





**Dear Friends:**

Among the lessons we’re learning from the pandemic, one of the most important is also the most obvious: our lives depend on the actions, not of a few, but of all of us—and that we are only as safe as the most vulnerable among us. The same is true for protecting the health of our planet. Scientists tell us that between now and 2030 is our last best chance to begin to get it right. Sonoma Land Trust is using that urgency to guide our new strategic plan. It is clear that conservation is no longer the job solely of scientists and nature lovers, if it ever was.

Our task as humans is not only to turn the corner on global greenhouse gas emissions by 2030, but also to ready ourselves for the impacts of a changed climate already underway. The good news is that while the task is huge, solutions do exist—and are right under our feet!

Our task as humans is not only to turn the corner on global greenhouse gas emissions by 2030, but also to ready ourselves for the impacts of a changed climate already underway.

In fact, nature provides among the highest-impact climate solutions available. These solutions can simultaneously lessen flood risk, recharge groundwater, reduce fire risk, on top of shrinking carbon dioxide emissions. Building on more than 40 years of protecting the landscapes

of Sonoma County, we are stepping up our game and taking a leadership role in using natural solutions to become a force for nature—to fight for a climate-resilient future.

In fact, nature provides among the highest-impact climate solutions available.

Climate change has had, and will continue to have, a disproportionate impact on human communities. That’s why we must share nature in ways that are inclusive and equitable. The Land Trust will embrace the diverse knowledge systems, values and perspectives of all Sonomans as we face the challenge of our lifetimes.

In the following pages, we’ve outlined our strategic plan, which runs from 2021 to 2023. It will serve as a basis for our work through the end of the decade. In executing our plan, we will observe three principles:

- Embed the values of justice, equity, diversity and inclusion in every aspect of our work;
- Provide effective decision-making supported by the best available science; and
- Know when to lead and when to collaborate.

The plan itself is divided into six, multi-benefit strategies serving Sonomans across the county:

1. **Preserving Nature Nearby:** Address the problem of park-poor and climate-change impacted communities within Sonoma County.
2. **Living with Fire:** Use controlled fire and fuel reduction to restore fire’s historical ecological role while managing wildfire severity and promoting biodiversity.
3. **Securing Freshwater Flows:** Restore freshwater resources for humans and salmonid fishes with specific actions in the Russian River watershed.
4. **Adapting to Rising Waters:** Build resilience to sea-level rise by restoring dynamic ecological processes in the Baylands.
5. **Protecting Sonoma County’s Biodiversity:** Secure wildlife movement corridors.
6. **Empowering Communities to Protect Nature:** Grow an inclusive movement for nature by connecting people to the land through personal and educational experiences.

As we emerge from the past couple years, we have a renewed sense of purpose—the time is now. We are confident, inspired and looking forward to engaging with partners, old and new, as we help build an inclusive, climate-resilient future for Sonoma County.

Please join me in being a force for nature.



EAMON O'BYRNE, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



◀ Kids enjoy kayaking during Bay Camp at Sears Point.





## PRESERVING NATURE NEARBY

Nature is good for us, offering physical and mental health benefits from better mood, lower stress and improved attention span, to weight loss, stronger immune systems and healthier hearts. In Sonoma County, as most of us live in cities, parks and open spaces are needed to offer these benefits. Parks are also an increasingly important tool for addressing climate change effects. They help lower temperatures in heavily paved neighborhoods, improve air and stormwater quality, sequester carbon and reduce flooding. **We are committed to investing in parks as one of the best ways to build resilience and improve livability in our cities and towns.**



Hula hoop contest fun at Child in the Wild event at Howarth Park.

### HOW WE GOT HERE

According to the ParkServe tool created by our partner The Trust for Public Land, one in four people living in Sonoma County does not have a park located within walking distance (half a mile) of their home. This situation disproportionately affects lower-income communities and those with physical, economic and mental health and safety challenges.

According to Climate Ready Sonoma County, rising temperatures due to climate change mean our cities will become even hotter. Without more greenspace to help cool them, communities—especially lower-income communities—will suffer more heat-related illness and death, worsening air quality and more respiratory illness. Making cities healthier and

providing access to open spaces nearby, on the other hand, will not only improve people's lives, but also have the added benefit of reducing city sprawl into potentially ecologically sensitive areas.

