



Strong advocates: Marcia and George de Garmo have demonstrated unwavering dedication to land conservation efforts in Virginia. With Linda Armbrust, MFHA's Northern Virginia District Representative.

Leading Conservation Efforts by Example

Middleburg Hunt Landowners Honored with Inaugural District Conservation Award

BY MARCIA BRODY | PHOTO BY LIZ CALLAR

Foxhunting cannot continue without land conservation, a truism that is an oft-repeated mantra of MFHA. Toward that end, the association instituted District Conservation Awards, to recognize conservation efforts in the various MFHA districts, and to inspire future land conservation efforts among members of the foxhunting family. Although

the program has been under discussion for a few years, it took the efforts of the Northern Virginia district representative and Blue Ridge Joint-MFH Linda Armbrust, who in the words of fellow conservationist and Fairfax Hunt member Steffanie Burgevin, “simply took the bit and ran with it,” to transform an idea into reality for 2011.

Armbrust cajoled eight out of the nine hunts in her

Northern Virginia MFHA district to put forward applications for the district award, and then approached MFHA 1st Vice President and Joint-MFH of the Iroquois Hunt Jack Van Nagell to evaluate the applications. Van Nagell has long been active in conservation, and was part of the Iroquois Hunt team recognized for its exemplary conservation efforts on behalf of foxhunting with the 2005

THERE IS NO GREATER THREAT to our sport than the loss of hunting venue; no more painful loss than the serenity and peace of provided by the pastoral scene. There is no greater injustice than not to recognize those people and organizations that toil to keep us close to the land and the wild animals that enhance our very existence.

—MFHA

national MFHA Hunting Habitat Conservation Award.

The inaugural MFHA District Conservation Award was presented to Marcia and George de Garmo, nominated by Middleburg Hunt Joint Masters Penny Denegre and Jeff Blue. Armbrust presented the de Garmos with their award in a winners' circle ceremony between races at the Virginia Fall Race Meet on October 1. Racegoers heard:

It is a privilege for the MFHA to present the Inaugural District Conservation Award to Marcia and George de Garmo. This award is given by the Masters of Foxhounds Association to honor out-

standing individuals who, through their hard work and leadership in land conservancy, have preserved their hunt country and enhanced their community. Foxhunting is based on a love of nature and hunting habitat, and depends upon the preservation of open land for its very existence. Throughout their careers, Marcia and George de Garmo have demonstrated unwavering dedication to land conservation in one of the most beautiful areas in Virginia. Their early utilization of conservation easements, and public opposition to development initiatives by the Disney Corporation, resulted in the preservation of a major portion of the Middleburg hunt country and benefited the entire Middleburg community. More recently, their work to form the Virginia League of Conservation Voters is bringing the public benefits of land conservation to all of the state. The MFHA is grateful to Marcia and George de Garmo for their support of land conservancy and the sport of foxhunting, and is honored to present this award to them.

The de Garmo's conservation activities embrace the spectrum from creating conservation easements on their own lands, to educating and persuading fellow landowners to place their own properties in conservation, and then to the wider realm of political education and awareness that culminated in the creation of the Virginia League of Conservation Voters. The couple, but Marcia especially, has long been active in land preservation.

Denegre traces Marcia's commitment back more than 30 years, pointing out that in 1978, Marcia's parents were one of the first families to place their 287-acre farm, Mount Pleasant, in easement. They had purchased the farm in 1965, in a considerable state of disrepair. "Marcia and her parents rebuilt

stone walls, put in a pond, not only for aesthetics, but also for irrigation and livestock, and restored farm buildings including the main house, which dates from 1772. In 1978 they were one of the first families in the area to put their farm in easement. A new idea, the easement was challenged in court by the IRS and was successfully defended, paving the way for neighbors to do likewise," commented Denegre.

Marcia was quietly instrumental in thwarting the development of a Disney project in the middle of Middleburg hunt country in the mid-1990s and more recently, in organizing the Virginia League of Conservation Voters to spread the benefits of land conservation throughout the state. According to husband George, she had tremendous talent "persuading people to do what they had no intention of doing." In between, both Marcia and George worked quietly with property owners and land trusts to safeguard thousands of acres with conservation easements. "Early on in becoming active in the cause of conservation, I realized that it was not enough for me, and a few friends, to be active," Marcia explains. "Many of the threats to our countryside came from decisions being made by local elected officials. They needed to hear from me, but they really needed to hear from many many people - or see them take the trouble to show up at various public hearings and meetings. No one else was working on encouraging and cajoling and pressing others to show up, speak out, or (later) send e-mails, at least, so that became my role. It then extended into elections, because if you don't have good people in office, it's really hard to get good pro-conservation decisions made — especially in a

fast-growing, pro-development county like Loudoun."

George's role was not only to support that work, but also to spread the word to landowners about the importance and rewards of putting land under conservation easement.

"Both of us learned that you can't do this work wholesale! You work person by person - and that's hard!"

The de Garmos' efforts did not end with Disney's retreat. Their continued passion is evident through their ongoing activity with the Snickersville Turnpike Association and land trust organizations such as the Virginia Outdoors Foundation, the Land Trust of Virginia and the Piedmont Environmental Council. As a result of conservation efforts, there are currently approximately 3.7 million acres of protected lands in Virginia.

Van Nagell was impressed with the overall strength of all of the applications, but chose the work of Marcia and George de Garmo because they combined several different methodologies in their activities. Not only did they conserve their own lands and educate other landowners about the benefits of following their lead, but they went to the next level with their strategizing and involvement in the political process, to promote candidates and legislation favorable to the conservation cause. Van Nagell called the de Garmos "visionary thinkers who understand the importance of conservation" and lauded them as "one of the original families that started the whole concept of land conservation and easements in the Middleburg area."

According to Van Nagell, "We must all be proactive and thinking, love the land and the habitat of the land. If you have it in your heart it will be obvious to most people, and you

will help your community. This is one of the most important things that the MFHA does. If sport is going to continue, we must maintain our hunt country. Nowhere is this more important than in certain critical areas like Virginia, one of the real leaders of foxhunting." Van Nagell pointed out that Virginia has more hunts than any other state, and the hunts are in close geographic proximity if not immediately adjacent to each other, meaning there is no additional land that can be created to expand foxhunting territories. Loudoun County, for example, is one of the fastest growing counties in America, with tremendous pressure coming from developers. He said, "If you don't think ahead, it is practically impossible to stave off the bulldozers coming across the fields."

The MFHA District Award is an educational and promotional tool in its own right. Although the award certainly recognizes the achievements of one individual or group of individuals, the process of encouraging nominations in every district, and from every hunt, will spread awareness of and enthusiasm for conservation efforts in the foxhunting community at large. Dissemination of various conservation tactics and programs will also educate conservation enthusiasts about financial, political and educational tools that may be employed toward land preservation ends. Noted Van Nagell, "We hope that these awards will be very meaningful in many districts and will result in people thinking about conservancy for their own hunting countries." 🐾

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