

Beau's Turn.

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Ted Turner's youngest son isn't trying to save the world--just a few huge, wild pieces of it.

THE VALLEY IS textbook Montana: a perfect roll of golden grasses stretching as far as the eye can see, bisected by a flashing stream and edged by jumbled granite peaks, which, much of the year, lie draped in snow. As herds of bison drift the tawny hillsides like cloud shadows on this Thursday morning in late September, the land seems as unpeopled as any place on Earth.

But far down inside the valley's center--knee-deep in the stream and tossing a tight flyfishing loop--is a solitary human: Beau Turner. He's the 32-year-old son of Ted Turner and a man who, at this moment, stands as one of the lesser-known but increasingly central players in America's new environmentalist mosaic.

Six-foot-three and sinewy--with the identical mix of Southern manners, brass-tacks brashness and Gatling gun oratory his father trademarked--Turner is pondering Cherry Creek's swirl. He's scouting trout-holding zones and bank-grass shadows, squinting and craning his neck as he works a small, pale hopper pattern along the bank of a rocky pool. Bang!--the creek erupts.

"Ho! Mr. Brown Trout," Turner says, grinning. "Always good to see you." After a minute of playing the fish, which leaps two or three times, he brings it to hand: a 12-inch specimen, its back mottled with pale spots. He regards the fish for a few seconds, removes the barbless hook with the efficiency of a tailor plucking a stray thread, and releases it back to the stream.

"Not bad, huh?" he says, glancing up and still grinning. "This creek's a long way from how it was when we got here. Cattle grazing had collapsed its banks. The lowest four miles were so silted over it didn't even connect to the Madison downstream in summer--it just dried up. It was dying."

Now, 10 years after Ted Turner bought this place--the 113,000-acre Flying D Ranch, located about 15 miles southwest of Bozeman--Cherry Creek runs clear and gorgeous. It's also a single thread in a sweeping and sometimes controversial Turner-monogrammed blanket of projects to improve the Earth's health by example. Over the past 15 years, Turner-the-Elder has been acquiring ecologically unique lands across North and South America and then nurturing biological diversity across them until, like this valley, each property absolutely bristles with life.

It's a project that has made Ted Turner the largest private landowner in the United States. With holdings of more than 1.5 million acres, he owns more of North America than the similarly missioned environmental organization The Nature Conservancy. And much of this acquisition and environmental tweaking has been ministered to by his son, Beau. A master's-trained biologist, he lives near the ranch and has spent the past decade implementing his father's vision alongside Russell Miller, manager of Turner's Western properties, and Mike Phillips, who joined the Turner team in 1997 following a stellar career at the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, where he managed wolf reintroductions in North Carolina and Yellowstone National Park.

On the Flying D and all across Turner country, the three have supervised the exchange of traditional livestock with harvestable native bison; reintroduced habitat-appropriate threatened and endangered species; forsworn pesticides; mn off invasive plant and weed species; removed hundreds of miles of fence to create open grasslands; and rehabilitated streams and watercourses using bank stabilization, streambed recontouring and revegetation.

It's all part of a larger environmental plan--outlined by groups like the Wildlands Project and the Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative--to conserve biological diversity and reweave connections between large national parks, wildlife refuges and private habitat areas across North America and beyond. Philosophically, ecosystem protection is a giant leap forward from the earlier environmentalist ideal of narrow and specific fixes--concern about a single pollutant in the air or water, for instance--and Beau Turner, his colleagues and, of course, his father have stepped up and committed their time, energy and money toward making this plan a success. By reconnecting these big swatches of landscape, many of this era's best environmental thinkers believe the tapestry of life--from wolves to butterflies--will have freer movement over the planet, helping them avoid the species-threatening effects of inbreeding, habitat destruction and disease.

The stream Beau Turner is currently standing in, for example, has been rendered such a perfect habitat that the state of Montana requested it as a reintroduction site for the threatened westslope cutthroat trout: a situation that has landed the Turner team inside a small public-opinion firestorm. Though it's not something that seems to daunt any of them much.