### WHAT WE'RE DOING ABOUT IT

While more parks won't solve all of these problems, they will go a long way toward moderating the direct impacts of climate change on city dwellers. By acquiring and transferring land to county and city parks, we are expanding both the amount of open space and access to it. Additionally, we are facilitating innovative and inclusive park-planning processes for several urban park projects over the next decade to ensure the full engagement of all our communities in design decisions.

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### STRATEGIES

Provide at least \$2 million in funding toward the purchase of the 47-acre Southeast Greenway in Santa Rosa.

Expand our engagement with the Sonoma Developmental Center, assisting with the transfer of more than 700 acres to state and county park agencies.

Seek out and involve marginalized communities early in the Petaluma River Park development process—before decisions are made—so that they are at the center of decision-making, including vision, advocacy and leadership.

▼ Wide green strip toward right side of photo shows the Southeast Greenway in eastern Santa Rosa.







# LIVING WITH FIRE

Fire—terrifying yet essential to California’s landscape—is a fundamental component of maintaining and restoring the ecosystems of Sonoma County. **Our strategic plan aims to reestablish fire’s ecological role in the landscape, restoring habitats and reducing the harm of catastrophic wildfires to human communities.**



*Prescribed burn with the Sonoma Valley Fire Collaborative.*

## HOW WE GOT HERE

Indigenous people of the region used fire to maintain and restore the health of the land. For example: heat and smoke trigger the seeds of native plants to germinate and patches of ground cleared by fire nurture successive generations of diverse plants and animals. And regularly occurring, low-intensity fires transform overgrown understory and debris into nutrient rich soil, preventing the buildup of masses of fire-prone, dead vegetation.

Over the past 150 years, fire suppression policies have largely replaced these Indigenous land-management practices, leaving us more vulnerable to wildfires and the enormous toll they take on lives, property and habitat.

Climate change has only made the problem worse. Record-breaking high temperatures, protracted dry seasons and drought-stricken ecosystems have increased the frequency and severity of wildfires.

In addition to health-threatening smoke and ash, these wildfires release vast quantities of carbon, stored in trees and soils into the atmosphere as greenhouse gases. As a result, we find ourselves in a self-perpetuating cycle of more warming, more drought and more wildfires. Finally, the loss of native ecosystems—key to climate resilience—makes it increasingly difficult to interrupt and reverse this cycle. But reverse it we must.



▲ *New life sprouting at Glen Oaks Ranch after the 2017 Nuns Fire.*

## WHAT WE’RE DOING ABOUT IT

Within our preserves throughout the county, we are conducting small, prescribed fires in appropriate locations and complementing these fires with vegetation management to influence fire behavior and remove ladder fuels. This helps to keep fast-moving crown fires on the ground, which slows and cools them and safeguards evacuation routes.

In Sonoma Valley, where we’ve helped launch a large-scale fire management partnership, the Sonoma Valley Wildlands Collaborative, we have selected strategic sites across

18,000 acres to reduce the risk of fire to 9,000 structures and improve the habitat quality of a key wildlife corridor.

On our preserves in West County, our fire management plans are designed to help protect fire-crew access and community evacuation routes. Additionally, working with CalFire, we are using our work across the county as demonstration sites and platforms for sharing our fire strategy research-and-development with state policymakers and local landowners alike.

## STRATEGIES

Implement fire fuel reduction and controlled burns across 150 acres in collaboration with the Sonoma Valley Wildlands Collaborative.

Initiate and implement fire and forest management plans for four Sonoma Land Trust preserves, demonstrating best practices for community safety and ecological health.

