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## Property Rights

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# Land Grabbing Secrets of the Conservancy

Never heard of The Nature Conservancy? Well, that's probably no accident. It keeps a low profile by design. When you run scams like it does, you don't want to be notorious.

So let's lift the rock off these slugs and shine a very bright spotlight on a few of their most outrageous games.

The Nature Conservancy is the richest, most powerful environmental colossus in the world. It claims 680,000 individual members and 405 corporate members operating out of eight regional offices and fifty chapter offices across the nation. The Nature Conservancy has assets of almost \$1 Billion and has an annual operating budget of over \$300 million and a staff of 1150 people.

**THE SCAM** - real estate. **THE HOOK** - "conservation through private action." According to the party line, The Nature Conservancy simply buys land with private money and sets up nature reserves, thereby helping the environment without infringing on anybody. What a wonderful, charitable idea. Ah, if only it were true.

**THE VICTIMS** - unsuspecting property owners (many times elderly). **THE METHODS** - hide behind phony corporations; serve as a shell for government agencies; work behind the scenes with more visible environmental groups to intimidate property owners into selling. **THE GOAL** - money and power.

The Nature Conservancy frequently uses phony front companies to get land from owners who wouldn't knowingly sell to an environmentalist group.

It used this tactic to purchase most of the islands off the coast of Virginia, containing 40,000 acres and sixty miles of coastline. In doing so The Nature Conservancy was able to

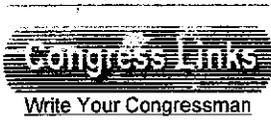
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stop all private development and control the use of the land, damaging the tax base, killing thousands of jobs, and severely curbing the locals from hunting, fishing, camping and joy riding on the islands.

But don't think the purpose was to preserve these beautiful, pristine islands for nature. The Nature Conservancy did bar others from developing the land - but not itself. Far from it. At a huge profit, the Conservancy developed up-scale homes for the rich.

But how is that bad? If they do it with private money what's wrong with it? Isn't that just free enterprise?

The problem is The Nature Conservancy is a non-profit organization with tax exempt status and they maintain that status because of their tightly protected image as benevolent conservationists. Moreover, property owners on the islands wanted to invest in development and thought they were selling their land to developers. They were aware of and frightened by the Nature Conservancy and would never have sold to the group. That's why the Conservancy hid behind a phony land company, grabbed power, foiled the development and made a huge profit on tax-exempt money. Today much of the coast of Virginia is off-limits to tourists and other development.

Other times, The Nature Conservancy acts as a shell to a government agency to acquire land cheaply and sell it to the government at a huge profit. Again, conservation is not the goal.

One of its favorite scams goes something like this. Your grandmother owns land close to a historic site or a wilderness area. The government wants the land to expand a park but grandmother won't sell.

One day a representative of the Nature Conservancy shows up, well dressed, smiling, but concerned. He tells your grandmother that he's just learned that the government intends to take her land after she passes away. She won't be able to sell it or give it to her children. However, he can offer a solution.

If Grandmother will sell her land to The Nature Conservancy he can assure her that the land will stay in private hands and not be taken by the government.

Well, a relieved grandmother is much happier and she agrees to sell. However, says the nice man from The Nature Conservancy, because the government has threatened to take the land, its value is now only about half its reported market value. That's all he'll be able to pay her. Well, thinks

grandmother, half is better than nothing, so she sells.

The next day our friend from The Nature Conservancy makes a call to the Department of the Interior informing them that their plan has worked. The whole thing had been pre-arranged between them before anyone ever knocked on Grandmother's door. As arranged, The Nature Conservancy then sells the land to the Interior Department FOR FULL MARKET VALUE PLUS OVERHEAD, FINANCING AND HANDLING CHARGES.

Hundreds of complaints have been recorded concerning the practices of the Conservancy's land grabbing operation. One family in Indiana had to sue to get back their father's land that was signed over to The Nature Conservancy when he was very old and mentally incompetent to handle his affairs. Agents of the Conservancy had helped him in changing documents that left his entire estate to The Nature Conservancy. The family won back their property but only after being forced to spend a fortune in legal fees.

Unfortunately space allows only a minor look at the mammoth operation of The Nature Conservancy. Its power, wealth and control is almost beyond comprehension. Yet it is able to maintain an image of idealism and concern for the environment.

The truth is The Nature Conservancy is really little more than a massive, ruthless real estate machine using its tax exempt status and ties to the government to create wealth for itself.

So If ever you receive a knock on the door from a smiling representative of The Nature Conservancy, slam it in his face and rush to you neighbors to sound the alarm, or the saying "there goes the neighborhood" could take on a completely different meaning.

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