



Landcare for Land Trusts

A primary goal of land trusts is the conservation of open space and working landscapes including farm and forest land. Landcare complements this goal, especially where restoring and maintaining working landscapes is the desired end. Landcare is a holistic approach to sustainable land stewardship that integrates environmental conservation and economic development objectives. It can provide the social and economic infrastructure to manage and restore conserved lands, support land owners, invigorate local communities, and enhance regional land management capabilities.

In the face of mounting pressure on rural landscapes and open spaces across the United States, land trusts have risen to the challenge, working tirelessly to conserve these threatened places. With conservation easements and outright purchasing as their primary tools, land trusts have preserved more than 37 million acres across the country. Land trusts are a major force in land conservation nationwide, but like any such effort to stem or slow a rising tide, they face challenges ahead.

Conservation easements and fee simple purchase are arguably the only tools now available to conserve land permanently. However, if land trusts across the nation reach their projected target by 2015, only 3.5% of private land will be under permanent conservation easement, and 2.1% of the nation's land overall, according to the USDA Major Land Use report of 2002. This will be a considerable accomplishment. However, by expanding the focus of conservation strategies to include sustainable management and production, it is possible to keep more farms and forests open and working across the country by increasing landowner incomes. This expanded focus would serve to sustain and enhance the

conservation impacts of conservation easements over the long term.

Conservation easements alone are insufficient to maintain an economically vibrant and healthy working landscape. Used in conjunction with sound management and economic development tools, conservation easements help ensure the conservation of landscapes, improve the value of land and quality of water, and enhance the strength and resiliency of communities. In this sense, landcare complements the work of land trusts by expanding the conservation strategies available to keep land open and working. Landcare provides alternative approaches to land conservation for those landowners who are not able to or have chosen not to put their land under permanent conservation easement.

In 1998, the American Farmland Trust (AFT) published a short article in its *LandWorks* publication entitled "Beyond Easements". The article asserts that "trust" is essential to the success of a land trust working in a community. "Providing useful services – such as economic development, stewardship, estate planning, farm transfer, and education – is another important way to build trust," the AFT suggests. Landcare may be a useful tool to help develop these other elements crucial to conserving land and to development of strong and trusting relations between land trusts and the communities they are working to conserve.

Landcare is simply people 'caring for the land,' an ethic and practice of sustainable land management that fosters a concern for the future of a place. Landcare originated in Australia in the mid-1980s and has since taken root in more than a dozen countries. Though distinct across nations, landcare maintains an



emphasis on economic, social, and environmental conditions in communities as it promotes conservation practices. In the United States, landcare is emerging as an effort to reconnect people to the land through a variety of approaches. Whether it is the development of sustainable forestry and agricultural enterprises, the coordination of ecosystem service market access, the restoration of waterways, or by providing a forum for neighbors to envision and coordinate the future of their land and their landscapes, landcare can provide the framework and tools to achieve locally-relevant goals.

Peter Barnes, in his 2006 *Capitalism 3.0: A Guide to Reclaiming the Commons*, describes “commonwealth trusts” that serve to sustain and restore the commons for people now and in the future. The commons to which he refers is much broader than land and includes water and air, as well as cultural commons including community identity. Barnes uses land trusts as his model because their trustees take responsibility for protection of our land commons. By incorporating the principles of landcare into the array of conservation tools and approaches, land trusts can capitalize on the desire for landowners to practice conservation within and beyond conservation easements and enrich and sustain the broader commonwealth.

Landcare as Value-Added for Land Trusts

Pre-easement

For landowners planning for a conservation easement, participating in landcare enterprises will help increase on-farm income to maximize tax benefits.

For landowners considering a conservation easement, and who may benefit from a stronger relationship with the local land trust, engaging in a community landcare group and its efforts can build relationships and trust.

For landowners on a waiting list to place their land under permanent conservation easement, participation in a landcare group and its activities can engage them in conservation practices and the mission of the land trust.

