

Conservation Law Center Protecting Land and Water

“There was a hole in the conservation community,” says Christian Freitag, executive director of the Conservation Law Center (CLC). Land trusts and other nonprofit environmental organizations were fighting to preserve land and water resources, “but many couldn’t afford sound legal advice.”

To fill that hole, W. William Weeks founded CLC at Indiana University in 2005 to provide free legal counsel to conservation organizations primarily in Indiana and the Midwest, although recent projects have taken the center’s staff of attorneys, advocates, and educators as far away as Africa.

Today, CLC projects fall into three main categories: land conservation,

water, and biodiversity.

Since its founding, CLC has protected more than 30,000 acres, including the Busseron Creek Area near Terre Haute. Busseron, Freitag says, “was one of the wildest places in Indiana. We were the main nonprofit behind putting the money together to buy the 4,000 acres. It is now owned by the state and open to the public.”

The second focus is water and wetland conservation, improving water quality, and managing water resources sustainably. That includes work along Indiana’s Lake Michigan coastline. “The Indiana dunes were surrounded by heavy



Christian Freitag, executive director of the Conservation Law Center.
Photo by Sarah Slover

industry,” Freitag says. “We led efforts to prevent privatization of the dunes. We sued the state to take over the beaches, and they are now public beaches.”

The third focus of CLC’s work is biodiversity. One project took staff to Costa Rica to study habitat preservation for a species of macaw. Another took them to Africa. In Tanzania, where, for example, elephants could raid a farm, “we were asked to research laws affecting human-wildlife contact,” Freitag says.

Closer to home, CLC is working on conservation of the Indiana bat, an endangered species.

The center also runs an environmental law clinic at IU’s Mauer School of Law, with a focus on conservation. “The students work with us on our projects,” says Freitag. They even accompany CLC staff on foreign projects. “It’s a great opportunity for the students,” he says. “Most won’t go into environmental law, but they will be more sensitive to environmental issues. Teaching really is at the core of what we do.”

IU provides the students, tech support, and office space for the center, but its conservation projects are funded by foundation grants and private donations.

—Janet Mandelstam

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