



BRUCE BROWN

## STEPPING OUT on a Limb

I see issues of cultural diversity in the land trust community through a different lens than most people. When I started to work for Taos Land Trust eight years ago I attended my first Rally and discovered that I was one of a very small minority of people of color working in this field in any capacity, much less as an executive director. To me, that speaks volumes about the challenges we face as a movement.

To my board's credit, they went out on that diversity limb and hired me for my local roots and involvement in issues regarding local land and culture, even though I had no experience with land trusts or conservation easements.

My roots and interest in those local issues have led Taos Land Trust into some fascinating and fun projects, and created some gratifying relationships. We work in a partnership that includes farmers who practice a centuries-old irrigation tradition and an economic development group that helps those farmers and ranchers make a better livelihood through value-added food production. We have made inroads to

the local agricultural community where no conservation groups have gone before. And we are working with the Taos Pueblo Tribe on a couple of projects, including helping to document and legally protect an age-old annual pilgrimage route that now crosses a checkerboard of private and public lands.

These are all collaborative partnerships that deal with traditional, land-based cultures that are profoundly rooted in this landscape. But every community has its own kind of diversity and its own set of issues.

Engaging diverse communities cannot be a tacked-on afterthought; it must be a very clear and intentional priority from the start.

Here are six suggestions for land trusts who want to engage more effectively with all facets of the communities in which they work:

1. *Look like your community.* By reflecting the local cultural and socioeconomic differences of your community on your staff and board, you will instantly gain a greater level of credibility, knowledge about the issues the community cares about, and stronger connections throughout that community.

2. *Take risks.* We all tend to live and work within safe and predictable boundaries that we are comfortable with. But to genuinely embrace the diversity of your community, you have to step out of that comfort zone and out onto that metaphoric limb.

3. *Loosen your grip on acquiring land or conservation easements.* Taos Land Trust's projects that engage the local community do not always result in conservation easements, but we are helping community members stay on the land and maintain healthy, traditional relationships with our landscape. This furthers our conservation mission in other ways and strengthens our community relations, even if we don't get an easement out of it.

4. *Listen.* Though we might be the experts in certain legal mechanisms for protecting land, community members are the experts in local land and conservation issues and in effective outreach approaches. Listen to their concerns and follow their guidance.

5. *Lead with diversity.* For good and valid reasons, we tend to prioritize land conservation first, above other local issues. That's our mission. But sometimes we have to recognize issues of justice, equity and diversity and lead with that priority instead, because it's the right thing to do.

6. *Think long term.* Though we may not accomplish our conservation goals as quickly in the short term, have faith that in the slow work of embracing different constituencies in the community and building relationships we are fostering social change, and broader and stronger support for conservation will follow. 🌱

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