Post-easement

Landcare provides principles and practices to help landowners manage the property under conservation easement so as to restore ecosystem functions, control invasive plants or animals, and manage fire and other forces that effect landscape change..

Land trusts need a cash flow to monitor and manage properties under conservation easement. Working with landcare groups and funders may be a way to generate such funds through grant and partnership opportunities.

Engaging in landcare practices will help landowners who want to continue increasing the conservation value of their land.

Community landcare provides an opportunity for landowners to work cooperatively towards landscape-level goals that require coordinated stewardship among multiple properties.

An asset for land trusts

The principles of landcare invoke an ethic of responsibility and stewardship of land, in concert with the existing principles of trust and preservation.

Landcare provides another means for landowners and community members to contribute to the goal of land conservation and engage in the mission of land trusts, especially:

- Non-landowners
- Local businesses and consumers



- Landowners for whom conservation easements may not be the most feasible option
- Landowners whose land do not qualify for conservation easement

Landcare emphasizes stronger relations in the community by promoting economic development, social equity, and cultural integrity traditionally associated with land uses.

Landcare builds organizational relationships for future conservation easements, members, and partnerships.

Landcare enhances the story and vision of land conservation through economic and social capacity-building activities, directed at a broader audience.

Landcare enterprises such as forest product cooperatives or biofuel energy networks keep landowners profitable on their land and create job opportunities in the community, creating to a more vibrant and resilient landscape.

Landcare enterprises promote economic development and reduce some of the concern about lost tax revenues to local and state governments.

Landcare provides additional options in maintaining the green infrastructure and ecosystem services of our regions and communities (see www.landcarecentral.org for more).

Incorporating Landcare into the Land Trust

Landcare can contribute to the mission of land trusts by reaching out to a broader audience and potential membership base. In addition, it can encourage conservation stewardship practices among private landowners whose land is already under conservation easement or those for whom conservation easements may not be the ideal option. At a time when conservation ease-

ments are in high demand and local land trusts are pushing their organizational capacity to meet the demand, the idea of building a new program or initiative may not be attractive. However, landcare does not have to embody a new program, but rather a new way of looking at the long-term stewardship of private land. Looking at the organizational structure and objectives of land trusts as they exist today may reveal that landcare is an ideal tool to accomplish goals and objectives already in place.

Landcare & Land Trusts in Action

An excellent example of how landcare can work for land trusts is the New River Land Trust (NRLT), serving the New River watershed in Southwest Virginia. This area, which features the New River winding northward through the picturesque Appalachian Mountains, has become a popular location for retirement and second homes. The NRLT has been working since 2002 to preserve the area's scenic rural landscapes, working farms, and productive forests, having placed more than 28,500 acres under conservation easement.

While recognizing that conservation easements are the ideal solution for conserving many working farms and forests, held by generations of Appalachian farmers and landowners, the NRLT has also supported the principles of landcare in helping people stay on their lands by making their land more profitable and communities more cohesive. NRLT shares the landcare ethic and commitment to keeping land working, open, and producing valued ecosystem services.

In cooperation with the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, Virginia Tech, and other strategic partners the NRLT has coordinated the formation of the Grayson and Catawba landcare



descriptions). Grayson LandCare was formed in 2003 and since that time, has helped establish two landowner-owned, for-profit corporations based on value-added production and processing of beef and timber grown and processed within the region. Grayson Natural Foods has enrolled several livestock producers in the area to raise all-natural, grass-fed beef for local markets, with returns going to participating landowners. The Blue Ridge Forest Cooperative, a forest landcare business, enrolls forest landowners to participate in the positive-impact harvesting and processing of certified sustainable forest products for local markets. Land is being conserved, ecosystem services are being restored, the landscape is remaining intact, and landowners are being empowered to preserve their community and way of life.

References

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For more information

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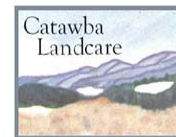
New River Land Trust - www.newriverlandtrust.org



Grayson LandCare - www.graysonlandcare.org



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