Land Trust Alliance Rally Remarks by Will Rogers;
Milwaukee, October 16, 2011

Thank you, Rand. I'm honored to be up here among so many great conservationists, partners and friends. 35 years ago when I was still a commercial beekeeper, I had my first exposure to a land trust when I tended beehives for Jim Lentowksi on cranberry bogs owned by the Nantucket Conservation Foundation. And through my time as an urban developer and re-developer and for the past two decades as an un-developer with the Trust for Public Land my career and my passion have been about the land and people and where they connect. That's why the land conservation community has always felt like family and why Rally always feels like coming home.

Congratulations, Rand, to you and your staff and LTA's volunteer leadership on another great Rally: The sessions have been strong and led by really knowledgeable presenters. And hearing from Will Allen and what he is doing to grow food and grow community was so inspiring. He personifies the vitality and activity that I am seeing in urban communities across America – and that's what I want to talk with you about today.

How many of us have been asked at talks like these – or have asked others – to close our eyes and remember a special place, a place where we made a deep and lasting connection with nature?

That memory doesn't exist for millions of people across America who have grown up with no such connection, no warm and fuzzy feelings about nature , no chance to flex their sense of wonder.
How about a different exercise: Try to remember a place that was really grim, unpleasant, that felt unhealthy and unsafe, a place you wanted to get away from.

I'm guessing that for many of us that place might be somewhere in a city or maybe a run down suburban strip: bleak, grey, short on beauty, not much nature, a low score on quality of life. Our cities and many of our suburban communities have places like that, places where the need for what we do is great. And I want to talk with you today about a bigger, bolder vision for land conservation that embraces that need in our cities and communities and about what we can do to help create healthy "human habitat".

By healthy human habitat I mean applying the principles of biodiversity protection to our own species and making sure that all humans have the physical surroundings and close to home connection with nature we need to lead healthy, fulfilled lives.

This bigger, bolder vision is for a connected nationwide system of parks and open space that stretches from inner city to wilderness. A system that not only protects wild, remote and inspirational nature, not only preserves our forests, farms, and ranches – and the special places we have come to know and love – but that also reaches into the hearts of our cities with parks, gardens, trails, green schoolyards and playgrounds and creek and river greenways that bring nature within a ten minute walk or half mile of every child or person in America.

Buying into and acting on this vision would mean a big change for our movement. It would mean going well beyond the important work we have been doing for years: preserving habitat for other species and protecting the places in our own communities we know and care about. It's a vision that recognizes that those cut off from nature are as threatened or endangered as the plants and animals and places we seek to protect; it's a vision for everyone that doesn't respect city limits or town lines; and a vision that I know many of us in this room share.

I know because in the 2010 Land Trust Alliance census, 27% of our membership rated urban parks, gardens and open space as extremely or very important. That number has grown from 5% just five years ago and it's a far cry from a decade ago when there was little interest in this topic at Rally. I hear the buzz in the halls, in the sessions, in the response to Will Allen's work. I see it in the partners we work with, in the growing number of urban land trusts that aren't solely focused on land for housing. I see it in the way some traditional land trusts are stretching their focus, their geographies, and their mission. I see it with organizations primarily focused on biodiversity that are beginning to talk a lot more about people and about cities—and I see it in the leadership of the Land Trust Alliance.

I also fully understand that our caring about this issue doesn't mean that we know what to do about it. But I'll get to that shortly.

How big is this human habitat problem? The truth is, no one really knows for sure. We have a lot better sense for the habitat and protection needs for California condors, wolverines or marbled murrelets. The Trust for Public Land and others are working

to define the need. We are mostly known for our conservation services. We helping our partners and communities do greenprints to identify and map their conservation priorities, raise public and private conservation funding, do conservation deals, and design and build parks and playgrounds.

But we also do research on parks and their health and economic benefits – and on park equity. Right now our ParkScore research is assessing and ranking the 40 largest cities in America, census tract by census tract, on how many residents don't have a park, garden or safe, green place to play within a ten minute walk or a half mile. We'll be getting the results out early next year in maps that show where the needs are greatest: the places where kids are the endangered species.

