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Improving the Land Trust Model's Impact on Environmental Conservation in Northern California

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UNIVERSITY OF SAN FRANCISCO

CHANGE THE WORLD FROM HERE

Improving the Land Trust Model's Impact on Environmental Conservation in Northern California

by

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Capstone Research Report Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the
Master of Nonprofit Administration Degree
in the School of Management
directed by Dr. Richard Gregory Johnson III

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Abstract

For years, the land trust sector of California and much of the United States has operated with a dollars and acres mentality that has prioritized fundraising as a result of acreage protected. Within California, nearly 5.8 million acres of land have been protected by 132 land trusts throughout the state. To accommodate for the diverse cross-section of land and the many needs of the population, land trusts take on numerous shapes and sizes. A unique aspect of this diversity is the rich agricultural and natural spaces found throughout the state. This mix of land and variety of land uses has led to some differences in the purpose and operation of trusts throughout the state. With this large range of land trusts, the goals remain the same: to protect and preserve lands across the state. To accomplish this and further impact the environmental conservation movement, trusts have been forced to move past the dollars and acres mentality and into a larger stewardship and education role. As organizations continue to transition into this role, they must look further and examine the sustainability of their work. Who are we conserving this land for if it continues a cycle of inequity and inaccessibility? The land trust model must continue its transition from dollars and acres but more importantly, it needs to ensure it is taking an active role in the various diversity, equity, and inclusion practices that are readily available in the sector. Examples that were highlighted from organizations in Northern California include the repatriation of land to native tribes and providing opportunities for under-resourced communities to utilize the open spaces protected by the trusts. Without a bigger tent of supporters, funders, and users, land trusts will grow unsustainably into the role of educator and steward. The greatest way to impact environmental conservation and climate change is to mobilize the greatest number of people from a diverse range of backgrounds.

Acknowledgments

To my fiancé, Leana (lay-na) and my cats, Nima (nee-ma) and Fern – thanks for putting up with me through all those long days.

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Section 1. Introduction

As the challenges of habitat loss, climate change, and environmental devastation increase (UNEP, n.d.), we must continue to think of creative and innovate ways to combat them. The role of a land trust in the United States has long been focused around dollars raised and acres protected as a key performance indicator for success. Only recently have land trusts started to broaden their programming to include more stewardship and education. This type of programming is exactly what is needed to increase interest in the land and environment around you and increase the impact on environmental conservation by connecting it with a familiar and local land trust.

As previously mentioned, land trusts have consistently focused on the dollars and acreage aspects when talking about their impact. In recent years, the land trust model has expanded to include more education and stewardship work around the lands protected in perpetuity. This gradual movement has changed the way land trusts are operating and cooperating with local, state and federal partners. As we look towards further impacting environmental conservation, land trusts could play an integral role in introducing nature and open space to the folks who can protect it.

Overview

To examine how land trusts might impact this field, this report took an exploratory case study approach through the lens of environmental conservation impact. With this method as the basis of the research, several other tools and methods were

utilized to gain context and help inform the recommendations and improved model.

These methods and tools included seven semi-structured interviews and literature review of fifteen sources related to the topic.

For the semi-structured interviews, seven land trust professionals were interviewed using both standardized and random questions depending on the flow of the conversation. 15 land trusts were chosen utilizing an online list from CaliforniaLandTrusts.org and 13 responded with some interest in speaking about this topic. In the end, seven organizations were chosen for interviews and scheduled over the course of two weeks. The size, origin, and purpose of each trust was different and provided a rich insight into the diversity of land trusts across Northern California.

From these conversations, themes and common topics were extracted and examined through the lens of environmental conservation. Along with the literature review, these elements led to the creation of a more holistic land trust model that is incorporate in the data analysis section of this report. Along with this model, the report also lists six recommendations for land trusts to better implement every aspect of this more sustainable and holistic model.

Format

Following this introduction, the literature review will include an overview of 15 different scholarly sources examined through the lens of environmental conservation. Five themes related to conservation, institutional change, relationship building, justice,

and accessibility have been examined and scrutinized to better inform the semi-structured interviews, the model, and the recommendations. After the literature review, a more in-depth overview of the methods and tools used for this report will be included. The reasoning behind using an exploratory case study approach along with thoughts about tools used will be found in this section.

