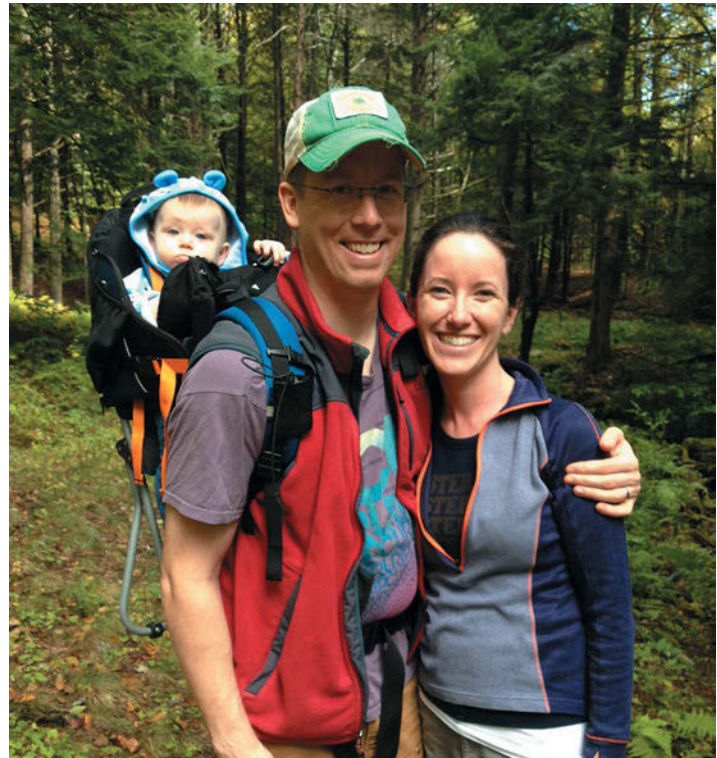




Photos courtesy of the Aquila family

Christina and Marc Aquila's tree farm in Norwich, Vt., is worlds away from Southern California, where they previously lived. The couple is focused on learning and creating a legacy for their two daughters that includes a passion and curiosity about nature.



Time is on Their Side

Younger Landowners Passionate about Conservation are Living Out Their Dreams

BY NICK FORTUNA

Christina and Marc Aquila's tree farm in Norwich, Vt., is about 3,000 miles from their old home in San Diego, but they needn't glance at a map to be reminded that they're living in a whole new world.

Their 43 acres of mixed hardwoods and pine include a pond that is perfect for ice skating during the frigid Northeastern winters, and they sometimes break out their snowshoes for a hike among the trees. During the summer, Marc will take the couple's two young daughters for a canoe ride, and if they work up an appetite, apple trees, blackberry bushes, cranberry bushes and even a peach tree stand at the ready with a healthy treat.

The Aquilas can see their pond through the window as they eat dinner, and the view is nothing like what

they had grown used to in the city. They've seen minks, foxes, beavers, woodchucks, snapping turtles, cardinals, ducks and Canadian geese. Their old city may be home to the famous sports mascot known as the San Diego Chicken, but when the Aquilas see a great blue heron glide over the pasture and land in the pond, they know that they've upgraded their setting.

"There are weird moments when you look out your window and into your forest and see a bear, and you think to yourself, 'Wow, this is normal life in Vermont!'" Christina said.

"We knew that living in California, we weren't going to be able to have the life that we wanted due to the housing prices out there. We both grew up spending



time outside—camping, backpacking and hiking—so it was important to us that we have a space where we could take our kids outside and let them explore. As they're getting older, it's really fun to watch not only what they're capable of doing physically, like climbing up a rock, but also their curiosity and passion about nature."

Christina, 36, is a former dietician who is now focusing on raising her children and dabbling in photography, and Marc, 41, works in admissions and recruitment for the public health program at the Dartmouth Institute on the campus of his alma mater. They're among a sizeable group of young family forest owners who are focused on learning and practicing good forest management practices and passing their passion for conservation on to the next generation.

For young families like the Aquilas who are new to landownership, the learning curve can be steep, but by reaching out to other landowners and conservation organizations like the American Forest Foundation (AFF), they are finding out they don't have to go it alone.

"When we first moved in, it was hard to know what to ask for because we didn't know what we needed," Christina said. "Being able to find a community of landowners who are willing to answer questions has been a big help. Neither of us had ever owned land,

so it's taken some time to figure out what resources are available. That was the biggest challenge when we first moved in—figuring out, 'OK, we own this. Now what do we do?'"

Christina said the previous owner's land management plan has been a good resource, and a consulting forester has pointed them toward invaluable programs such as the Natural Resources Conservation Service's Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), which provides funding and technical assistance to help landowners manage their property. Over the summer, the Aquilas learned that their first application for EQIP funding had been approved, which will help them reclaim their forest from invasive plant species that had grown unchecked under the previous owner.

The Aquilas also have benefited from the Woods, Wildlife and Warblers program, a partnership of groups such as Audubon Vermont, the Vermont Tree Farm Committee, Vermont Woodlands Association and AFF. Its focus is on providing southern Vermont landowners with the knowledge, tools and resources they need to better care for their woods and wildlife. The program offers free, no-obligation services to landowners such as informational materials and site visits from a woodland expert.

The Aquilas said their main goal is to ensure that their forestland remains undeveloped and becomes increasingly healthy so that it can sustain the wildlife that brings the family so much joy.

"Having both of our daughters out here and realizing what kind of life we can have with them together as a family, we know we made the right choice when we moved out here," Christina said.