I can tell you that from our past work, there are many cities where 2 out of 3 children live nowhere near a park or garden. Even the best-parked metro areas like Minneapolis with its great legacy of parks, lakes and open lands, neglected sections of its downtown when it made its parks investments. And the city is working to fix that oversight. In Chicago with its great lakefront parks – Lincoln, Grant and now Millennium – neighborhood access is generally good, but the green still fades to grey as you move west from the lake into poorer neighborhoods. And many other cities, like Dallas that is investing in the Trinity River and turning parking lots into parks and Atlanta, whose Beltline is creating its own emerald necklace of greenways and new parks and many, many other cities large and small are taking steps to address this challenge. But they need our help.

So the need is great. But with all we are already doing right now, why should we expand our focus and take on a bigger vision? After all, a lot of the work that we do is to save land and other species from human activity. I know we all care about and work with people – although mostly the people in our own communities -- but even for those who think of humans as a planetary virus rather than charismatic mega fauna, there are some very practical reasons to re-connect everyone to nature. Even for those who aren't partial to cities, it's in all our best interest to make them livable, and even lovable.

In the simplest terms, we are a part of nature and nature needs a constituency. Author Robert Michael Pyle nailed it when he wrote: "People who care, conserve; people who don't know don't care. What is the extinction of the condor to a child who has never known a wren?" If we can't plant the seeds of environmentalism in our city streets, where so many of us live, how can we expect people to support the protection of remote wilderness and the places many will never see?

If the survival of our planet depends on us humans living sustainably, respecting the web of life, and finding balance in how we use land, water, energy and other resources, then each of us needs a personal relationship with the natural world that goes far beyond consumption.

Second, cities that offer healthy human habitat support denser living. Green livable cities not only attract people, they have a much greater carrying capacity. They reduce the pressure for unsustainable sprawl outside our metro areas, sprawl that leaves our communities with the leftovers of poorly planned growth. And sprawl and climate change are closely linked. As individuals, urban dwellers also have a much smaller ecological and carbon footprint.

And third, I think of greening our cities and communities as a health plan that delivers physical, mental, community and economic health. Here's a sample of what's in the benefits package:

Study after study shows that if we build parks, trails and outdoor recreation and exercise opportunities, people will come - and use them. And it's a good thing because public health professionals tell us that lifestyle interventions, like exercise and diet are the best ways and maybe the only ways to tackle the obesity epidemic, which is a major contributor to diabetes and heart disease. On treating diabetes alone, America spends $200 billion. That's 2% of all our spending.

On the dietary side, community gardens, urban agriculture – the kinds of efforts Will Allen and so many others are doing in cities across America – and even raised beds in our school playgrounds not only give us a chance to get our hands in the dirt, they are increasingly a source of healthy local produce. They also teach our children, especially those in our urban food deserts, what real food looks and tastes like and where it comes from.

There are mental health benefits, too. We all know first hand that spending time in nature lowers stress, hypertension, and anxiety. Nature eases the pressures of city life. Many studies show that our brains work better in natural settings, and our stays in hospitals are shorter when we have views of parks rather than parking lots.

Then there's community health. Frederick Law Olmstead saw parks as the great democratizers, bringing city people from all walks of life together in nature. When people come together in a park or where children and families and neighbors participate in creating or caring for their playgrounds, parks, and gardens, they develop a sense of ownership and stewardship and community.

And there's economic health, particularly relevant in this economy where everyone is wearing green eyeshades and focused on

jobs creation and smart investments. Most civic leaders now understand that you can't have a great city without a great parks system. They are reading the studies that show that one dollar invested in parks and conservation has a four to ten dollar payback. They know that quality of life is important to the educated young professional demographic group that cities compete to attract. This group, often referred to as the "creative class", "the young and the restless", or, as one demographer calls them, "lattes and laptops" can choose where they want to live. They choose green, livable cities with great culture, dynamic retail environments, and well-parked, walkable neighborhoods.

And there's one other benefit to our taking on this bigger vision for healthy human habitat. It will help us with our long-standing struggle to expand and diversify our movement and stay relevant here in the 21st century.

In my years with The Trust for Public Land. I have learned that the single most important thing we can do to attract partners, members and supporters from different racial, ethnic and cultural backgrounds and younger supporters is to do work they care about where they live. And to do that work well means engaging, listening to, and understanding local priorities and supporting the leadership and initiative that are already there so that we can be good partners and contributors.

