



1 What is Taos Land Trust? We are a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization started in 1988. We protect natural lands through conservation easements and other tools.

2 What is a conservation easement? It's an agreement between the landowner and typically a land trust, or some governmental entity, where the landowner retires development rights. Each easement is individually tailored to that piece of property and that landowner. And then if they sell the land in the future, whoever owns it has to abide by the same agreement.

3 Why do people choose to set up conservation easements? Mostly because they care about the land. It's considered a public benefit, because you're creating a gift for the public by protecting your land. Conservation easements are tools that benefit the local community, the general public, and individual landowners because we help them keep hold of their land and give them a tax credit and a direct financial benefit.

4 How does the tax credit work? When you place a conservation easement, you're basically giving up a certain value in your land, and that has a financial value that you can use toward federal tax deductions. New Mexico was the third state to create a transferable state income tax credit. You can qualify for a state tax credit up to \$250,000 that you can use for up to 20 years to pay your state income tax, or you can sell it to a third party.

5 What are the biggest challenges in your work? One is explaining what a conservation easement is, that you don't sign your deed over to us, we don't tell you how to manage your land, you don't have to give up anything except what you agree to in the conservation easement. We never try to force this on anyone. We just want people to know about it. In terms of permanent land conservation, the challenge is when people want to maximize the value of their land. You can't do that with a conservation easement. You'll get more money putting up a Wal-Mart.

6 Can you give an example of an easement you're working on? A local traditional landowner whose family has been in the village of Velarde since it was first settled has a small commercial orchard that's

9 Questions

BY SUSAN CARPENTER SIMS
PHOTO BY TINA LARKIN

very successful, and it's right next to the river so it's a beautiful riparian strip including endangered species habitat. So we've got all of this stuff on one fairly small parcel of land that we're protecting.

7 How did your love affair with land start? I was originally from Dixon, but moved to Denver when I was 6 and grew up in the inner city. We never got out to the mountains, never went camping. When I finished high school, my name was drawn from a hat for a scholarship for a three-week Outward Bound trip. Us inner city punks called it "Hoods in the Woods." And that was it, it changed my life. So I know the effect and power natural landscapes can have. Since then, I've spent every spare day I have outdoors. I worked for years as a park ranger and wilderness instructor, and leading wilderness trips with my wife.

8 How does your Master's degree in cultural anthropology play into your work? My fieldwork was on the Tibetan Plateau in Ladakh, India. There was a very innovative sustainable development program going on there and that's what I was interested in — culturally appropriate sustainable development. And while I was there, I had an epiphany, walking along an irrigation ditch that was just like an acequia, about coming back to Northern New Mexico and doing conservation work. I try to apply my background in anthropology to this work because there's such a cultural dimension to the land and its conservation.

9 In the seven years that you've been executive director of Taos Land Trust, one of the most significant projects initiated is De La Tierra A La Cosecha. What is that? It's a unique, groundbreaking collaboration started in 2004 among the Taos Land Trust, Taos County Economic Development Corporation and Taos Valley Acequia Association. Working with these organizations, they bring other tools and expertise in preserving and promoting the land-based culture of Northern New Mexico. It makes this work a lot richer. We don't always get a conservation easement out of those relationships but if we can help a rancher or a farmer be more successful so they don't have to sell or develop their land, then we're furthering our mission. 🌱