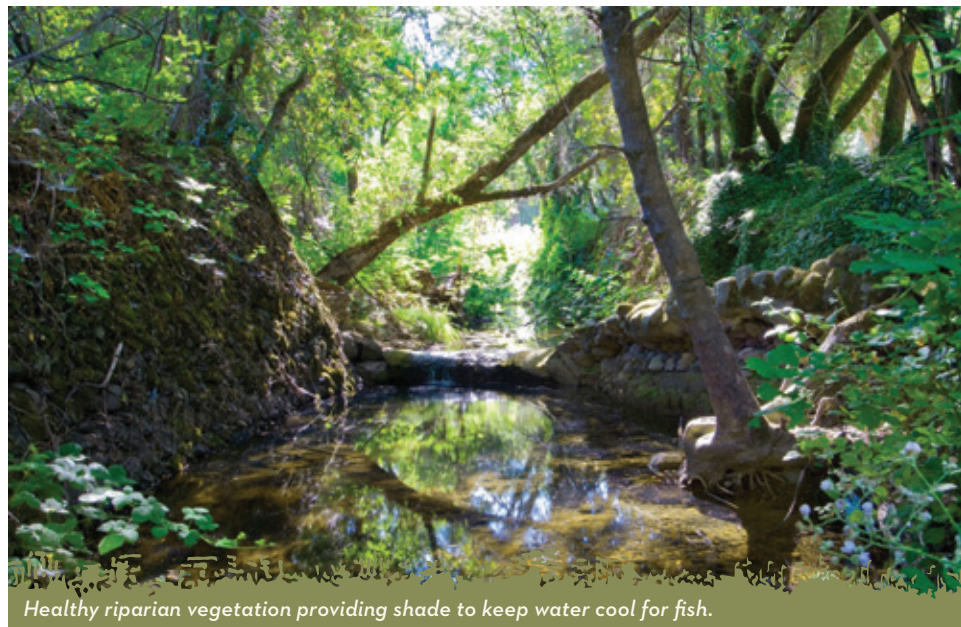
Work toward repeating the success of the Sonoma Valley Wildlands Collaborative project in another region of Sonoma County.





# SECURING FRESHWATER FLOWS

**A critical part of Sonoma Land Trust’s strategic plan is to secure and safeguard freshwater flows in our streams and rivers.** A functioning stream system provides ample clean surface water, recharges groundwater and provides flood protection and habitat for wildlife and humans. Today, declining fish populations tell us that all is not well within our watersheds. Salmonids (salmon and trout) are vitally important in the food chains of local watersheds. Physical changes to the river landscapes over the past 150 years have damaged the habitat conditions for spawning and rearing. Losing these fish is a sign of degraded water quality and quantity conditions. Continued declines and losses of these species will have ongoing impacts on the surrounding habitat and will signal irreparable damage to the water supply for more than 600,000 people.



Healthy riparian vegetation providing shade to keep water cool for fish.

## HOW WE GOT HERE

Damage to streamflow has been going on for well more than a century. Large-scale land-use changes, roads, dams, diversions and pollutant runoff have dramatically altered our stream systems. The resulting, channelized, contaminated and interrupted streams and rivers make it almost impossible for salmonid fish to complete their lifecycle.

For humans, too, scarce and poor-quality freshwater brings physical stress and economic hardship, especially for the most vulnerable among us.

Climate change and changing weather patterns are also taking their toll. In the future, dry seasons will last longer, drying out creeks, dropping groundwater levels, intensifying drought and increasing plant stress. In turn, these conditions may then dry up seeps and springs that connect underground aquifers to aboveground streams—further interrupting freshwater flows. In the winter, erratic and intense rainy seasons will produce fast-moving waters—a hazard for the survival of young fish—and exacerbate downstream flooding.

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## WHAT WE’RE DOING ABOUT IT

To protect and enhance the county’s freshwater resources, we are bringing the latest science and innovative solutions to promote groundwater recharge, reconnect creeks with their floodplains and help reduce dry-season diversion of streamflow, among other approaches.

Using an analysis of five sub-watersheds of the Russian River, we are pinpointing where our strategies can enhance streamflow, whether through straightforward land conservation, restoration projects or working with landowners on water transactions, such as forbearance agreements and dedication of water rights for fish and wildlife benefit.

## STRATEGIES

Complete the Russian River sub-watershed Conservation Assessment for the Dutch Bill, Green Valley, Maacama, Mark West and Mill Creek watersheds.

Complete two conservation easement projects, protecting approximately 1,000 acres and four miles of riparian habitat.