I live in California where Hispanic and Anglo populations are almost at parity. By mid-century Hispanics will become the dominant demographic group in the state. It's a group that values conservation: In state-wide conservation funding initiatives Hispanic voters outvote Anglos and other groups in support of parks – parks in the cities – but also state parks and wild life habitat. There is an inevitable demographic and political shift underway in metro areas across America and we need to understand, align and work with our new allies for nature.

So now you have my thinking on the great need and some of the real benefits of more people-focused conservation. Let me finish by talking about what we in the land trust community can do.

With some notable exceptions, most of us live a long way from the inner city. Our knowledge of landscape and how to get things done is local. Our skills are more around land protection than creating new parks and salvaging remnant urban natural areas. We are either monitoring our past work or up to our elbows in new conservation, or both. And we already have a hard time raising the funds we need to meet current challenges. I really do understand.

So how do we use our experience, skills, resources and our growing commitment to expand the people-nature connection? It's very important that each of us answer this question for ourselves, but I'll finish by offering some ideas and examples I've seen where land trusts and conservationists have stretched their geographies and their activities to tackle this bigger challenge.

First of all, there are plenty of opportunities to try this out closer to home. We don't all have to rush into our inner cities. Look to the needs in our own communities and in the towns or communities next door. I bet most of us have a sense for where those needs are. There are very meaningful ways to create human habitat that complement the work and land holdings of our friends in town and city parks departments. But be aware that they know where the needs are and they are looking for more public-private partnerships that can help and support new parks and stewardship. They welcome our involvement, our time and our financial assistance.

A few weeks ago I was in Albuquerque celebrating the establishment of a new urban national wildlife refuge on an old dairy farm, surrounded by a mostly low-income and park-poor residential neighborhood. This refuge will be as much for those people as it will be for sand hill cranes and silver minnows. This refuge is a federal project – but it is also very local. There is broad and critical support from a big coalition of civic organizations from across the city and county including land trusts. That coalition will make possible what was just a dream for that South Valley neighborhood. So opportunity #1: You don't have to be in the lead - join partnerships and coalitions. Throw your support behind efforts that help create new conservation even if it isn't in your immediate geography.

A number of years back, I was giving a presentation to the Lake Minnetonka Garden Club in a comfortable suburb of Minneapolis. I happened to mention that we were working with low- income immigrant communities in downtown Minneapolis to help fund and buy nine vacant lots that they had taken over to create community gardens. The Garden Club – and this is why I love talking with Garden Clubs -- got excited and adopted the gardens. Members were gifting garden support in honor of each other and much of the nearly $100 thousand we needed came through that relationship. So opportunity #2: People care about special places but people also care about people and they want others to have a relationship with nature, too. We can harness that care and generate meaningful financial or in-kind support for a broader range of work inside and outside our communities.

Public funding measures provide further opportunities to engage. Well more than a decade ago when we were working on a state-wide bond initiative for parks and wildlife, we took the then controversial step of including funds for urban parks in the measure. That led to a winning coalition with a much broader base of popular and legislative support that has grown even stronger over the years.

Water flows downhill through wild lands and cities, alike. Streams and rivers provide great opportunities for green connectors that are also part of our water quality and storm water infrastructure and therefore important to cities and funders. Look at the whole watershed: there's a good chance that the stream that flows through your community needs attention somewhere along its course. So another opportunity: Restoring, daylighting, or building trails along suburban or urban waterways can become great collaborative projects between communities that can deliver recreation and beauty - and water quality.

Or look at food. There is conservation to be done at both ends of the farm to table foodshed: from ranch and farmland easements to CSA's in the rural landscape to urban ag, community gardens and farmer's markets in parks and urban open space. Food production and distribution can link urban and rural communities through common interests and by tapping into the genuine interest in healthy local food.

Our membership in and support for the Land Trust Alliance provides other opportunities to help create better human habitat. Not only do we have a President in Rand who has deep experience and understanding of what it means to work effectively in both cities and rural areas, we also have a great team of LTA staff and volunteer leadership with a wide range of relevant knowledge and skills.