Right now, as Turner releases a fish, he's far more interested in the faint veils of silt still covering a few flat stones in Cherry Creek's most remote eddies than in the morning's "Letters to the Editor" in the local paper.

"Letting the silt wash out over the last few years," he says, "that's as much a part of returning this creek to optimum health as anything. Nobody wants to make that a big confrontational deal. But if you take that next step, when you agree to promote a threatened species, to support ecosystem health and biodiversity

on a larger scale, well, that's a leadership position and a sacrifice for the common good not everyone's comfortable with."

With a ziiiiinnng of the drag, Turner strips some flyline off the reel and casts again. The rod works rhythmically back and forth. "It's also the difference between someone who's going to take steps to improve the world," he says, "and someone who's going to let this whole thing slowly collapse. It comes down to this: Will you make sacrifices to help the planet? Or do you want to stand back and let it die?"

ASK BEAU TURNER where he fits into the global environmental community, and he'll likely shrug. When talking about Turner-based projects and holdings, he often invokes Miller, the Turner organization's laconic 48-year-old ubermanager. Or he'll talk about 41-year-old Phillips and the efforts he has made in returning endangered animals to the properties while networking Turner environmental programs with federal and state wildlife agencies and private environmental groups.

Or he'll bring up his sister, Laura Seydel: At 36, she's the oldest of Ted's children, and along with her husband, Atlanta lawyer Rutherford Seydel, she has started the environmental organization Georgia/Chattahoochie Riverkeeper in Atlanta. Or maybe he'll mention his older brother, Rhett, a filmmaker currently at work on a documentary about pollinators; or brother Ted Jr., a venture capitalist-- "He's the conservative among us, the sounding board for the rest of the family," he says. Ted Jr. and his wife, Leslie, started the St. Mary's Riverkeeper in Jacksonville, Florida. And, of course, he'll constantly remind you that all this relates back to his father, whose unswerving environmental commitment--not to mention stores of cash--makes the whole endeavor spin.

Yet make no mistake: In a family of green-minded, green-pocketed people, no one is more tapped into the environmental movement's players and principles than Beau (see sidebar, page 73). "With everything the Turner family does for the environment, they're all pretty amazing," says one observer. "But if the question is: Who'll control the land and wildlife-management programs after Ted can't do it anymore? Who'll take on that big leadership role? The smart money's on Beau."

But if you grew up a member of Ted Turner's five-child brood, working to support the environment has always been simply another part of every day. Living first in Atlanta and, after 1981, at Turner's Hope Plantation in low-country South Carolina, the drumbeat of life was always hard work, a healthy heap of often-rollicking outdoor fun and environmentally correct sacrifices toward making the world a better place.

"I remember my dad in Atlanta, before we moved to Hope," says Jenny Garlington, who, at 31, is the youngest of the Turner children and a writer and producer for the weekly Earth Matters program on CNN. "The local Mercedes dealership gave Dad this huge car--but he didn't want it. He drove this tiny Toyota because it got good gas mileage and didn't pollute as much. He gave the Mercedes away and kept

driving the Toyota. For school carpools, he'd pile us and the neighbor kids into that car and drive us on his way to the office. We were packed in there. But Dad wasn't gonna change cars, even if it was a free Mercedes. That's the example he set, and we learned from it."

Later, at Hope, improving the plantation's environment was expected of all the Turner children. One particularly memorable summer, the kids were ordered to pull thick, choking rafts of duckweed from the plantation's ponds and ditches. "We'd all be waist-deep in there," Beau says, "pulling and sweating, wolf spiders biting you, snakes and alligators in the weeds."

And since the paterfamilias was--and remains--deeply opposed to the wasteful excesses of air conditioning, possession of oscillating fans at Hope Plantation became "valuable as gold," says Jenny. "We almost died in the summers. If you didn't have a fan that worked well, you went around the house at night, after everybody had gone to sleep, and you'd steal their fan! Then, in the morning, they'd come in and find you with fans on all the chairs around your bed."