After an overview of the literature and methods, the data analysis portion will be included. This will focus on the semi-structured interviews, their connection to the literature, and the common themes throughout.

Finally, the implications and recommendations included from this research. Following the data analysis, this section will include the sustainable and holistic model created based on this research along with six recommendations for implementing this new model. A conclusion and reference page will finish this report and include all scholarly articles in the literature review and used throughout this research.

Section 2: Literature Review

This literature review will look at sources and work related to environmental conservation within land trusts and the model more broadly. Due to the exploratory nature of this project, the literature review was an integral part for creating interview questions, implications and recommendations.

Easements as a Means of Conservation

To look at easements, it is important to have the information and context for what an easement actually is in terms of a land trust, “conservation easements (hereafter, easements) are legal agreements between a landowner and a nonprofit land trust or government that restrict development and other land uses, typically in perpetuity and in exchange for payment or tax reduction” (Rissman et al., 2019). Broadly speaking, most land trusts will operate this way with variations depending on mission and purpose. Easements as an integral tool to the land trust structure and how they function.

The land trust model and conservation go hand-in-hand as organizations protect lands and open spaces around the country. Since the formation of land trusts, easements have been used to preserve at-risk and unique areas from development or overuse. To date the conversations surrounding the role of the land trust, Steiner, Guhathakurta, and Corcuera (2000) examined the role land trusts could play in preserving at-risk lands on the border between the United States and Mexico:

Decades of experience with land trusts in the United States have proven that one of the greatest advantages is their rapid response ability to protect endangered areas. In the Mexican border region, where landscapes are rapidly deteriorating, such land trusts might prove an invaluable asset to complement or replace slow-developing intergovernmental conservation agreements.

As shown with this research, the conversations surrounding land trusts as a more efficient and nimble conservation operator have been in-motion for over 20 years.

Beyond the more obvious piece of land physically protected via easement, the easement process has been shown to increase the overall philanthropic giving towards conservation efforts. Explained by Pinnschmidt et al. (2021), “Overall, this study found first indications for a relationship between philanthropic donations and land acquisition for conservation; specifically, we found evidence that increasing the area of land protected may increase the level of giving among donors in the same state.” For a land trust, this is the cycle that feeds the dollars raised and acres protected mindset and why land trusts have been a key player in protecting lands for conservation purposes.

An overall increase in lands protected by easements has also shown some of the challenges around the current model. Parker (2004) writes about the advantages of easements from certain landowner perspectives. From the conclusion:

Tax considerations aside, the main economic advantage of conservation easements is that they better facilitate gains from landowner specialization. Through conservation easements, land trusts can conserve environmental amenities while continuing to allow landowners the right to produce non-conservation output. This can be an especially cost-effective arrangement when landowners specialize in farming, ranching, or logging and the land trust does not.

Northern California in particular has a large number of these working lands and several land trusts that protect these areas specifically. There is some friction between organizations focused on these types of lands and conservation-focused organizations due to political and economic factors.

The Challenges of Growth

As the land trust has grown, it has continued to protect land, gain funders, and branch out into stewardship and educational roles. The seminal work by Richard Brewer in his book *Conservancy: The Land Trust Movement in America* (2003) speaks in depth about numerous topics related to land trusts in the United States. One chapter in particular looks at The Nature Conservancy (TNC), the largest and arguably most well-known land trust in the United States. As a giant in the field, they are a good indicator of the changes in the sector and Brewer reflected on what the original founder would think of the modern iteration:

He'd probably find the cooperative efforts with government positive, in part. He'd probably not be dissatisfied with an international thrust. The Naturalist's Guide to the Americas included the best information available on Central America, South America down to the Amazon, several Caribbean islands, the Galápagos, and even the Philippines. I'd guess that Shelford and also George Fell— both frugal men— would have disliked the dependence on vast sums of money raised from rich donors, business, foundations, and the government. The dominance of

business-minded leaders rather than scientists that has sometimes accompanied this dependence would have troubled him.

