

# Land Conservation and the Public Trust

## *The Case for Community Conservation*

by Ernie Atencio, Peter Forbes, and Danyelle O'Hara

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CENTER FOR WHOLE COMMUNITIES

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A message from the Land Trust Alliance to readers of *Land Conservation and the Public Trust: The Case for Community Conservation* by Ernie Atencio, Peter Forbes, and Danyelle O'Hara (January 2013)

The Land Trust Alliance thanks the Center for Whole Communities, the authors and all of the people who provided valuable information, perspectives and experience to this report. We are grateful for all of the time spent and good thinking offered through focus groups, interviews, and workshops. Thank you for celebrating the connections between land and people in this way, and helping all of us engage communities more broadly and deeply.

The Land Trust Alliance Board reviewed the research findings and recommendations as part of a larger board discussion about what the Alliance can and should do in this arena. The recommendations outlined represent decades of potential work for the Alliance and the land trust community, work that will continue to evolve as the communities we serve grow and change. This report represents a preliminary first step in listening to others as we begin to explore the optimal role for the Alliance in helping land trusts build deeper and broader relationships with their communities – what we are calling a Community Conservation Initiative.

The Alliance is not a pioneer in this arena; great work is happening within the land trust community already that deserves recognition. The innovative and inspirational stories of community conservation from land trusts large and small are all around us. For several years the Alliance has shared these stories through *Saving Land*, at Rally: The National Land Trust Conference, in eNews and elsewhere, and we will continue to do so.

Throughout the rest of 2013, the Alliance will continue to listen and discuss this and we welcome feedback from land conservation practitioners, other partner organizations, and others who are interested in community conservation as we think more holistically and proactively about our mission of land conservation and how it serves and meets community needs.

Sincerely,



Rand Wentworth  
President, Land Trust Alliance

## Executive Summary

*Community conservation is an approach to land conservation in both urban and rural settings that embraces and is grounded in local cultural and socioeconomic diversity and local perspectives, is relevant and responsive to the concerns and priorities of the local communities in which it is practiced, and benefits a broad cross-section of the public. Through authentic engagement, community conservation contributes to healthy and sustainable communities by advancing important matters like improving people's health and quality of life, providing clean water and access to healthy food, providing equitable access to housing, generating economic benefits, and land-based education.*

The Land Trust Alliance recognizes that land trusts share a destiny with the communities in which they work and that more must be done to understand and respond to the needs and aspirations of those communities. The United States of America that is emerging *right now* is very different from the USA of the 1980s when the majority of land trusts were formed. How will land trusts choose to relate with their changing communities? What can be learned about land and conservation from so many new perspectives? What will define the relationship between land trusts and community? All successful long-lived social, political and economic movements have required re-invention—it is part of innovation. How will land trusts innovate in the next 25 years as they have in the past 25 years? These questions are all addressed in this report by Center for Whole Communities.

The land trust movement in the United States has never been stronger, and from that success comes new responsibilities. If you control 20% of a state like conservationists do in Maine, it's no longer feasible to assume that issues like transportation, poverty, food security or how people heat their homes is not your concern. Because of your success, the public assigns you some measure of responsibility regardless of what your mission statement says. This is part of becoming a public citizen. Many land trust leaders, including the Land Trust Alliance itself, believe that the movement's enormous strength at accomplishing "wins"—what is known as *transactional strength*—must now be matched with *relational strength* and other competencies in order to rise to the challenges of this moment.

This research did discover strong trends among respondents. Potential community partners out there are ready and waiting for meaningful partnerships with land trusts. There is a hunger within parts of the land trust community to expand the work, to authentically engage with a broader range of community allies, and to make a contribution to addressing community issues. There are land trusts throughout the country that have been doing this work for years, and we can learn from them and follow their leadership. The iron is hot.

These pioneering land trusts are making *communities* stronger because communities have access to experiences on and with the land that matter and 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 wellbeing, and to help communities own significant land resources, all of which helps communities to be more

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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.

Today, our communities need to be more closely connected to the land and our practices of conservation need to be more closely aligned to the needs of people. By focusing conservation on sustaining livelihoods, on increasing public health, on strengthening food systems, and on how we educate our children, conservation becomes culture and culture becomes more rooted in the land. The outcomes of this work are more resilient, healthier communities more closely connected to the land, and a conservation movement that transcends its privileged roots to be in service to more Americans.

The main thrust of these 17 recommendations is directed internally at the community of land trusts and its leader, the Land Trust Alliance. This report is mostly about surfacing the need for structural changes, 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.

These recommendations are not a call to change the mission of land trusts. Emphatically, we heard this from both community allies and land trusts themselves. No one wants land trusts to stop doing what they do best. 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.

This alignment between land trusts and community interests is particularly critical right now, as so many urban and rural communities are in the process of re-inventing themselves and attempting to create comprehensive future visions. Our nation's demographics have already shifted and will continue to shift. There's enormous public attention focused right now on our food systems and how we educate our children. These are all major opportunities for every land trust to serve, to learn, and to grow.

Based on our research, we have 17 recommendations for the Land Trust Alliance which are described in detail in this report:

1. Undertake Community Conservation for Authentic Reasons and Communicate It Clearly
2. Make Mission Equal in Importance to Real Estate Transactions

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3. Focus Instead on the Relationships between People and the Land
4. Recognize and Respect the Centrality of Land to All Community Development Issues as Part of the Public Trust
5. Honor and Address the Structural Obstacles to Engaging with Different People and Communities
6. Create an Aligned Understanding, Appreciation and Shared Vision of Community Conservation within the Alliance and the Land Trust Movement as a Whole
7. Evolve How the Alliance Speaks to its Primary Internal Audience about Conservation
8. Speak about Land Ethics, Not about Geographies
9. Foster Meaningful and Lasting Community Relationships through Programs that Connect Land Trusts to community groups, new internal Policy and Other Support
10. Publicly Honor First Nations and Create a New Standard Regarding Appropriate Engagement with Tribes
11. Adopt a New Community Conservation Standard with at Least One Substantive Indicator Practice that is Reviewed as Part of the Accreditation Process
12. Become More Creative and Community-Oriented regarding Conservation Easement Amendments
13. Level the Playing Field of the Existing Accreditation Process to Make It Less Costly and Fairer to the Smaller Land Trust
14. Significantly Broaden the Alliance's Legislative Lobbying Efforts to Refocus on the Needs of Communities at the Federal, State, and Local Levels
15. Significantly Evolve the Goals and Audience for the National Land Trust Rally
16. Create and Co-Fund Community Conservation Pilot Projects in All Regions of the Country
17. Take Action at the Highest Levels and Be Transparent about What You Will Do and Cannot Do

The Land Trust Alliance has made enormous strides in creating durable, successful organizations and now it must point that formidable strength toward a larger, more integrated, and inclusive purpose. This is the right thing to do, and it's also what will make land trusts more innovative and successful as well all move forward together.

***The full report is available at <http://landcultureconsulting.com/wp-content/uploads/Land-Conservation-and-the-Public-Trust-fin-5.pdf>.***