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The Courage to Make Change: A Letter to the Land Trust Movement

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Editor's note: since its beginnings in 2003 — and through programs such as 2042 Today, Whole Measures, and an upcoming Native Lands Summit — Center for Whole Communities has been deeply engaged with the land conservation movement to strengthen both conservation and communities by helping conservationists to become more effective allies and partners in community building and social change. Ernie is an alumnus of Center for Whole Communities, Peter is a co-founder, and Danyelle is a founding board member. Together they spoke with more than 70 conservationists and potential community allies to arrive at these conclusions.

This is a particular moment in time for conservation and these thoughts, compiled and written after many conversations with land trust leaders around the country, are designed to help the movement rise to this moment.

The story of all long-term efforts — and organizations — is that they need to evolve in order to innovate and serve.

Organizational change is always a slowly swinging pendulum-of-a-conversation between “how” and “why.” How land trusts do their work has been the focus of the last 25 years, and those hard skills are imbued today in the culture and DNA of conservation groups everywhere. The question for the next 25 years is why, for whom, and how will they do their work differently to achieve these more systemic goals and approaches?

This article is mostly about aligning that movement around who it really wants to be and, should it choose, preparing it to be better partners with a much larger universe of actors already working successfully to create healthier, whole communities. The allies are waiting and are excited, willing to meet land trusts on equal ground. The opportunities are for a much larger set of shared and durable successes, and for land trusts to fulfill the calling of one of their greatest heroes, Aldo Leopold, to create a stronger and broader land ethic in this country. The reason this has been so hard to achieve is that it could never be done alone; to strengthen a land ethic in this country requires that conservationists join others.



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These recommendations are not a call to change the mission of land trusts and conservancies. Emphatically, we heard this from both community allies and land trusts themselves. No one wants land trusts to stop doing what they do best. No respondents felt that land trusts should expand into new sectors of work. In fact, *“At their best, land trusts are keeping their focus on the conservation parts of their mission. They’re not trying to build brand new people-type programs if there are already partners doing those things.”* Community conservation has never been about mission drift, but about the possibility of finding a larger and shared purpose for that mission. Community conservation is about putting the unique expertise of land conservation in service to larger community objectives. Land trusts share a destiny with the communities in which they work. The goal is to find the sweet spots where those destinies overlap and then to learn the skills of being a good and effective partner.

But, truthfully, community organizing is often very new for conservation groups. And it does require different skills and competencies for land trust leaders. Transactional skills will need to be matched with relational skills; it’s about becoming full leaders on a larger stage. For some land trust leaders who just love “doing deals” this may be an uncomfortable stretch, but our conclusion is that many land trust leaders are already doing some of this community work and the far majority will enjoy and personally grow from what it asks of them.

The premises of effective community organizing are: to meet the community where it is; to listen deeply to its interests, aspirations, and needs; and to move forward where there is overlap. Some land trusts are already practicing good community organizing. They are protecting the land while helping people to connect to and benefit from it, in ways both tangible and intangible. They are becoming voices to help their communities think about what the land means—culturally, historically, socially, and economically. These land trusts are defined by their local culture, community, and economy, not by a set of organizational outcomes. *“I love to see land conservation where it ties together a connection between land, economy, enterprises, and community,”* said one senior land trust leader.

These land trusts are leveraging community “green infrastructure” to serve a broad base of the population in supporting community health and viability, including supporting working families, ranchers, and helping farms and farmers to thrive. They are dynamically drawing on a wide range of tools for conserving and sustainably utilizing land. They are reaching

people by entering into partnerships with organizations whose strengths are in people’s skills. They come in with deep curiosity and are working hard to understand how to engage at the grassroots, trying to understand community sensibilities and sharing decision making, and co-creating rather than selling their own “product.”

These land trusts are making *communities* stronger because communities have access to experiences on and with the land that are transformative. Land trusts are helping to bring healthy food to the table, to improve local and regional economies, to provide land-based youth education, to improve peoples’ health and well being, and to help communities own significant land resources. This helps communities to be more resilient. And it helps land trusts to become more resilient, innovative and successful. Community conservation is already building a stronger constituency for conservation far beyond the usual suspects. It’s helping land trusts to learn and to become better public citizens.

As one land trust executive director said, *“Each time we engage in a new place, our knowledge base increases. We try new tools and learn what does and doesn’t work . . . and become a trusted part of the community.”*

There is very effective community conservation going on today, but it is the exception rather than the rule. And it is these innovating exceptions, among some of the oldest and most successful land trusts in the movement, who are calling most ardently for changes. This is because they care so much about the movement they helped to create.

Attempting community conservation requires the courage to make big changes. And when a person or an organization of people takes on big change, it’s easy to be hard on oneself, it’s easy to criticize more than encourage, and it’s easy to get overwhelmed. To all readers of this report, we offer these words of encouragement: *“Do the best you can in the place where you are and be kind,”* said Scott Nearing, a social justice leader whose work spawned the back-to-the-land movement in the United States.