This struggle has only been amplified as we move into 2023 with large sums of money coming from fewer, less diverse sources. These struggles have also coincided with an increasing impact from climate change and the loss of biodiversity.

Another challenge mentioned throughout the literature was actual impact on conservation and biodiversity instead of the stated impact. As land trusts have grown, their responsibility in terms of stewardship and staff time has also increased. An article written by Dayer et al. (2016) specifically examined the discrepancy between what land trusts say they are doing versus what they have actually done:

Survey responses suggest that land trusts believe that they are contributing significantly to wildlife habitat conservation. Yet, these results are not consistent with mission statements, the majority of which do not specifically emphasize wildlife or wildlife habitat. Despite encouragement by the Land Trust Alliance to carefully craft meaningful mission statements (e.g., Land Trust Accreditation Commission 2014), many are written broadly and fail to articulate the benefits to wildlife or habitat.

Dayer et al. mention that numerous factors could have been affecting this data but this remains as a challenge for not only land trusts, but social service organizations as a

whole. Measuring impact and ensuring strong performance indicators can ensure confidence and transparency in a growingly important institution.

A final thought for the challenges of the growing land trust sector has been the shift away from a dollars and acres mentality into more stewardship and educational programming. Land trusts are being called on to do more than just protect land and instead be an organization that connects people to the land and their local community. Tatyana B. Ruseva, James R. Farmer and Charles Chancellor (2016) conducted a quantitative study looking into the social capital required to be a successful land trust in Southern Appalachia. Social capital is just one of these factors that are being required for land trusts to remain sustainable and the authors summarize this well, “Among land conservancies, and particularly those in rural southcentral Appalachia, social capital is expected to be critical to successful private land protection. Social capital represents the cognitive and structural dimensions of the relationships among people and organizations”.

Developing a Relationship with the Land

Moving beyond just open space and green areas, the idea of conservation within urban environments was also a common thread. More commonly seen and referred to as community land trusts (CLT) these organizations have a different priority from conservation land trusts but can have a similarly large impact. Connecting people to their communities and the land around them whether urban or open space, is an important part

in creating a holistic organization. Bunce and Aslam (2016) wrote about this topic within Canada and summarize this new emphasis:

We note that the majority of land trusts focus on the protection and conservation of agricultural and wilderness lands. While this is an important and necessary emphasis of land protection and conservation in Canada, we suggest that a re-framing of land protection and conservation that includes the protection of urban land by non-governmental land trust organizations is increasingly relevant given the growth of urban residents as well as rising property values and challenges of affordable access to space in Canadian cities.

Developing this relationship with the communities around them, land trusts can include a bigger tent of supporters and users. The conservation land trust model in its current form and hopefully improved, can be used to meet challenges like climate change and affordable housing by connecting the community to the lands around them and preserving that in perpetuity.

Another theme that connects the community to the land are the longstanding relationships that people in a community will have with their space. This relationship can be enhanced by using the land trust model to introduce and educate members of the community. Rissman et al. (2021) talks about an example of these longstanding relationships in the form of successor landowners and managers:

Existing private land conservation agreements around the world embody countless hours of conversations, negotiations, struggles, and accomplishments between landowners, staff, and, increasingly, successor landowners and managers. Organization–landowner relationships can sustain important public investments in protected areas with private rights-holders which provide an array of societal benefits. Renewing this work with each subsequent generation will require creativity, commitment and investment.

Long-term relationships like this example are an important cornerstone for land trusts to build a repertoire within a community and connect that community with the land and each other.

A final example of connecting the people to the land relies on collaboration with indigenous communities and their experience as stewards of the land. Organizations are partnering with indigenous and local community groups to varying levels across the United States and Northern California, but Native led groups are even more unique. Middleton Manning et al. (2023) looked at a group like this when they wrote about the work the organization was doing around community building and connecting Native people back to the land:

Sogorea Te' Land Trust expands the vision of what a land trust can be. Far beyond an organization focused only on habitat protection, conservation, or recreation, the Sogorea Te' Land Trust embodies and enacts ethics of relationality

and reciprocity between people and land and between and among diverse peoples beginning to recognize their responsibilities within Indigenous homeland.

