

WOODS 'N WATER™

JULY 2025
47TH YEAR 12TH ISSUE

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**Freedom,
Fireworks
& Fishing**

**Jake Paul Buys
Ga. Plantation
for \$39 Million**

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THE KOHLER CHRONICLES:

Advice & Anecdotes from a
Third-Generation Land Broker

by Jon Kohler, JD
Broker / Partner



How the biggest recreational land deal in Georgia history just closed

And other short stories about restoring wild lands

by Jon Kohler

Biases doesn't always align. For generations, fortunes were spent to develop rural land into something "productive."

But in a twist of modern irony, it's often those who undo that development – those who restore the wild – that see land's true value rise. What was once commercially logged or farmed is now transformed into private havens of conservation and recreation. And it's be-

come a booming asset class.

Enter Jake Paul.

The international celebrity, boxer and social media mogul just bought Southlands Plantation, 5,750 acres in southwest Georgia, for \$39 million – a staggering \$6,800 per acre. That makes it the highest recreational land sale ever recorded in the region.

And, it wasn't just a flex. Paul bought it as a recreational investment. As a private national park. As something



"A BOUNTIFUL TURKEY HARVEST TAKEN AT SOUTHLAND" -The legend of Southland and its abundant natural resources is so vast that the late EE Calloway mentioned in his book that this site was the Garden of Eden. (Photo courtesy of Jon Kohler & Associates)

that – even with wealth – few can say they truly own.

Southlands: From Timberland to Trophy

Once a national model for managed timberland, Southlands – best known as the Southlands Experimental Forest and the flagship of International Paper's 12-million-acre empire – has since redefined its legacy. This isn't normal land. The late EE Calloway authored a book saying this was the site of the Garden of Eden.

Today, it stands as a benchmark for a different kind of wealth: habitat restoration, prescribed fire and biodiversity enhancement. Originally established by Herbert Stoddard – the pioneering ecologist who championed fire management long before it gained mainstream recognition – Southlands has emerged as the crown jewel of Georgia's recreational

land movement.

What's fascinating is how it's all come full circle. Southlands – now managed as a recreational property with fire – just sold for three times what it was worth as timberland. It's been a long journey to get here, but this sale proves what I've been saying for the last 30 years: natural places equal real wealth.

Its journey mirrors that of other transformational properties across the country. And, one name keeps surfacing in these stories: Jim Dahl.

Jim Dahl and the Power of Seeing Land Differently

Long before "influencer" became synonymous with social media, Jim Dahl was influencing the way people thought about land as an investment. After leaving Wall Street in the wake of the Junk Bond era, he came back to Tallahassee

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So... Why Jake Paul?

(Continued from page 8)

not just with capital – but with a vision.

Dahl was the one who flipped the script. He showed us that reversing the industrial timber model could create more long-term value. He proved that recreational land – with more habitat and less timber – wasn't just beautiful, it was smart business.

Looking back, it kind of snuck up on me. Over the years, I closed more than \$300 million in land deals with Dahl. I can't think of one that didn't turn into a landmark sale that helped define this market. He had a gift for seeing what others missed. The Sanger Ranch in Wyoming. Centerville. Honey Lake. Miccosukee Hills. Deep Creek Plantation in Florida. And, now – Southlands.

Deep Creek: Deer Sashimi, Diplomacy and the FBI

Then there's Deep Creek Plantation. It started as a paper company tract, tucked away in a \$1 billion timberland sale back in 2001. Today, it's one of Florida's most iconic riverfront recreational properties. It's changed hands four times – including a memorable chapter with two Chinese buyers who famously (or infamously) served raw deer backstrap sashimi at their welcome dinner.

"It was one of those moments," a broker I know recalled. "Trying to bal-

ance culture, hygiene and hospitality, and someone hollers, 'Who the hell put the raw backstrap on the table?'"

The story even made it as far as the FBI. With Deep Creek just 90 miles from a nuclear submarine base, there were questions – and rightfully so. Why were two women from Beijing buying thousands of acres near critical infrastructure? It was a legitimate inquiry. With Ruby Ridge and Waco still in mind, I volunteered to meet at the FBI office, not at Lick Skillet.

Today, those questions echo even louder, as international land ownership becomes part of a much broader geopolitical conversation. But one thing is clear: recreational land in our region has gone global. It's not just American outdoorsmen who see the value anymore – the world is paying attention.