The the main purpose of our research is to strengthen community *and* conservation by trying to bring them together. It takes courage, willingness to hear feedback, and more than a few deep breaths to begin this important work of making big change. We recognize that big change may start with small steps and we also recognize that those small steps can be extremely powerful when taken with intention and wisdom.

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Structural Change

An effective response to the opportunities of community conservation, from the perspective of the innovator land trusts who are calling for change, would entail deep “structural change” within the movement. In addition, some of the land trust movement’s most important potential allies may not be ready to stand alongside conservationists to do this deeply important work of connecting land and community until they see evidence of structural change.

“Structural change” is a term used to describe efforts that go directly toward changing inequitable social arrangements that are so deeply embedded in our culture, practices, and institutions that they are often unnoticed or “invisible.” Dr. Paul Farmer, the internationally celebrated public health leader, says of these social arrangements that they, “*are structural because they are embedded in the political and economic organization of our social world . . . neither culture nor pure individual will is at fault; rather, historically given (and often economically driven) processes and forces conspire to constrain individual agency.*”

Structural change as a process undoes inequitable social arrangements that systematically disadvantage certain groups and replaces those arrangements with equitable ones that ground our culture, practices, and institutions.

The direct and prominent connection between wealth, class, and land conservation has been well documented in this country by generations of academics and practitioners. This information, however, is not well integrated into the story that land conservation tells about itself or the practices it uses to address these dynamics. At the same time, stories in the United States abound within the living blood memory of Native Americans, low-income White people in Appalachia, Black family farmers, and Indo-Hispano land grant heirs, to name but a few groups for whom a loss of land is tightly connected to loss of income and economic well being, history and culture, and their sense of self and dignity. In some communities, mental health professionals have recognized a collective “historical trauma” connected to the loss of land and identity that is directly linked to substance abuse and violence. The gap between the stories



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told by conservationists and those told by others who are deeply connected to and love the land can impede authentic collaboration, although connection to and love for the land should unite the two groups. This is the sorrow of the conservation movement, of our nation too, and one major obstacle to creating healthy, whole communities.

The ability to integrate land trust stories with the depth and complexity of the movement's roots and with the fullness and richness of the broader United States story about land requires first that land trusts know and understand these different stories. According to one land trust executive director, *"In our land trusts there's an insufficient understanding of the historical and current connection to landownership and dynamics related to privilege, and specifically, where people are placed socially and economically in the community.*

There is a deficit of training and learning around this."

Here's an example of a sentiment we have all heard often enough that bears re-telling to explain the challenge of making the structural changes that are necessary to succeed at community conservation. *"I choose not to live in the past. I cannot possibly address what happened 150 years ago. I choose to focus on the future."* This kind of statement is sometimes used today as an excuse by some conservationists to not engage in issues that are important to others, or are difficult, or perceived "unsolvable" to conservationists. It may refer to Native lands, the history of slavery, the history of black family land loss, the history of the creation of our National Parks, the history of Hispanic land grants. To say, "I'm not going to talk about that" closes more doors than it opens. And the authors of this letter fully understand that the intention behind these kinds of comments is not to do harm, but there have been resulting impacts which are, nonetheless, harmful.

As one Native lands conservationist explained, "The problem is [land trusts are] not recognizing all of the different Tribes in the region and their long history in the area. So we found ourselves at odds with the land trust groups. We had to say, 'look, you can't rewrite history as you see it. I mean the history is what it is.' If there was some vehicle that would hold land trusts accountable, so they just can't come in and do what they want on our homeland. . . . Some way to not only set the history straight but the cultural record straight."

The difficult truth is that without structural change,

inequitable social arrangements will be repeated forever unless we, as a primarily White conservation movement, step forward and do something to take apart the structure. In this case, the structure is one created by silence. By not talking about the issues, by "choosing to focus on the future" we are actually perpetuating the past. We recall William Faulkner's famous statement that "the past is never *dead*; it's not even past."

The ramifications of this history are still with us. Another interviewee asks, *"What is that wealth creating, how [land trusts] use it and invest it? And how does it benefit the community?"*

It's not a question of whether or not we as a movement are privileged and powerful; the question is, what do we each do with that power and privilege? Who do we aspire for it to serve? It's no longer a question of whether or not our nation's

systems of parks and conserved lands were often built upon the forcible removal of the people of that land. The question is how will we conserve lands differently today? What have we learned? What can we put our talents in service to today?

This can feel overwhelming to the staff of any land trust, no matter how big or small, traditional or innovative. What's a caring and aware conservationist to do? The first step is educating ourselves and the second step is speaking the truth however authentically each and every one of us can. And let's remember again what Scott Nearing said, *"Do the best you can in the place where you are and be kind."*

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