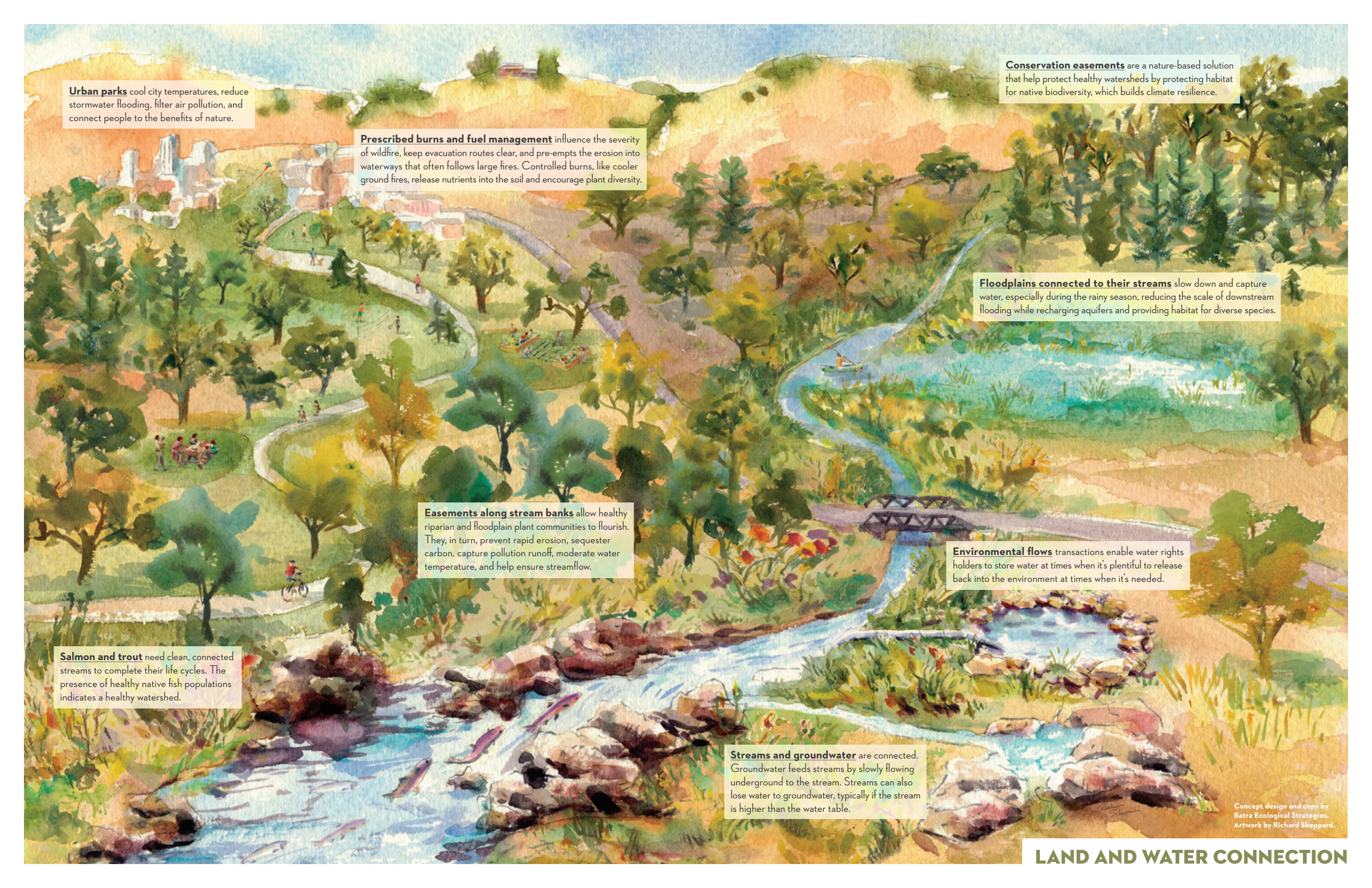
Advance two new acquisitions that protect land and/or water important for salmonid habitat.

Review our Anchor Preserve Management Plans and identify existing opportunities to enhance freshwater flows and habitat.

▼ Natural waterfall and pool at the geologically unique region of The Cedars.







**Urban parks** cool city temperatures, reduce stormwater flooding, filter air pollution, and connect people to the benefits of nature.