Upon graduation from The Citadel with a business degree, the idea of becoming a Bigger-Picture environmentalist had yet to strike. "I was planning to go to Wharton Business School," Turner says. "I was going to get my MBA, be in finance. One summer before, though, I came out to work on the Flying D and met guys from Yale and Stanford who were working as cowboys, and I realized there was a life beyond the usual path. All of a sudden, I was like: This is the life I want. I want to work outdoors, with the environment. I'd landed in heaven."

He enrolled in graduate-level wildlife and forestry management studies at Montana State University, finishing the class-work in 1993--though his graduate thesis has yet to be completed. Turner stresses, however, that he will finish his thesis: "I'm just on sabbatical from it," he says, "and--obviously--I'm using my training every day."

He lays the reason he hasn't finished it at the feet of practicality. "I looked at what Dad was doing, buying up these ecologically important places, and the fun he was having doing it," Turner says, "and I thought: I'll write my thesis eventually. Right now, there's a lot of value and work I can bring to what Dad's doing. And I think I've been a sizable help to him."

His father is quick to second this assessment. "I'm very pleased with what Beau's doing," Ted Turner says. "His hard work and the high quality of it are a real source of pleasure for me. We work very closely together on the properties and off, and I've worked hard to change our relationship from a parent-child relationship to an adult relationship. That's not easy for a parent to do."

Across the properties, biodiversity programs stretch the imagination. Aside from overseeing 1.5 million acres of land, the Turners work with Miller inside a national co-op that sells bison to groceries and high-end restaurants. Father and son also manage (with Phillips) a kaleidoscopic array of endangered species reintroductions: aplomado falcons, desert bighorn sheep, black prairie dogs, California condors and black-footed ferrets in New Mexico; westslope cutthroat trout in Montana; red-cockaded woodpeckers in Florida. Partnered with state and federal agencies, Turner lands are also places where endangered and wide-ranging predators--like gray and Mexican wolves--can be captive-bred and acclimatized to the outdoors in pens before being released on public land.

Then there's the work Ted Turner and his children do off the ranches. Every three months, the seven Turner Foundation trustees convene in Atlanta to consider roughly 4800 grant applications. It's part of the \$25 million-a-year philanthropic organization established with a portion of Ted Turner's assets after merging Turner Broadcasting with Time Warner in 1996. And before each of these meetings, family members often spend days poring over the applications, driven by a family-imposed fear of being caught flat-footed at the impending vote.

Seeing 4800 environmental grant proposals each year also gives Turner Foundation trustees a unique vista from which to view the broad palette of environmental thinking. Board members, including Beau, often take the initiative to investigate new and promising programs. "I love to do site visits and talk to grantees," he says. "I like to network them when I can. It gives me a good idea of which issues bear further looking into. All of us, I think, learn a lot from the groups coming to us with proposals."

Or, as the environmentalist, Hudson Riverkeeper founder and Turner-family friend Robert F. Kennedy Jr. puts it: "The whole Turner family has provided a needed dimension to the environmental movement, which had left hunters, fishermen and land-management people behind. They've helped regraft that constituency to environmentalism. Beau himself is all heart and spirit; it's infectious. He understands land-management and land-use issues--and he's tireless and very effective at moving that knowledge to others who need it."

Tireless indeed. Upon entering Beau Turner's sphere, don't be surprised if you begin getting 5:30 A.M.--Montana time--telephone calls from him, not to mention 11 P.M. e-mails. "When you're running with Beau," says Mike Rising, his college roommate and now a North Carolina game warden, "you'd better be eating your Wheaties. That's all I can say."

"HEY ... A BROOK TROUT," Turner says with satisfaction. He's fishing a bend in Cherry Creek when a squaretail--lying in a smooth tongue of current below a chute--sucks down his hopper. The 10-incher fights and flashes before coming to hand.

For two hours, as we fish a mile of Cherry Creek, four species of trout are caught and released--brookies, rainbows, cutthroats and browns--the longest perhaps 16 inches. With several of the fish, Turner jokes, the optimum wildlife-management policy is to perform a "long-line release," in which the fish takes the fly but then frees itself at a distance. Today, several times, Turner curses his adeptness at it.

