

ENVIRONMENT

How a friendship forged at Wolf Ridge helped protect the outdoor classroom

A unique partnership will permanently protect 928 acres of North Shore habitat, ensuring future generations can learn from the land.

By **Mya Sommers**
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Students gather at Sawmill Creek at the Wolf Ridge Environmental Learning Center. The Clean Water, Land and Legacy Amendment of 2008 helped to fund the conservation easement that ensures continued education at the creek. (Wolf Ridge Environmental Learning Center)

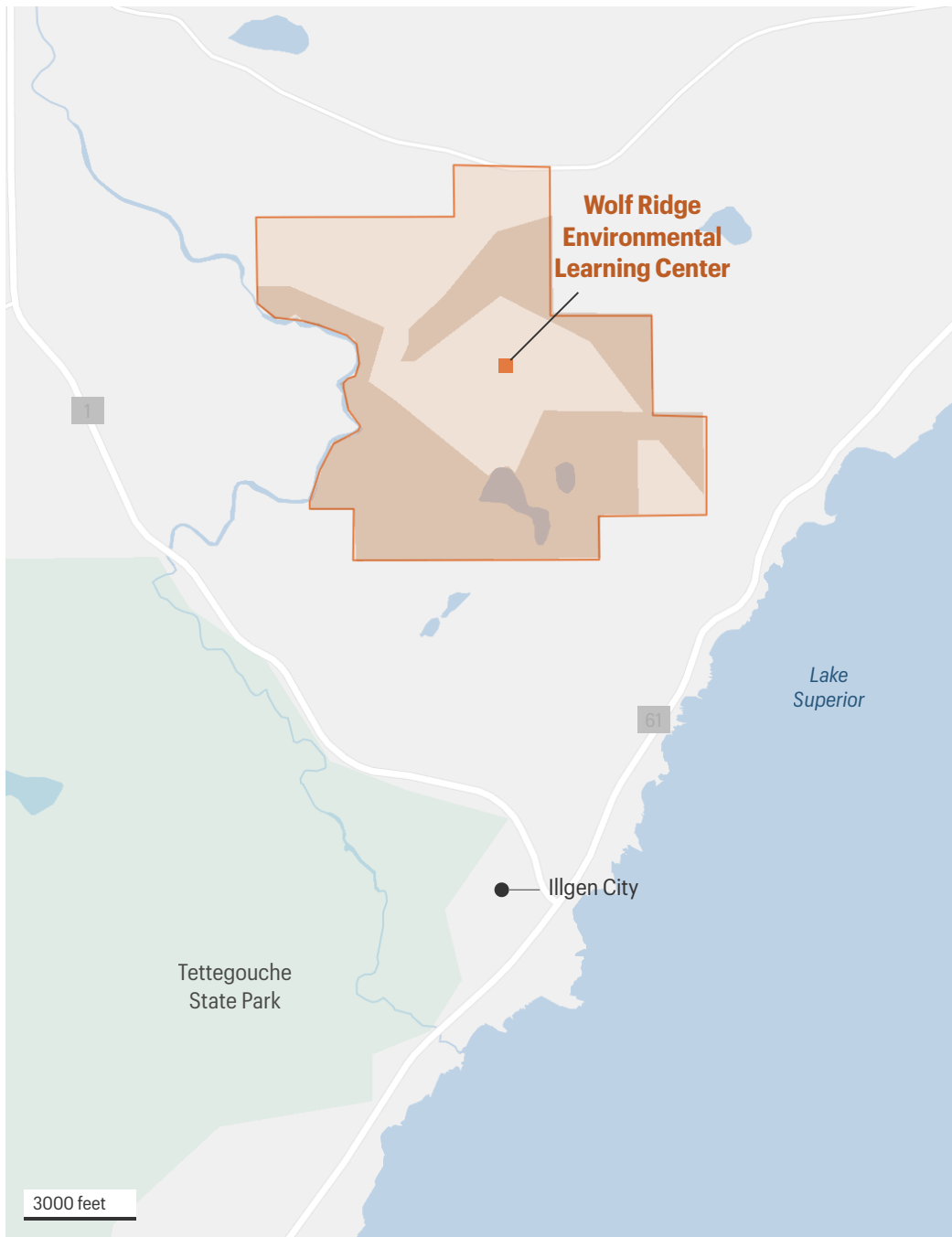
Peter Smerud was watching the land around him change.

A surge in development had in a matter of decades transformed Minnesota's North Shore where he was serving as executive director of the Wolf Ridge Environmental Learning Center. Smerud was seeing "houses on top of hills that you never thought possible to build upon," he said.

Smerud had discussed ways of protecting the land where Wolf Ridge operated many times, but it wasn't until three years ago - during a phone call with longtime friend Jim Manolis - that the idea grew into a plan.

That plan has now come to fruition with the creation of a conservation easement that will protect almost half of the center's 2,000 acres. Smerud said he expects the agreement to preserve the land as an ecological classroom for generations.

Located in Finland, Minn., Wolf Ridge has operated in some form for more than 50 years, providing students from throughout the region with educational programs, research opportunities and camps year-round. Its landscape is home to critical waterways, rare plant communities and wildlife. And 40 years ago, it's where Smerud and Manolis met.