Justice and Equity

Building off of the previous theme and the idea of collaboration, the justice and equity piece of the land trust model is beginning to be scrutinized. Land usage and history of the land comes with a certain level of bias and it is becoming increasingly common for land trusts to reflect on these inequities and injustices with the goal of addressing them. Beckman et al. (2023) looks at these issues directly and summarizes the shifting priorities:

More broadly, debates about equity and justice are, rightfully, front and center within the literature and among conservation practitioners in a post-2020 world. Among different perspectives and viewpoints, it is difficult to say what may be the “right” or “wrong” path forward in terms of conservation paradigms. What is clear, however, is that the tradition of “mainstream” conservation fails to meet our current moment by accepting as given both hegemonic capitalism (and corresponding factors of economic growth and consumerism) and a strong dichotomy between human and nonhuman nature.

As shown in the dates and nature of these recent sources, the ideas of equity and justice within the conservation space are increasingly important. As mentioned by Beckman et al., the challenges and shortfalls of the government and system will need to be

continually filled by organizations like land trusts using a more diverse and equitable model.

Another example of community-led trusts (CLT) show that this model can be used to introduce justice and equity principles into the conservation space. Mariangela Veronesi, Line Algoed & María E. Hernández Torrales (2022) spoke about how CLT's can instill a sense of justice and advance a more equitable community:

As much as we celebrate the ability of communal tenure models to offer greater resistance and security against politically and economically motivated displacement, we observe that a lot of the energy from communities must be dedicated to mobilising for the right to remain and 'firefighting' the consequences of environmental hazards, instead of having the space to focus on upgrading processes, development, and environmental management.

As evidenced through Veronesi et al.'s research, there is still work to be done before organizations and under-resourced communities can feel included as they are still fighting for their seat at the table.

Accessibility and Land Usage

The final theme that was prevalent throughout the literature is the conversation around land usage and who exactly land trusts are preserving the land for. As a large and incredibly biodiverse state, California and its land trusts must negotiate the numerous different land use terms concerning agriculture, habitat protection, migration path

connection, and more. A particularly nuanced piece of California's land usage and acreage protected falls under an agricultural umbrella. Literature by Jessica Beckett and Ryan E. Galt (2014) look at agricultural land trusts in coastal California how access is going to be an important piece of the land trust model:

Innovation in land access will be critical if beginner farmers are to enter the agricultural sector and reverse the trend of increasing average farmer age. Land trusts can be a key part of increasing access, but the 145 million acres (58,679,400 hectares) of land in their care is small relative to the one billion acres (404,685,644 hectares) that are currently in active cultivation and ranching in the US today (USDA, 2013), and the structural ills of American agrarian capitalism are far deeper and broader than access to land offered by land trusts.

Without being overall optimistic, the authors have made an important point about the role land trusts will need to play in the future if we hope to address these accessibility and usage trends.

Another piece of accessibility is the organizational accessibility to resources. These resources can come from internal sources, partners, supporters, or governmental agencies and can sometimes help land trusts over the finish line. Land trust cooperation and their ongoing membership into a national alliance (landtrustalliance.org) allows them access to other organizations and their collective power to affect change. Meagan Roach (2014) touched on this topic for her article looking at an improved land trust model,

“membership in a larger and well-recognized organization provides a strong foundation within the community and also provides access to various outlets of help and support, including other land trusts and voices of support for land protection”. With the support of other entities, the land trust model can flourish and work to impact the challenges faced by the world today and into the future.

As a final piece of the access theme and to provide some final context, one of the challenges towards access and usage will be addressed. Research by Katherine Lieberknecht (2009) on the topic of public access to land trusts shows a picture of what was being offered by land trusts across the country. “I found that the vast majority of land trusts (78% of those responding) allow public access to some or all of their lands, a key public benefit” but:

Most acreage protected by conservation easement does not provide public access. Respondents emphasized the challenges of getting landowners to consider allowing public access to conservation easement lands. In addition, few land trusts focus on public access as a major goal of their work; instead, most land trusts give higher priority to conserving lands with other characteristics relating to habitat, biodiversity, and water quality.