From Cattle to Cast & Blast

This trend isn't limited to the Southeast. Out West, the legendary Sanger Ranch in Wyoming – 75,000 acres steeped in cowboy heritage and cattle grazing – was re-imagined into part of Brush Creek Ranch, now recognized as the #1 recreational resort in the world. Originally sold for \$25 million, it later changed hands for nearly double that. Not for cows – but for fly rods, fresh air and sharing God's great outdoors with



"SO WHY JAKE PAUL?" It's the question everyone's asking. Why would a Gen Z celebrity buy a Georgia plantation? Maybe it's because in a world full of noise, 5,750 acres of silence has become the greatest luxury. Maybe it's because land is still the ultimate long-term play. Or maybe – just maybe – he's writing the next chapter in a movement that people like Jim Dahl helped pioneer," says Kohler, pictured with Paul (center) and Walter Hatchett (left). (Photo courtesy of Jon Kohler & Associates)

others.

It took us eight years to find that ranch. It was never even on the market. As far as we can tell, it was the first true change in ownership since the Treaty of Laramie. Imagine sitting on one of the top three fly-fishing properties in the lower 48 and not even realizing what the water was worth.

We've seen the same story play out closer to home. River's Edge, once just another piece of land, was transformed into a world-class deer hunting property. We sold it for \$4,200 an acre and just a few years later, fetched over \$8,000 per acre – outpacing even the legendary quail plantations of Thomasville.

These lands are no longer being valued just for what you can extract from them – but for what you can experience on them. In Southwest Georgia, that means Boone & Crockett-caliber white-tails and wild coveys of bobwhite quail. The shift is clear: beauty, biodiversity and the thrill of the chase now define true land value.

Recreation Is the New Yield

In a world where capital seeks refuge from volatility, land has become a haven. But not just any land – recreational land. Places where deer, ducks and dogs roam free. Places where habitat improvements yield not commodities, but memories. Buyers like Jake Paul aren't just looking for privacy – they're buying prestige, legacy and the promise of nature in a curated form.

So Why Jake Paul?

It's the question everyone's asking. Why would a Gen Z celebrity buy a Georgia plantation?

Maybe it's because in a world full of noise, 5,750 acres of silence has become the greatest luxury. Maybe it's because land is still the ultimate long-term play. Or maybe – just maybe – he's writing the next chapter in a movement that people like Jim Dahl helped pioneer.

As a Social Storm Property™, it's built to hold value through every cycle – to appreciate in both good times and bad. In many ways, it may just be the perfect hedge.

Jake Paul may not be the landowner people expect – but then again, neither

was Jim Dahl when he started. Forty years ago, the old guard whispered similar doubts. Now, we look back and see how his vision changed the land world for the better.

Will Paul do the same?

The \$142 Million Handshake:

How One Call Changed Everything

Sunday night. My wife Erica's advice: "Don't take it." But with \$4 million on the line, going "hard" in 10 days with a public company – no paper trail, just trust – it was a call I had to answer. This was the ultimate Rolodex test.

For two weeks, my office sat empty. I lived in pajamas, never pausing long enough to drive across Centerville to the office, which was usually buzzing with the organized chaos of a deal taking shape. I made my case, built the team, and we went to work. The result? A \$142 million, 10-state timberland transaction – the largest in the South in eight years.

But what was the real price? Southlands: Dahl and his partners bought that extra 120,000-acre tract just to reach their ultimate prize – Southlands itself. It was a strategic acquisition, a means to an end.

Unbeknownst to me at the time, Walter Hatchett, who played a key role in that initial deal, would later co-list Southlands with me, ultimately selling it to Jake Paul years later. It went full circle from the "crown jewel" of International Paper's 12M acre empire to the highest-selling recreational property in Georgia history. The layers of these deals are truly fascinating. God places opportunities; it's up to us to see them.

Closing Thoughts

I started this piece to write about Jake Paul. I ended up writing about Jim Dahl. Funny how legacy sneaks up on you. Dahl created a blueprint for valuing land in its most natural, beautiful state. He showed us that wild land isn't worthless – it's priceless.

Maybe Paul sees that too. Maybe these massive acquisitions are the start of a new generation of stewardship.

And, if land really is the Garden of Eden we lost, maybe it's through fire, patience and vision that we find our way back.

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