

Land Conservation and Communities

Mark C. Ackelson

We hear a lot about communities these days, and as individuals we likely belong to or live in several communities that may have shared values. In communities where peoples' values and interests are not necessarily shared, however, interactions and decision making may be more complicated.

Working within the land trust network, many of us have been acculturated to consider natural communities to the exclusion of our human surroundings. To be most effective, however, we must deal with the complete range of communities and all their human and ecological complexities.

Creating the Land Trust Community

In 1980 Boston attorney Kingsbury Browne became a fellow at the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy. He traveled across the United States to explore the role of nonprofit organizations in protecting land, water, wildlife, and agricultural, historic, and scenic resource areas in their local communities. Browne found hundreds of organizations, referred to as land trusts, scattered across nearly every state, but most had little or no connection to one another.

Browne and the Lincoln Institute later convened leaders of many land trusts to explore ways to build a network to strengthen their effectiveness. Out of that gathering grew the Land Trust Exchange, which is now known as the Land Trust Alliance and has become the voice for the national land conservation community. More than 1,700 land trusts are found in every state, responding to local or regional conservation needs as defined by the

communities of which they are a part. Together these organizations have protected some 40 million acres.

Linking Land Trusts to Local Communities

In my position with the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation (INHF), I have dedicated my life to protecting natural resources. I have worked with colleagues and partners to conserve and restore special places primarily for their ecological, scenic, and public use values. The Foundation's work is supported primarily by urban residents, but almost all of our work occurs in rural areas.

Other land trusts work in urban or urbanizing neighborhoods, wilderness areas, tourist sites, or landscapes with diverse agriculture. Some land trusts work entirely within one community, county, watershed, or state, while others work nationally or internationally. Some work to protect community gardens and parks, high-quality natural areas, entire ecosystems, greenways and trails, water quality, wildlife habitat, or historic sites. Defining, understanding, and engaging the human communities in many of these diverse settings can be challenging but also rewarding.

One major difference between INHF and most other land trusts is our trails work, which can be controversial and difficult to manage. Trails require tenacity, complex financing, and political will, but they connect people and communities to each other and to nature. They also help build networks of users among local advocates, volunteers, and civic leaders who work together to acquire, develop, manage, enhance, and integrate trail use into the fabric of the community. INHF's trail work has helped me appreciate this rich land/people/community connection.



© Carl Kurtz

Conservation activity is sometimes framed as protecting land *from* people through laws and legal systems. But if we do not help to build relationships between people and the land, our efforts will be challenged and may very well be lost. As Iowa-born conservationist Aldo Leopold (1949, viii) stated, "We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect."

The way we interact with land and water says a lot about our future and our relationships with each other. Land trusts already respect our natural communities, but we need to respect our human communities as well. We appreciate the interconnected web of nature, but too often think of it as something abstract rather than part of the social/community web.

A Study of Community

In early 2008 I helped explore these issues in a survey of land trusts undertaken in a collaboration between the Land Trust Alliance and the Center for Whole Communities (2008). The purpose of the survey and interviews was to better understand how land trusts

perceive and engage with the communities they serve. The report data came from 361 respondents in 39 states, representing nearly a quarter of the land trusts in the country. Respondents understood the need to engage communities in their work, even if they were not already doing so.

The survey and interviews showed that there was often, but not always, a lack of connection between where a land trust operates and the primary beneficiaries of their work. The results help us understand where the movement is today, and what paths it is exploring for becoming more inclusive.

For example, many land trusts are working to shift from protecting species and landscapes to engaging their broader human communities. Case studies help us understand how land trusts have arrived at their current goals and strategies for engagement, and how they are expanding their mission and partnerships to do this work more effectively. The reflections and stories of those interviewed provided valuable insight into the thinking of land trust leaders.

Land trusts are almost universally working in areas with shifting demographics, land use, and land ownership patterns. Many of these changes are happening quickly as rural landowners are increasingly older and absentee. Up to 50 percent of these lands could change hands within the next 20 years. Escalating land costs make it more difficult for landowners to compete with ever-expanding urban areas, industrial agriculture, and second homes.

We can no longer afford to assume that the values that motivate most of us in the land trust community (such as species diversity and open space) are those that motivate the human communities we serve, including past and current land conservation partners and landowners. We have to listen to their needs and values, and find where they mesh with the land trust's mission.

By engaging with the various communities of which it is a part, a land trust increases its understanding of the broader social and environmental work that needs to be done, and can better respond to local needs. Sharing resources with neighbors and exchanging management strategies can be beneficial not only to the stewardship of the land, but also to the deep relationships to land that are crucial to a long-term conservation agenda. Community engagement can also help expand public support for the land trust's work.

The survey also queried the issue of public access to protected lands as an indicator of the land trust's engagement with its community. Since many land trusts use conservation easements (voluntary perpetual legal conservation agreements), the protected land remains in private ownership and public access is often at the discretion of the owner. Lands owned outright by land trusts or acquired in partnership with public agencies generally are open to some level of public access.

Allowing traditional uses of the land (such as hunting, fishing, hiking, and appropriate forest and agriculture management) reinforces the sensitivity to and connections with the local community. This can help demonstrate and reinforce appropriate management of

the special resources while also connecting local residents more deeply with the land.

Looking Ahead

Many land trusts are taking a longer-term view of their work in the context of community needs by collaborating with various constituencies to identify ways that conservation can benefit other agendas, such as low-income housing, public health, local food sources, economic development, and underserved residents. These efforts may require a reorientation of the land trusts themselves, a new focus on partnership, and a willingness to bring in new constituents to support a broader community agenda.

Land trusts have long recognized the importance of communities. Now the definitions are expanding and land trust leaders are learning how to understand those communities and their diverse needs. Remembering that our land business is indeed a people business will help us develop stronger communities and greater long-term support for conservation. Integrating land trusts, and our missions, with the communities we serve is good for natural resource conservation and good for communities across the country. **L**

▶ ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MARK C. ACKELSON is president of the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation based in Des Moines (www.inhf.org). He was the recipient of the second annual Kingsbury Browne Fellowship at the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy in 2008–2009. This fellowship is awarded in connection with the Kingsbury Browne Conservation Leadership Award, which is presented annually by the Land Trust Alliance. Contact: mackelson@inhf.org

▶ REFERENCES

- Center for Whole Communities. 2008. *Building a new movement: Land conservation and community*. September. www.wholecommunities.org
- Leopold, Aldo. 1949. *A Sand County Almanac*. New York: Oxford University Press.