Given the date of the literature and more recent research, the increased focus on accessibility has undoubtedly increased. However, land trusts must continue to meet the

needs the community through education, stewardship, conservation and other programming even if that means reflecting and changing current norms.

Section 3: Methods and Approaches

For this report, several methods were utilized with one over-arching approach and lens to guide my research. To begin this process, an exploratory case study approach through the lens of environmental conservation was chosen. To gain insight, seven expert interviews were conducted with seven different organizations using a set of standardized to guide the conversations. Finally, a literature was utilized to gain a better overview of the current thoughts around land trusts in relation to environmental conservation, climate change and habitat loss. These methods were selected due to the limited time span of this project and the hope to create a deliverable model with recommendations.

Exploratory Case Study Approach

This approach was chosen as a way to learn more about the current land trust model and how it applies to the specific lens of environmental conservation. This report began as a broad look at environmental conservations working on climate change issues. While speaking to organizations and researching my topic, the topic of land trusts and conservation easements become particularly interesting.

This exploratory case study approach allowed for the project to focus in towards land trusts as one of the main drivers of environmental conservation moving forward. It

was only through the initial research and conversations that the final product was become a deliverable model and recommendations that could have be actionable over time.

A key component of this approach was the frame of environmental conservation in my questions with experts. Due to the exploratory nature of this approach, each expert interview was focused on land trusts in the realm of conservation, climate change and habitat loss. Along with the interviews, the exploratory approach also informed the literature review and the types of sources that would contribute to this research.

From my personal perspective, my future career goals in the land trust sector and personal passion for the environment led me to explore how land trusts could further address these challenges. An exploratory case study seemed like the clear choice to both inform myself and inform the research and create a substantial and deliverable report.

Semi-Structured Interviews

To accompany the exploratory case-study approach, seven different land trust experts were interviewed. Each expert was a staff member from a different land trust across Northern California. All of the organizations varied greatly in size, scope and mission but were extracted from the same list of California land trusts previously mentioned. Out of the 15 organizations contacted, 13 responded and seven were chosen to speak about environmental conservation. Each conversation ran anywhere from 20-45 minutes and included six standardized questions. These questions were as follows:

- Can you tell me about your land trust and what you do?

- How do you see your land trust in the greater picture of environmental conservation in California?
- What are your thoughts on land trusts being more efficient and faster than government conservation efforts?
- In your opinion, how could land trusts improve their impact in the greater environmental conservation movement?
- What do you see as the future of your land trust in the next 5-10 years?
- Anything else you would like to add that you think might help my research process?

These questions were supplemented by follow-up questions that came up as a natural flow of the conversation.

All of the organizations were contacted via email and the initial meeting was set-up via Google Calendar. Six of the seven interviews happened via Zoom with the one outlier happening over the phone. Each experts position ranged from coordinator level to the executive director level in some cases. Since one organization asked to remain anonymous, all organizations will remain anonymous for parity.

Literature Review

This method was selected as a necessary supplement to the exploratory case study and a requirement for the course's final product. Completing portions of the literature review while interviewing experts helped to both inform and enlighten topics that had

been brought up in the land trust sector. Please see the literature review section and the data analysis section for a more in-depth look at this method and its relation to the other methods.

Stakeholder Participation

Throughout this process, land trust experts were approached and interviewed about this topic. With a goal of producing a deliverable model and recommendations for greater impact in environmental conservation, it was incredibly important to receive information from these experts and stakeholders. The goal of speaking to a wide pool of organizations was to diversify the voices in this report and provide a truly holistic model that can be adopted by nearly every land trust without sacrificing their mission or history.

Hopefully, the model created and the recommendations accompanying them can be used by land trusts and their staff to further improve their organization. The important role a land trust plays within a community cannot be understated and any research on the topic can only further the field.