**Prescribed burns and fuel management** influence the severity of wildfire, keep evacuation routes clear, and pre-empt the erosion into waterways that often follows large fires. Controlled burns, like cooler ground fires, release nutrients into the soil and encourage plant diversity.

**Conservation easements** are a nature-based solution that help protect healthy watersheds by protecting habitat for native biodiversity, which builds climate resilience.

**Floodplains connected to their streams** slow down and capture water, especially during the rainy season, reducing the scale of downstream flooding while recharging aquifers and providing habitat for diverse species.

**Easements along stream banks** allow healthy riparian and floodplain plant communities to flourish. They, in turn, prevent rapid erosion, sequester carbon, capture pollution runoff, moderate water temperature, and help ensure streamflow.

**Environmental flows** transactions enable water rights holders to store water at times when it's plentiful to release back into the environment at times when it's needed.

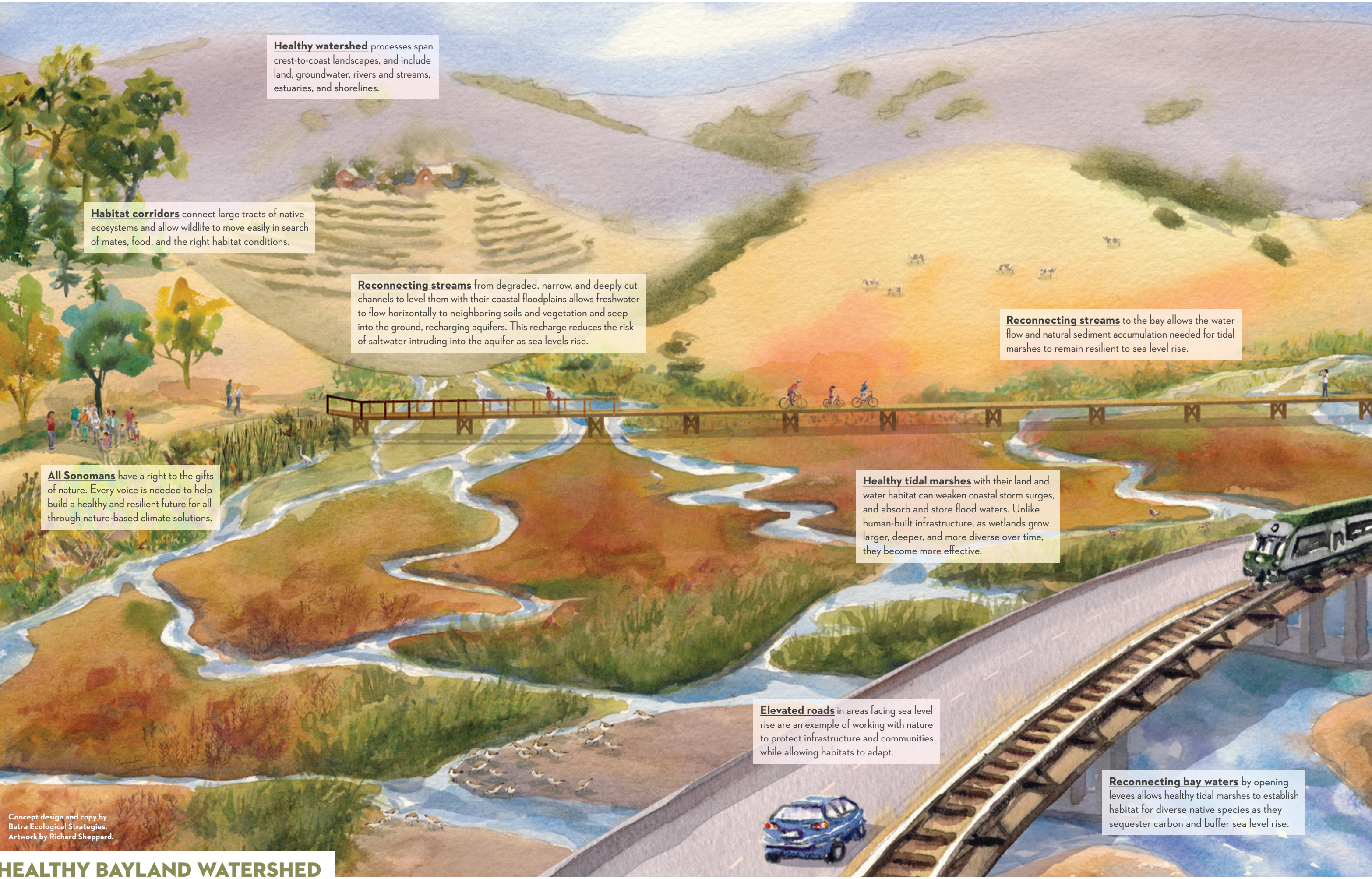
**Salmon and trout** need clean, connected streams to complete their life cycles. The presence of healthy native fish populations indicates a healthy watershed.

