



Lynn Whitmore Fishing
photo © KHLT

On Common Ground

By Hannah Heimbuch

When we teach our children to work together, we're quick to use the age-old metaphor of 'finding common ground.' That phrase couldn't be more fitting for the partnership that's gradually developed between the Kachemak Heritage Land Trust and Kachemak Moose Habitat, Inc. (KMHI). While the diverse organizations at work in a city or borough are constantly called upon to seek such commonality, these two organizations take the philosophical and literal meaning of that advice to heart.

According to KHMI board president Lynn Whitmore, the why is the easy part — open space, and moose. He likes them, and he'd like to keep them around. "I'm a very large user of the resource," Whitmore said. "I'm a moose hunter, a bird hunter, I have a terrible fishing habit. I fish all the time. So I use our resources a lot. The key," he said, "is giving back more to the resource than you take from it. If everybody did that, if all these people in this community who use these resources put the same amount of time back into taking care of those resources, our resources would be in a lot better shape. How to do that,"

Whitmore said, "starts with creating meaningful relationships between individuals, boards, leaders, and all other manner of decision makers." Whitmore has been with KHMI since its incorporation 15 years ago. That time, and his many years on Fish and Game advisory boards, has taught him a thing or two about common ground. For starters, it's sometimes hard to find, but not impossible. While local governments and nonprofits may sometimes find themselves at loggerheads, Whitmore believes a persistent search for common ground and quality communication can pull down fences. That's why he's stuck around for so long.

"You find out that you can cause change to happen," Whitmore said. "You can do positive things. And I think that motivates a lot of people in their pastimes and in their jobs. You see results. And you see positive changes and you watch people work together that have always been on opposite sides of the fence."

As he seeks to fulfill KHMI's mission to support essential moose habitat, Whitmore said he and his fellow board members have

found many ways to protect open spaces. And that doesn't always mean purchasing land to protect in perpetuity. The organization does buy land, but it also accepts land donations, encourages other entities to earmark their land for open space, supports the land conservation efforts of other organizations, and keeps regular contact with private owners near or in essential habitat.

The KHMI relationship with the land trust is equally diverse, as they explore ways to support their mutual interest in preserving open space. "As this has gone on we find ourselves having an unpredicted symbiotic relationship with the land trust," Whitmore said, "because there's properties that come available that they're not comfortable with." The two groups have mutually beneficial goals, but different parameters and restrictions. "More than one time the land trust has passed on a piece of property and we've acquired it," Whitmore said. "That being said," he added, "the two organizations don't compete for land or grants, they simply work alongside each other to cover more ground."

These efforts fit in with the piece-by-piece philosophy of habitat protection that KHMI operates under. "If you wait and try to get that one big magic block, it's impossible to do," Whitmore said. This is why they aren't fighting to buy up huge tracts of land, but gradually pursuing good opportunities at the right time and right place. "You try to get them in the general area, then slowly you pick up the pieces around it," Whitmore said, "and then the puzzle fits together and you have a large enough block to have an impact on winter moose habitat."

KHMI focuses on land that provides essential feeding, travel and quiet zones for the Kenai Peninsula's moose population. They outright own more than 1,000 acres in the Homer/Anchor River area. "We direct a lot of our interest around the Beluga wetlands because that's the remaining cover for our moose herd, for the Homer Bench Herd," Whitmore said, "and the Anchor River bottom because that's a migration corridor. When it comes to making that a reality, a little flexibility on how land is set aside comes in handy," he said, "especially when it comes to establishing a tradition of habitat protection."

"When you are in this business and you want to set a precedent," Whitmore said, "you try to set an easy precedent. And not push and fight and beat somebody up. Doing that doesn't get you very far." Whitmore can list examples of how honest and amicable conversation has led to real and lasting land protection in these vital areas. These conversations — whether with borough managers, private landowners, or nonprofit leaders — foster relationships that lead to positive change, one way or another.

"We don't need to own property," Whitmore said. "If it gets put in habitat by the borough then I'm happy. In a stretch of prime habitat in the Anchor River bottom," he said, "land parcels owned by KHMI, the Department of Natural Resources, and the Kachemak Heritage Land Trust together make up a tract of land that is very valuable to the local moose." The wildlife don't seem to care that it's owned by several different entities, so neither does Whitmore. If it feeds the moose, and has some promise of longevity, he's pleased.

"We've hired the land trust to administer fish and wildlife grants, because I have no staff," Whitmore said. "So if we have a big project like that we'll work through them."

The land trust and KHMI are able to work together in other ways. KHMI has also supported various land trust efforts, such as funding to print educational booklets about moose and habitat. "This is the only way I know of keeping our moose around," Whitmore said of his work with KHMI.

"If you live here for the natural beauty of wildlife and land," he said, "for the fish and the meat and the natural resources abounding in our Alaskan life, then it makes sense to expend time and effort to protect it. 'Why do you live here?' Think about that," he said. His own answers are many, and are most often linked closely with the natural world. "Well, it's that view," he said. "And how about the wildlife? I had to stop and stare at a coyote on the beach road this morning on the way in here. There's moose around there, and he's down there trying to scratch a living out just like the rest of us. And that's why I live here. I like that stuff."

But in the face of development and consumption and climate change, those things we so highly value are not thriving on their own. "There's not a resource up here that's building. What resource is growing here?" Whitmore asked. "None that I know of. From far out west in the deep ocean to the steamer clams in Kachemak Bay."

There are, however, people and organizations that seek to chip away at the umbrella effort to protect land, to find common ground for thriving. On this peninsula, in this time and moment in space, KHMI and the Kachemak Heritage Land Trust are doing that side by side. ✧