

# Community conservation, for all the people

The land trust movement in the United States has been incredibly successful. From the first land trust in Massachusetts established in 1891 to only a dozen 35 years ago, the movement has grown exponentially to over 1,700 land trusts across the

## FOR THE LAND



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country that have permanently protected more than 47 million acres. That's an area more than twice the size of all the national parks in the lower 48 states. It's huge.

Federal tax incentives that

began in 1980 to reward landowners for voluntarily conserving their land, along with other public subsidies for conservation, have fueled that growth. And the public also cares more about it.

Land trusts have been great about doing deals and conducting complex transactions to protect land, but they have been less great about maintaining good relations with the broader communities and diverse populations where they work. And they have a reputation of being elitist, a mostly white and privileged club catering to the wealthy and just protecting pretty views for tax breaks.

Reputation is often more about perception than reality, but sometimes and in some places all this has been true. Our local Taos Land Trust and many others are exceptions, and it's starting to change through-

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out the conservation community.

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By 2042, people of color will become a majority in the U.S. Many do not have access to open or natural landscapes, lands to grow food or even little urban pocket parks for kids to play in — they are not connected to the places we have protected. This is significant when in some states land trusts control as much as 20 percent of the land mass. Our society has changing needs around land these days, a much more diverse population with a different set of priorities.

In 2007, Land Trust Alliance president Rand Wentworth called for building “a conservation community that looks like America,” and wrote, “In the end, our future depends on each generation loving the land enough to fight for its protection all over again.” Conservation needs to be grounded not just in law and money, but in the hearts, minds and everyday choices of diverse people.

With this in mind, Land Trust Alliance recognizes that it is time to evolve and is proactively taking on

an ambitious new initiative called “community conservation.” I have been working with others on this project, interviewing and listening to and conducting retreats with stakeholders across the country, and both land trusts and their potential community partners are hungry for this change. It's time.

There is a lot to it, many specific recommendations about how to proceed, and Land Trust Alliance will have to determine the best way to move forward. But here is the definition we are working with for now:

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 sector of the public. Through authentic partnerships with ally groups, community conservation contributes to healthy and sustainable communities by advancing important matters like improving people's health, providing clean water and access to healthy food, providing equitable access to housing, generating economic benefits and connecting youth to land.

The land feeds us, inspires us and keeps us healthy and sane. We all have a right to stay connected to it.

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