



Laura Johnson is an attorney and lifelong conservationist with more than 30 years of experience in non-profit management. She is currently director of the new International Land Conservation Network (ILCN), a visiting fellow at the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, and chair of the Land Trust Alliance board of directors.

Laura was the president of Mass Audubon from 1999 to 2012. Prior, she worked for 16 years at The Nature Conservancy as a lawyer, Massachusetts state director, and vice president of the northeast region.

Laura received a B.A. in history from Harvard University and a J.D. from New York University Law School. From 2013 to 2014, she was a Bullard Fellow at the Harvard Forest, Harvard University, where she completed a study on private land conservation efforts around the world.

## Growing the International Land Conservation Network

**LAND LINES:** Your program, the International Land Conservation Network (ILCN), is new this year, but it has some antecedents at the Lincoln Institute. Can you tell us about that history?

**LAURA JOHNSON:** There are some wonderful connections between the new network and the Lincoln Institute's past support of the innovative, capacity-building effort devoted to conservation that eventually became the Land Trust Alliance.

In the early 1980s, Kingsbury Browne, a prominent Boston lawyer, decided to take some time away from his law firm, and he used a sabbatical at the Lincoln Institute to explore the needs and opportunities of private land trusts in the United States. Up until that point, there was no nationwide effort to seek out the best examples of land protection activities, to share those ideas and best practices, or even to keep track of what was happening in land conservation around the country. Kingsbury Browne's study led him, along with several other land trust leaders at the time, to start a new organization called the Land Trust Exchange, which connected the country's small but growing conservation community through a newsletter and some basic research and training activities. The Lincoln Institute played a crucial role in helping to launch the Exchange, which grew over the years and changed its name to become the Washington, DC-based Land Trust Alliance. There were fewer than 400 U.S. land trusts in 1982 when the Exchange got started; now the Land Trust Alliance serves 1,200 land trusts all over the United States. The Exchange started out with a modest newsletter in the 1980s; now the Alliance provides an online learning center, a full conservation and risk management curriculum, and more than 100 webinars and 300 workshops that served close to 2,000 people in 2014.

**LL:** Throughout most of your career, you have been deeply engaged in U.S.-based land conservation work. What attracted you to expand your efforts on an international scale?

**LJ:** When I stepped down from the presidency of Mass Audubon two years ago, I began talking with Jim Levitt, a fellow at the Lincoln Institute, the director of the Program on Conservation Innovation at the Harvard Forest, and a former Mass Audubon board member. It was initially his idea that I explore how conservationists outside the United States were using and adapting conservation tools that had been developed over the years here. Jim had become very involved in private conservation efforts in Chile, and there was an opportunity to strengthen the very new movement there by sharing U.S.-based measures such as conservation easements. At about the same time, Peter Stein received the Kingsbury Browne fellowship and award from the Land Trust Alliance and the Lincoln Institute, which allowed him to explore the breadth of worldwide conservation organizations as well. Through our different projects, Jim, Peter, and I came to the similar conclusion that many people around the globe shared a strong interest in connecting to each other and to U.S. conservationists. This desire for a community of practice seemed like a remarkable opportunity to help build capacity for privately protecting land.

**LL:** Why is this role the right challenge at the right time for you?

**LJ:** I have had the incredible good fortune to work with some great organizations and wonderfully talented people. As a young lawyer just starting out at The Nature Conservancy in the 1980s, I was able to grow professionally at a pivotal time for conservation in the United States. Looking at the historic trend lines, the U.S. land conservation movement took off then, and it was very exciting to be a part of that growth. Then when I went to Mass Audubon in 1999, I was able to run the nation's largest independent state Audubon organization, which provided leadership not just with land conservation, but with environmental education and public policy as well. Now, I have the honor of serving on the board of the Land

Trust Alliance, which does such remarkable work here in the United States to enable effective land and resource protection. Along the way, my legal training was certainly useful, but I have also learned a tremendous amount about what makes organizations successful and likely to have a positive impact. I feel very fortunate to have this background and set of experiences, and I want to bring it to bear on the issues facing the international land conservation community.

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**LL:** You've mentioned capacity building and creating successful organizations a few times. Can you comment on what that means in the context of land conservation?

**LJ:** Land conservation organizations need all the elements of any sound nonprofit organization—a clear mission, a compelling vision and strategy, disciplined planning and clear goals, sufficient financial resources, and great people. But working on land protection requires a very long-term outlook. To start with, a land trust needs to have the knowledge and resources to assess what land should be protected—whether the mission is to conserve natural resources or scenic, cultural, or historic values—and what legal and financial tools are best suited to achieving a good outcome. Then it can take years of working with a landowner to get to a point where everyone is ready to agree on a deal. Land trusts need to have people with the training, knowledge, and experience to carry out transactions that are legally, financially, and ethically sound. Once land is protected by a trust, that organization is making a commitment to manage the land it owns or has restrictions on forever. Museums are a good analogy, but instead of Rembrandts and Picassos, land conservation

organizations are stewards of invaluable living resources, and the land and water we all depend on to survive.

**LL: Why is private land conservation particularly important now? Why do we need an international network?**

**LJ:** We are at a critical juncture as the pressures of climate change, land conversion, and shrinking government resources are making it more challenging than ever to protect land and water for the public benefit. Therefore the mission statement of the new International Land Conservation Network emphasizes connecting organizations and people around the world that are accelerating voluntary private action that protects and stewards land and water resources. Our premise is that building capacity and empowering voluntary private land conservation will strengthen the global land conservation movement and lead to more long-lasting and effective resource protection.

Support for better coordination of international private land conservation is emerging from many sources. For example, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) considered the role of private land conservation in the context of global efforts at its November 2014 World Parks Congress held in Sydney, Australia. *The Futures of Privately Protected Areas*, an IUCN-commissioned report released at that conference, provided a number of recommendations, such as developing relevant training and improving knowledge sharing and information, which are certainly important goals for the new network. We expect to work in collaboration with partners such as the IUCN, and with the existing regional or countrywide networks that are already in existence. And of course we have the very powerful example of the Land Trust Alliance and what it has been able to accomplish over 30 years to build the capacity of land trusts in the United States.

**LL: What will you try to accomplish in the first year to address these needs?**

**LJ:** We've had to get ourselves organized and deal

with basic issues such as our name, visual identity, mission statement, goals, and governance structure. We will be designing and launching a website to serve as the essential repository of case studies, research, best practices, events, and conferences. Eventually, we want to have a continuum of learning available on the website through tools like webinars that address a range of subjects, from legal instruments to organizational best practices. We also want to carry out a census of existing networks and active organizations, to start building a baseline of knowledge about private land protection that will help measure progress over time.

**LL: What are the greatest challenges to starting the network?**

**LJ:** There are many. Money is a big one, of course. We've received a generous start-up grant from the Packard Foundation, and we have great support from the Lincoln Institute. But we are working hard to identify additional sources of funding, in order to grow the network and increase its impact. And of course we are still proving that the network will provide useful, important, and actionable information and training to meet a tremendous variety of needs within the international land conservation community. We know that we can't do everything, so we must be strategic and choose activities that will have impact. The global scale also presents a host of cultural and logistical challenges, requiring us to navigate different legal systems, languages, customs, and, last but not least, time zones.

On the positive side, we already have a very committed group of land conservation practitioners who came together at our organizing meeting in September 2014 and enthusiastically signed on to be the "sweat equity"—to provide the network with knowledge, expertise, experience, and wise counsel. It's already very clear to me that this is a wonderful group of colleagues who are doing interesting and important work around the globe. It will be an adventure—and I know I'll learn a lot—to grow this new network together. □