One example of LTA's help: Ten years ago, The Trust for Public Land bought 64 community gardens that had been created by urban gardeners and neighbors on vacant New York City-owned lots – lots that Mayor Giuliani threatened to auction off. The gardeners came to us for help. We raised the money and bought the land from the city, raised more money for improvements and an endowment. But we had always planned to turn the gardens and the ownership back over to the gardeners and we needed a structure to do it. It had been more than two decades since The Trust for Public Land was in the business of helping set up land trusts, so we called on the LTA team, who gave start up help and expertise to two new city land trusts: Bronx Manhattan and Brooklyn Queens. Demetrice Mills, President of Brooklyn Queens and Classie Parker, representing Bronx Manhattan are here at Rally. The first 32 gardens were transferred last June and we are hoping to hand over the rest this fall. We and the new land trusts got great help from LTA and their staffer, Ethan Winter. So as we see more urban land trusts established, let's help them and welcome them into the LTA fold.

Another opportunity is through LTA's participation and leadership with the Administration's America's Great Outdoors initiative, which, thanks to the President's leadership, has a strong focus on urban youth and close-to-home conservation. Among other programs, the report that emerged from the Department of the Interior recommended $100M in matching grants for urban parks and open space to be funded out of the Land and Water Conservation Fund. This critical federal funding source is in jeopardy right now and many of us along with LTA have been doing all we can to preserve it and I hope you are all part of that effort in any way you can be.

Those are just a few ideas. You will have your own as you think about where you can dig in and put what you know and care about at the service of communities in real need. This is rewarding and challenging work. Fortunately we can share our ideas, information and creativity as we move forward.
What better place to talk about changing our movement than here in Aldo Leopold country. Leopold's career as a conservationist followed a time of huge change: the beginning of the public lands movement "America's Best Idea", thanks to leaders like Teddy Roosevelt and Gifford Pinchot. Over his own career, Leopold led a profound revolution in conservation thinking and practice. How many of us have been inspired and guided by his Land Ethic, which, if I can paraphrase it, goes like this: "Land is not a commodity, but a community of which we and all species are members – and we should do nothing to harm that broader community."

That was not the young Leopold, who began his career believing that controlling and eliminating predators was the path to successful game management. But Leopold evolved. Read his essay "Thinking Like a Mountain" about how the experience of watching the fading green fire in the eyes of a dying wolf – a wolf Leopold had shot – helped change his awareness and move him toward a land ethic that embraced both predator and prey.

I'm suggesting that we re-commit to the community in Leopold's land ethic. And while I don't know what the "green fire" is that will inspire us to take on this larger goal for conservation, the stakes are very high. At risk is nature as we know it including us humans, our chance of achieving some kind of balance on this planet, and also the relevance of our own conservation movement.

On closing let me acknowledge that this bolder vision to touch more people's lives is particularly challenging right now. We are living in VUCA times. VUCA, V-U-C-A, is a very timely acronym that came out of the US military and stands for Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity. On a daily basis we cope with deep financial stress, political paralysis, and great and worthy competition for scarce resources. It is a time where our planning horizons are shorter, where we need to be flexible and nimble and scramble hard to do the great conservation work to which we are already so committed.

However there is plenty to be optimistic about. In almost every city I visit, I find excitement and partners working in their own communities and eager for help in creating close-to-home parks and nature and restoring and conserving our natural systems. Land is more affordable. The general public – and we see this in our polling and in the success of voter-approved funding initiatives – is still willing to approve taxes for conservation. The nexus of parks and nature with public health is clearer than ever. And with every passing year, all of us have more experience, more know-how, more impact, and there are more voices lifted in support of this bigger bolder vision for people-oriented conservation.

And finally there's the inspirational power of the remarkable work we do: Work that gives meaning to us and to our communities; work that will be there long after we are gone.

It may be a VUCA world out there, but I'll match the smarts, creativity, skills, knowledge, experience, persistence and passion that we have right here in this room against anything that this economy and this moment can throw at us. In doing this work, we don't ask for "easy": We never have. But we do demand that what we do together make a difference, we demand impact and permanence, and we thrive on the inspiration that comes for our relationship with the land, with nature and with each other.

My heartfelt thanks to each of you for what you do to make a difference. May we go forward together as a dynamic, growing and changing movement and expand our horizons to include the new geographies and new people that will be so important here in the 21st century. Thank you!