Section 4. Data Analysis

A qualitative analysis was the main method of analyzing both the semi-structured interviews and the literature review. This approach required finding the consistent themes present throughout the process and creating a coherent picture around them. Through both methods, the same environmental conservation lens was used, but the new and

expansive context provided by the experts and the literature created a pathway to this report's recommendations.

Themes from the Interviews

1. "Forever"

- Land trusts have the unique experience of holding land or having contracts in perpetuity. These agreements are "forever" as many of the land trust staff said and drive the need to ensure sustainability and preservation. These agreements in perpetuity also contribute to the impact land trusts can have on the conservation space, as easements can be used to protect at-risk spaces like wetlands, forests, and coastline.

2. "Nimble"

- As a smaller entity engaging with private land owners, land trusts are well-positioned to be quick and efficient in their negotiations, programming, and overall operation. As many experts shared, land trusts are "nimble" in how they can operate versus an entity like the government. The personal engagement and access to funding through private donors provides land trusts with the ability to act quickly in protecting and preserving lands. This nimbleness also allows land trusts to pivot their programming and access to meet the needs of the community around them.

3. "Access"

- Creating a space for people to gather as a community is something that more land trusts are considering. The word “access” meant different things to the experts interviewed due to the diverse nature of land trusts across Northern California. For land trusts in the agricultural space, access to lands is not always an option or wanted by those individuals reaching out to work with a land trust. On the other hand, conservation or open space trusts very often offer access, trail networks, tours, or programming allowing members or the general public.

4. “Education”

- The topic of education is beginning to play a larger role in what land trusts do on a daily basis. Experts interviewed shared how “education” played a large role in what nearly every land trust was doing. Depending on the nature of the land trust, “education” meant different things. Examples include informing people about the importance of rangeland for the food supply or the importance of forests for carbon sequestration. Organizations have also been including more information relating the land protected back to the overall outlook on the climate and the environment.

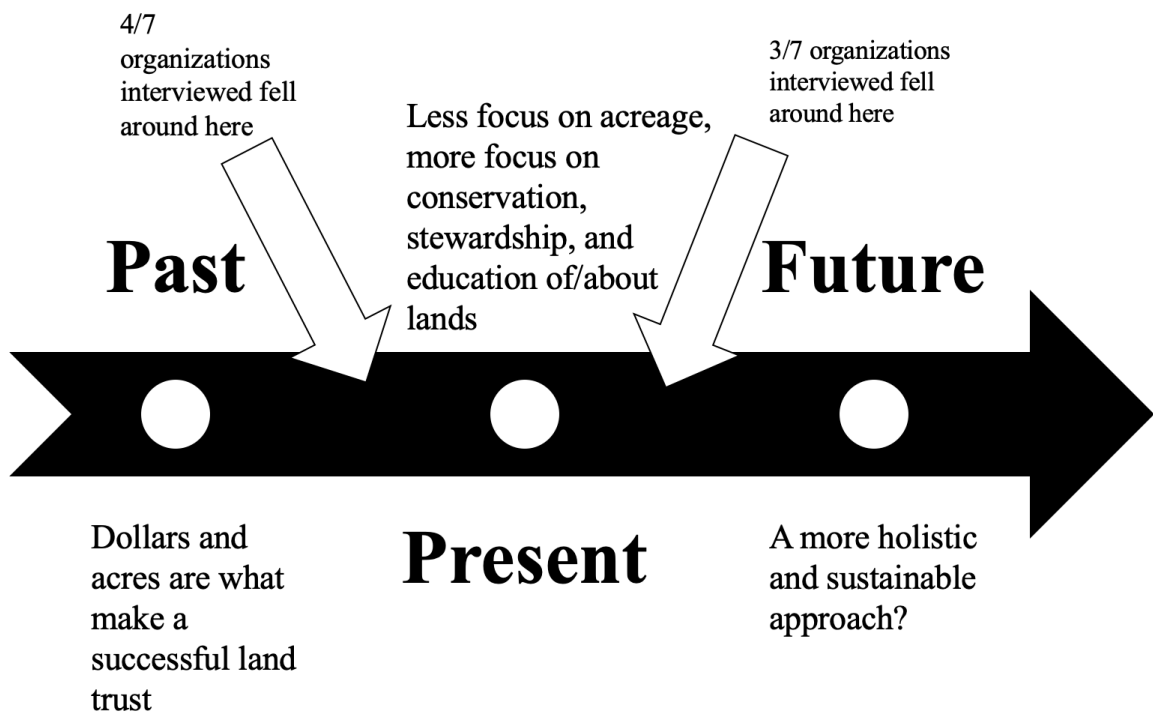
5. “Stewardship”