As habitat, the creek is perfect. Along its banks, if you look closely, you can see where rocks and boulders have been added to redirect flow; where shade-giving willows and alders have been planted; where biodegradable jute netting has been laid on crumbly banks to protect them, allowing stabilizing grasses to grow through the net and secure the soil beneath. "Most every inch of this creek," Turner says, "has been worked on in one way or another. But then, like I say, it was in bad shape when we got here."

But it's the fish--not the streamwork--that's landed Turner in a teapot-sized tempest. In the mid-1990s, the State of Montana approached the Turner organization with a proposition: Could Cherry Creek become a reintroduction site for the threatened westslope cutthroat trout? Though still extant in the wild, the fish is petitioned for addition to the Endangered Species List.

Unfortunately, to create optimum habitat, the creek's other trout species would have to be removed or poisoned-out (a practice used by other states and the National Park Service as the antecedent to wild trout reintroductions). Initially, the entreaty was declined by the Turner organization. Montana could reintroduce the wild fish in Cherry Creek's drainage on federal lands, but disrupting the recently upgraded environment on the Flying D precluded a reintroduction on Turner property.

Over the next few years, however, and with the 1997 establishment of the Turner Endangered Species Fund, the reintroduction idea began to gain currency. But while most everyone agrees that a healthier environment is a good thing, when this policy promotes one animal over another, things get sticky.

It's not the first time such ideological collisions have arisen. In New Mexico, where the Turner-owned ranches host captive-breeding and outdoor-acclimation sites for federal wolf-reintroduction programs on adjacent lands, local ranchers have been voluble for years.

"I don't know Mr. Turner; I've never met him," says William Hunt, a fourth-generation New Mexico rancher. "And I have no criticism of what he does on his own land. But when his ideas about supporting predator populations start killing my cattle, well, I've got a big problem with that."

And to no one's surprise, after 1997, when the Turner Endangered Species Fund approved the westslope cutthroat reintroduction, announcing it would also foot roughly two-thirds of the project's \$475,000 bill, a small but vocal band of Montana citizens began to yowl.

"Their endangered species program is a noble act," says Bill Fairhurst, a longtime neighbor of the Flying D. "But the westslope cutthroat has yet to be listed as endangered. So why destroy the diverse population of fish in Cherry Creek to protect a fish not yet listed? This is still wild and primitive country, and while it may not be so pristine as it once was, I hate to see people stepping in and upsetting the existing balance."

Judging by letters in the Bozeman Daily Chronicle, arguing the fate of Cherry Creek has become southwest Montana's favorite parlor game. Almost daily, someone weighs in with an opinion over the wisest direction to take. And Fairhurst and his small organization, Friends of the Cherry Creek Cutthroat, seem to be the lone voices unilaterally criticizing the current plan.

Still, on the editorial page, the dialogue on ideas about the proper way to dispose of the creek's current trout--suggesting which poisons might kill the fish but not the aquatic environment or analyzing whether live-shocking and relocating existing fish is a possibility--shows that Montanans are engaged and educated in the myriad ways of biodiversity and wildlife management. Because of the dustup, a new round of permits and public comment forums was called for last summer, delaying the project for another year.

"We're starting that permitting study," Beau Turner says. "But the objective fact is that the project will go through. What's always forgotten is that the state of Montana came to us. This isn't the Turners wanting a pure strain of wild trout on their property. The state wants this to happen, and given the aims of the Turner Endangered Species Fund, it now fits our larger plan. So if we need to do additional permitting, that's OK. That's part of working with state and federal agencies; part of doing the job right and doing it well. It's part of thinking long-term."

We continue fishing beneath a warm Montana sun, and at each snaking bend of Cherry Creek, Turner peers stealthily upstream, examining the habitat, appreciating the fish and their behaviors. Like Aldo Leopold, Gifford Pinchot or Teddy Roosevelt before him, he is a sportsman-environmentalist of the Old School. And like Leopold in particular, he often argues that we, as human beings, have nothing less than a moral obligation to protect the natural world.