**Streams and groundwater** are connected. Groundwater feeds streams by slowly flowing underground to the stream. Streams can also lose water to groundwater, typically if the stream is higher than the water table.

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Batra Ecological Strategies.  
Artwork by Richard Sheppard.

## LAND AND WATER CONNECTION





**Healthy watershed** processes span crest-to-coast landscapes, and include land, groundwater, rivers and streams, estuaries, and shorelines.

**Habitat corridors** connect large tracts of native ecosystems and allow wildlife to move easily in search of mates, food, and the right habitat conditions.

**Reconnecting streams** from degraded, narrow, and deeply cut channels to level them with their coastal floodplains allows freshwater to flow horizontally to neighboring soils and vegetation and seep into the ground, recharging aquifers. This recharge reduces the risk of saltwater intruding into the aquifer as sea levels rise.

**Reconnecting streams** to the bay allows the water flow and natural sediment accumulation needed for tidal marshes to remain resilient to sea level rise.

**All Sonomans** have a right to the gifts of nature. Every voice is needed to help build a healthy and resilient future for all through nature-based climate solutions.

**Healthy tidal marshes** with their land and water habitat can weaken coastal storm surges, and absorb and store flood waters. Unlike human-built infrastructure, as wetlands grow larger, deeper, and more diverse over time, they become more effective.

**Elevated roads** in areas facing sea level rise are an example of working with nature to protect infrastructure and communities while allowing habitats to adapt.

**Reconnecting bay waters** by opening levees allows healthy tidal marshes to establish habitat for diverse native species as they sequester carbon and buffer sea level rise.

Concept design and copy by  
Batra Ecological Strategies.  
Artwork by Richard Sheppard.

**HEALTHY BAYLAND WATERSHED**





## ADAPTING TO RISING WATERS

Our communities need nature’s help to adapt to rapidly rising sea levels and to repair damaged ecological processes. **The focus of our Adapt to Rising Waters strategy is one of the highest-impact natural climate solutions available—tidal marshes.**



Planting cordgrass at Sears Point tidal marsh restoration.

### HOW WE GOT HERE

Tidal marshes, such as the San Pablo Baylands, require our protection for several key reasons. They weaken coastal storm surges by reducing flooding and diminishing the wave energy that would otherwise erode shorelines and infrastructure. Over the long term, tidal marshes are critical to moderating the impacts of rising seas. Like giant sponges, tidal marshes absorb massive amounts of water, then slowly and manageably release it.

The Baylands were once part of a large, complex estuary landscape, exchanging water, nutrients, plants and animals with the watersheds of Novato Creek, Petaluma River, Sonoma Creek and Napa River. Starting in the 1800s, however, these tidal wetlands began to be converted for other uses, such as agriculture, sewage treatment and salt ponds. This left as little as 10 percent of the entire San Francisco Bay wetlands system intact.

A drastically altered estuary left the Sonoma County communities of Petaluma, Sonoma and Schellville, along with crucial infrastructure such as Highway 37, vulnerable to sea-level rise and flooding. And looming ever larger is the threat of saltwater intrusion into the aquifers that supply our drinking water and irrigation water further inland. This threat highlights the interconnectedness of all land use along a “coast-to-crest” geography.



▲ An excavator breaches a levee at Sears Point, allowing tides back in for the first time in more than a century.