- The final theme that arose consistently through expert interviews was this idea of “stewardship”. Similarly to education, stewardship is becoming an increasingly important part of a land trusts role. Here in Northern California specifically, the conservation of redwoods, wildfire mitigation, and working land preservation for

agricultural spaces all fall under this umbrella of stewardship that very often is the responsibility of the land trust. At the same time, this stewardship relies heavily on the idea of “forever” and what it means to sustainably protect lands for generations.

Stewardship vs Acreage

After speaking with each land trust and asking about their thoughts on this distinction, each organization was placed on this scale. It is important to note that no organization was fully committed to either stewardship or acreage but this was a qualitative attempt to assess where they would land on this spectrum.

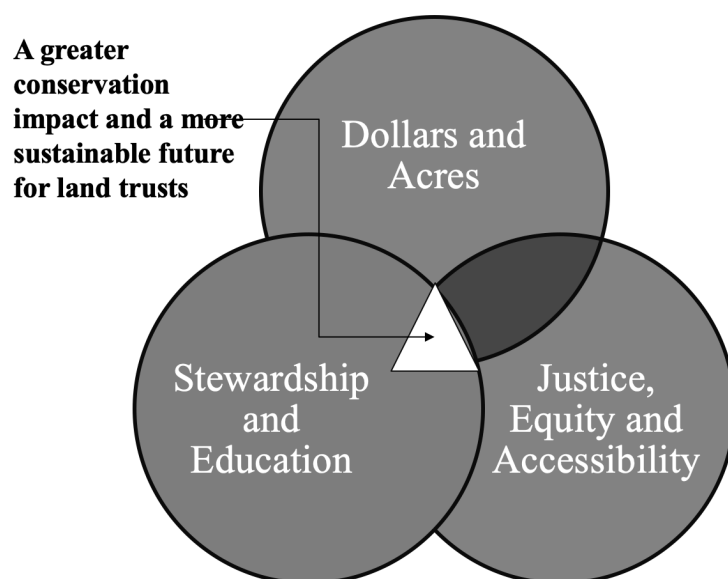


Four out of the seven land trusts interviewed for this report would have fallen somewhere between a dollars and acreage focus moving towards more education and stewardship. Differences for these four organizations include nature of the trust, history, and purpose but all of them acknowledged the need for more education and stewardship programming to accompany their preserved lands. Three of the four organizations interviewed seemed to be thinking about this spectrum in a different way. While they realized that you need dollars and acreage to create this education and stewardship programming and protect more lands, they also realize the unsustainable aspects of the current model. For them, the transition from a dollars and acres mentality must occur along with an examination of justice and accessibility. These ideas are why an exploratory case study approach was taken and played a large role in forming the implications and recommendations for this report.

Section 5: Implications and Recommendations

The goal of this report was to explore the current land trust model in Northern California and look to offer an improved model based on conversations with experts and sources around the topic. From these resources, a model was created that aims to more holistic and sustainable as land trusts move beyond dollars and acreage and into the education and stewardship. Each section will be expounded upon below the model and connected back to the original question of impact on environmental conservation.

A More Holistic Land Trust Model



Each section of the model has an important role to play as the land trust model grows and more is required of it in terms of conservation impact and community needs. The interconnected nature of each section and the overall importance of each is dependent on the organization and where they are currently at as an organization.