"It's like the reintroductions in New Mexico," Turner says. "We've reintroduced endangered desert bighorn sheep ... at great expense to our organization. And now, with the wolves being released on the public lands near and around these same ranches, well, we'll lose a few sheep. That's how nature works. If you want to promote real nature, you're going to have to tolerate losing some sheep to reintroduced wolves. That's the cost of keeping wild species alive. Hey, but if you think it's expensive and frustrating to keep these animals around--whoa, buddy--just wait to see how costly it gets when they're completely gone, forever."

WITH THE FLYRODS stowed, Turner has one last thing he wants to show me. After grabbing a hot dog and iced-tea lunch at a gas station in the little town of Gallatin Gateway, 10 miles up the road from the Flying D, we hustle back to another isolated portion of the ranch: a high-country draw called Bull Basin.

Turner pulls a tubular elk call from his truck and takes off at a fast walk over the golden hillsides. Like his father, he's all angles and ideas and energy; his gait is fit and springy, born from years of outdoor activity. It's his last night in Montana before a two-week trip to China, where--as a guest of the United Nations--he's going to study population, water-degradation and economic-development issues. But before he goes, he wants to take a quick survey of the ranch's native elk herd.

We cross the hillsides, working toward the dish-shaped valley set above us. His fiancée, Gannon Hunt, a freelance interior design writer, is back at his house right now, preparing for their December 1999 wedding. Apprehensive as the next groom, Beau Turner wonders how life will change after they are married. There has been talk of children, and he's both excited and a little leery of the grave responsibility of being a good example to them; showing them what's truly important for a life well lived.

After his parents divorced in the 1980s, Turner says he felt distant from his father for a time. "But now, as an adult," he says, "I've come to realize that not everything in every grownup's life is perfect--and to improve it you sometimes have to do things that aren't pleasant. My mom and I have always been close. She and I will always be close. We talk every day. But nowadays, my dad's also gone from being a father to being my best friend. The better I get to know him, the more I find I can still learn from him."

Ahead of us, silhouetted on a hilltop against an electric-blue sunset sky, an enormous bull elk stares across the valley. Its horns are a massive six-by-six; its neck and shoulders are thick and monumentally healthy. We hunker low in a brushy stand of aspen. "Look at that!" Turner whispers sharply, lifting the elk call and bugling and whistling the bull closer.

"Look at that!" he whispers again, as the bull moves down the hill's brow toward us. "The beauty of that! I want my kids to see it someday; their kids to see it."

Before long, with a little patient effort, Beau Turner has called in hundreds of cows and bull elk. The animals--frighteningly wild and large close-up--are moving down the hillside, passing within a few yards of our small patch of trees, oblivious to our being just inside.

An adrenalized hour passes. Cold night begins to fall. Thirty miles below, far down in the dark Gallatin Valley, the soft electric-lamp glow of houses is rising like distant starlight. "I come up here sometimes," Turner says, "just to remind myself why the natural world needs to be preserved; why man needs to work

harder at understanding the planet's systems. Because if we don't, if we let the world down, the blame for losing all this falls on us."

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Beau Turner already has more environmentally oriented jobs than most people have pairs of shoes. He is manager of Turner's Eastern North American and South American properties. He is also one-seventh of the voting board of the Turner Foundation, which--trustered by Ted, Jane Fonda and the five Turner children--gives away \$25 million in grants to environmental and population-based organizations each year. Beyond that, Beau Turner is president of the Turner Endangered Species Fund, a \$1.1 million organization that works with state and federal agencies to reintroduce species teetering at extinction's edge onto Turner lands. Finally, with biologist Mike Phillips, he is charged with stimulating top-drawer ecosystem health across all 1.5 million Turner-owned acres while searching for more ecologically unique land to acquire. The most recent purchase, made last fall, was 200,000 acres of South Dakota prairie.

In addition to these formidable day jobs, however, Turner also advises the United Nations Foundation's environmental office and sits on the directorial boards of perhaps a dozen wildlife and environmental organizations, including The Wildlife Conservation Society/Bronx Zoo, Ducks Unlimited, The Peregrine Fund, the Tall Timbers Research Organization and the The Land Trust Alliance--the last of which promotes deeding of private lands as conservation easements, protecting them permanently from development.

--D.W.