M. WOOLSEY

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### WHAT WE’RE DOING ABOUT IT

In recent decades, Sonoma Land Trust has helped lead public and private partnerships to acquire and restore nearly 40 percent of the marshes around the San Pablo Baylands to their original footprint. The success of our 1,000-acre Sears Point wetland restoration has shown how nature can strengthen and protect human and natural communities. With our partners, we have developed ambitious plans for more than 20,000 acres of the San Pablo Baylands, the northern arm of San Francisco Bay, by restoring the tidal marshes and reconnecting them to their upper watersheds.

### STRATEGIES

Complete one land acquisition project and have three in the planning pipeline for Petaluma River and Sonoma Creek watersheds, reconnecting the Baylands with uplands and providing room for marshes to migrate.

Complete the design and permitting for reconnecting Sears Point’s Lakeville Creek to its historic floodplain, seasonal wetlands and alluvial fan on the historic bay margin, an area once known as False Bay. This will reestablish the natural flow of water, nutrients and life between coast and crest that are essential to ecological resilience.

Continue to work toward a Highway 37 redesign that is climate resilient and compatible with the Baylands restoration plans.

Complete the Sears Point Levee Adaptive Management Project, a natural solution to erosion intended to rebuild shoreline habitat at Sears Point and pilot a new approach for marsh restoration throughout the Bay.





# PROTECTING SONOMA COUNTY'S BIODIVERSITY

Ecosystems are complex and we depend on them for food, fresh water, clean air and much more. They are more resilient to stress when all the pieces, such as a full assortment of native plants and animals, are in place. While extinction is a natural process, humans have accelerated the rate of extinction at an alarming pace, leaving our ecosystems out of balance and putting all of us at risk. Biodiversity loss is directly linked to drought, flooding, fire and health risks such as Lyme disease, as well as declines in forest cover, pollinators and air and water quality.

Biodiversity is key to ecosystem health; protecting Sonoma County's biodiversity starts with protecting habitat. **Sonoma Land Trust is committed to preserving and connecting large, ecologically intact landscapes so that native plants and animals residing there can maintain their natural ranges, as well as adapt to changing climate conditions.**



A volunteer installs a survey point marker for bird monitoring during a stewardship workday at Sears Point.

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## HOW WE GOT HERE

Biodiversity loss has many causes, but a leading one is habitat fragmentation caused by structures, utilities, roads and fences as part of poorly planned development into wildlands. These barriers cut off native species from their natural foraging and mating areas and eventually lead to population collapse. Another leading cause of biodiversity loss is land degradation and changing land use cover types, such as when forests or grasslands are converted to crops or paved over with asphalt and concrete. Additionally, reduced water supply and quantity due to more intensive uses, pollutant runoff and erosion from roads and other development all hinder biodiversity.

Climate change is changing the conditions under which native species evolved, and many native species may not be able to adapt in place.



## WHAT WE'RE DOING ABOUT IT

All species, down to the invisible soil microbes that are responsible for carbon sequestration, are part of a complex web of life whose fragility or resilience depends on us. If we work to protect as many of the elements of this web as possible, we can strengthen its resilience. Working to protect whole ecosystems by acquiring and restoring resilient and connected lands can dramatically improve the future of all our communities, both human and natural.

◀ Harbor seal with Brown Pelicans at the Russian River Estuary.

## STRATEGIES

Acquire and transfer the Fitzsimmons property and McCormick Ranch, totaling more than 850 new acres of protection up the western slopes of the Mayacamas Mountains and contributing to the function of the Marin Coast-Blue Ridge Critical Linkage.

Update our Preserve Management Plans to include management activities that protect biodiversity and improve habitat permeability and connectivity.

Conduct a permeability impact analysis to advance compatible development patterns in the county's specific plan for the Sonoma Developmental Center campus, thereby supporting the conservation of more than 700 acres in the heart of the Sonoma Valley Wildlife Corridor.





# EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES TO PROTECT NATURE

While we bring extensive experience in protecting nature, we know that we also have much to learn. We do not claim to speak on behalf of marginalized communities. Instead, we offer humility and sincerity in amplifying their voices. **We are committed to expanding and deepening our relationships with all of our local communities to help advance their advocacy for climate justice and access to nature in Sonoma County.**



Teens participating in the Conservation Council, setting up wildlife cameras.