Learning center lands
 928-acre conservation easement

Map source: OpenStreetMap • Mark Boswell, The Minnesota Star Tribune

“You never know how things could change long into the future,” said Manolis, who is now director of forest strategy and stewardship at the [Nature Conservancy \(TNC\)](#). “If ownership had to change for that property, [land development] could happen.”

The easement, announced earlier this month, is the result of a partnership between Wolf Ridge and TNC. The international nonprofit has a track record of working with partners to

preserve lands throughout Minnesota. Manolis saw an opportunity to do the same for Wolf Ridge, where he was once a student and an intern.

“We have funding for that,” Smerud recalled Manolis saying during the phone call. “And I remember, I got kind of tingly.”



The view atop Marshall Mountain at the Wolf Ridge Environmental Learning Center, which resides on the conserved land. Lake Superior can be seen in the distance. (Rich Biske/The Nature Conservancy)

Educational and environmental preservation

Conservation easements are permanent legal agreements that serve to protect an area’s natural habitat and resources, and they allow landowners to keep full ownership of the property.

Smerud knew about these kinds of agreements, but Wolf Ridge was more than just its land; it was a classroom, and its lessons needed protection too. This is why the conservation easement was designed carefully to allow outdoor education to continue on protected lands, Smerud said.

The agreement excludes areas of the campus that are developed – such as lodging and dining – as well as areas that may need buildings in the future, but it does allow for things

like trails, life-jacket racks or even research shelters on the 928 acres that are being preserved.

Funding for the Wolf Ridge project came from the Clean Water, Land and Legacy Amendment of 2008. “It’s really what that funding was designed for,” Manolis said. “To deliver lasting benefits for people and nature.”



Nicole Johnson, 11, points at a perch in a freshwater aquarium during the indoor portion of a frozen lake studies class at the Wolf Ridge Environmental Learning Center on Feb. 13, 2018, in Finland, Minn. (Aaron Lavinsky/The Minnesota Star Tribune)

Conservation easements require an area to have valuable features, such as natural resources, recreational use or cultural significance. The protection takes place by transferring certain property rights to the partner organization – in this case, TNC. Wolf Ridge keeps ownership of the land but loses the right to develop it. The permanence of conservation easements ensure the land will be protected in perpetuity.

The high ecological value of Wolf Ridge property was a large contributor to its protection. “These areas are ranked as [having] high biodiversity value by the Minnesota Biological Survey,” Manolis said.

“Tributaries like Sawmill Creek are a critical refuge for species like brook trout,” Smerud said. “And so preserving the land along [Sawmill Creek and Baptism River] is an act of

helping, in this case, researchers like the DNR to understand and better enshrine this future protection for critical species on one of the biggest waterways.”

Wolf Ridge’s tributaries have served as a model before. After a road culvert on the center’s land was replaced with one that better supported aquatic species, upstream spawning of brook trout increased threefold, and trout continued to spawn in subsequently smaller tributaries, Smerud said. “Even some of the fisheries managers had never really foreseen that potential,” he added.

A full circle moment

Manolis was 10 years old when he visited Wolf Ridge for the first time. He joined scientists on a journey to a bear den where they were performing research. They allowed Manolis to hold one of the bear cubs.

“That was just a really inspiring experience for me,” he said. “[It] helped inspire my career in conservation.”

Manolis later had an internship at Wolf Ridge, where he and his students visited a beaver lodge and skied cross-country. It wasn’t long before he met Smerud.



Ten-year-old Jim Manolis holds a bear cub at Wolf Ridge's first location in Isabella, Minn., in 1976. The center would later relocate in 1988 to the now-protected lands in Finland, Minn. (Jim Manolis/The Nature Conservancy)

Manolis worked for the DNR for 19 years in conservation and forestry roles before joining TNC in 2014. Manolis and TNC have a long work history with Wolf Ridge on projects like forest management and tree planting.

“We’ll continue that relationship,” Manolis said. “It’s just a great continuation of a good collaboration,”

What started as a simple phone call “became a vision,” Smerud said. “Something that [Manolis] and I, and a tremendous number [of staff] – for both TNC [and] Wolf Ridge – have now created for children of Minnesota and around the region: to come and have that space in perpetuity, to connect it to nature and to the land and the water resources that we all rely on.”

Following an unpredictable timeline, the conservation easement was completed just four days before Smerud retired, ending a four-decade stint at the head of the organization.

New executive director Vanessa Riegler assumed the role June 8.

“I’m stepping in such a beautiful moment to just bring things forward,” said Riegler, who was formerly executive director of the Aloha Foundation. “I hope that we can utilize this moment in helping spread the word, get the message out, get more people to this place.”

Having relocated from Vermont, she is living in a Wolf Ridge dorm for the next three months to immerse herself in nature and meet staff.

“The more we can connect people with the places around them, the more they will do to protect those places, the more they learn about themselves,” she said. “I think that’s the greatest gift that we can bring.”



A chickadee perches on the head of Bethlehem Academy student Matthew Croke during a birding class at the Wolf Ridge Environmental Learning Center on Feb. 13, 2018, in Finland, Minn. (Aaron Lavinsky/The Minnesota Star Tribune)

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