## HOW WE GOT HERE

Historically, the U.S. conservation movement has not been inclusive of ethnic diversity or the land management wisdom of Indigenous people. At the same time, the physical and economic burdens of climate change are disproportionately being borne by Black, Indigenous

and people of color (BIPOC) communities. As we face down climate change and look to nature to address the crisis, we see that large portions of our population are not present at the solutions table, having been disenfranchised from the birthright of belonging with nature.

We do not claim to speak on behalf of marginalized communities. Instead, we offer humility and sincerity in amplifying their voices.

## WHAT WE'RE DOING ABOUT IT

Those who are most impacted by the climate crisis must have a seat at the table—and their knowledge, traditions and cultural values must be part of the solution. If together we safeguard the relationship between communities—human, ecological and cultural—nature can provide resilience that we need to withstand many of the changes to come. We are working to empower the general public of all ages and backgrounds with knowledge of and personal experiences in nature so that they can claim their rightful place in caring for the natural world and the benefits that a healthy planet should confer on all.

We are tailoring and delivering programs for under-represented communities that offer opportunities for children, teens and families to enjoy outdoor experiences on Sonoma County preserves.

We will redouble our educational efforts through our programs, including Language of the Land, On the Land Outings, Bay Camp and Students Learning In Marsh Environments (SLIME), reaching over 3,000 learners in total, offering bilingual materials where appropriate.

Finally, inclusive coalitions are important to the success of proposed new urban parks efforts that Sonoma Land Trust is helping to move forward, such as the Santa Rosa Southeast Greenway and Petaluma River Park. With the help of local communities, we are working toward inclusive, accessible public input processes for these projects, with the greater goal of learning how to build community engagement across all of our work.

## STRATEGIES

Expand our efforts to connect people with nature through a variety of educational programs, such as our Language of the Land webinars, virtual and in-person On the Land outings and Students Learning in Marsh Environments (SLIME) for school groups. We will reach more than 3,000 learners in total.

Tailor and deliver programs that offer opportunities for children, teens and families from underrepresented communities to enjoy outdoor experiences on Sonoma County preserves. This includes our teen Conservation Council, our Familias al Aire Libre bilingual family outings and our summer Bay Camp.

Build and strengthen relationships with Latinx communities by including the community in program development, focusing on conservation's cultural relevance and equity-based program designs that center on the community.

As part of these efforts, we are developing Spanish-language programming, translating written materials into Spanish and providing Spanish interpretation for webinars.



▲ Bay Camp adventure week kayak trip on the Russian River.



# STRIVING FOR ORGANIZATIONAL EXCELLENCE

Now in its fifth decade of protecting Sonoma County’s iconic landscapes, we have built a powerful reputation for fiscal responsibility, trustworthiness, expertise and problem solving. We’ve attracted passionate donors and volunteers and have become a leading partner for county and state environmental agencies. As the urgency of our mission increases by the day, we need to make sure that we have the right supporting structures and tools for achieving our goals.



Bay Camper at Sears Point.

## WHAT WE’RE DOING ABOUT IT

Our organization is taking key steps to ensure that we remain nimble and efficient. We are implementing new technologies to streamline administrative processes, systems, policies and procedures. We are ensuring that we have the tools to inspire, educate and engage all of our communities across diverse media platforms, and build a new generation of land stewards for the future.

We’ve launched our capital campaign Be a Force for Nature to secure the resources we need to deliver on our strategic goals. This campaign, our largest to date, enables us to be a leader in protecting everything we hold dear—the very land under our feet, our natural resources and our way of life—from the destructive effects of a rapidly changing climate.

We are executing the internal organizational goals set forth in our Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Plan to make Sonoma Land Trust aligned with our mission objectives and putting in place the training, culture and standards that hire, welcome and engage Black, Indigenous and people of color in the conservation movement, seeking out their diverse perspectives and increasing their rightful access to nature.

Executing this plan will require that we work in new, more flexible, cross-team collaborations to leverage our work in multiple ways while remaining focused on our primary objectives. We will report quarterly to our board of directors and annually to supporters and partners through our Impact Report. Always evaluating and listening to feedback, we will use what we learn along the way to refine our strategies.







[sonomalandtrust.org](http://sonomalandtrust.org)

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