Dollars and Acres

The original impact indicator for land trusts and conservation organizations and a necessary piece of the conservation and protection process. When questioned about the balance between acreage and stewardship, experts consistently made the point that they need this acreage and the funds to have anything to steward or use for education. Without

this most basic function, a land trust loses the foundation that builds up the other two components.

Stewardship and Education

An increasing component of a land trusts impact within the community and conservation space is the stewardship work and educational programming it offers. As land trusts come into possession of lands, they must continue to steward towards the needs of the community along with strict environmental considerations. In Northern California, the stewardship work done by land trusts are specifically catered to the needs of the communities and the challenges they are facing on a daily basis. Some of the work mentioned by the experts included wildfire mitigation, migration corridor protection, ecosystem restoration, trail creation and trail maintenance.

To coincide with this work, the educational programming and material by land trusts must continue this trend of connection to community. As land trusts increase their acreage, funding and stewardship responsibilities they will have enhanced capacity to educate that same community about the open space around them. From a conservation standpoint, education must also relate these local issues to the overall trends of climate change and habitat loss across world. The land trusts ability to raise awareness and further impact the environmental conservation relies on an organizations ability to leverage these strategies and create meaningful programs to enhance them.

Justice, Equity, and Accessibility

The most recent development in the land trust sector and across much of the non-profit and for-profit world are the considerations of diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) principles. When speaking with experts and longtime land trust staff members, a consistent diversity and accessibility issue was brought up. Some experts in particular raised the question, who are we really protecting this land for? Considering this question, you have to look at the current funder and user base for spaces like land trusts and outdoor activity in general with the vast majority of those in the ecology and conservation are white men (Maas, 2021). Without a diversification of funders, supporters, and users, land trusts will struggle to gain the funds necessary to invest in new conservation easements, stewardship work or educational programming.

Another important piece of the land trust conversation around DEIB is addressing the history of the land and places being protected by the land trust. Cooperation with indigenous tribes and local communities is a necessary step to addressing historical and ongoing injustice. Several experts interviewed for this report spoke about the work currently being done with local communities and the indigenous tribes throughout Northern California. In some cases, land trusts are even rematriating the land to indigenous tribes or relaxing certain use easements to account for a history of abuse.

The final piece of this was the lack of diversity within the organizations themselves. The majority of staff at land trusts are white and do not always represent the

communities they are in or the lands that they protect. (land trust employee demo stat)

Land trusts must start DEIB from within and work their way out into the communities that they represent to act as the connection for people to the lands around them.

Interviewing and hiring diverse candidates is only the beginning of making them feel like their voices are heard and that they have a seat at the table.

Recommendations

These recommendations serve to compliment the model and expand on each section of the model independently. The goal of these recommendations are to improve the land trust model, therefore improving the impact of each organization and contributing to a greater impact on environmental conservation across Northern California.

1. Dollars and Acres:

- Examine creating a “triage” system where at-risk areas are targeted for easements and protection instead of relying solely on private owner donations. Areas like wetlands, forests, migration paths, etc. are specific areas that could be prioritized and planned around.
- Partner with other land trusts working in the same space or similar mission to increase reach and awareness. Examples include partnering with organizations working on the same thing but in a different geographic area. Another example is

partnering around specific abutting lands or geographically similar areas to leverage each other's resources and knowledge.

2. Stewardship and Education:

- Meet the needs of the community; i.e. wildfire mitigation/controlled burns, migration path protection, working land stipulations, etc. Partnering with local communities can ensure that the needs assessment is correct and sustainable for the organization and the community served.
- Create education material for lands protected by the land trust. Educational material can be specific to the land trust, the purpose and the history as all of this is important to showcase the diversity of land use in California. Regardless of use or mission, climate change and habitat loss are affecting every open space in California and that should be a common thread throughout material offered. Connecting a larger issue to something you see in your local community is a great way to improve impact and engagement.

3. Justice, Equity and Accessibility

- Partner with local communities and indigenous populations and work to address historical injustice on the land. Look at rematriation of lands to indigenous communities and increasing access to historically underrepresented populations through community partnerships. Also consider altering easement restrictions to

consider these historical and ongoing factors. Examples also include partnering with local community organizations that bring together under-represented communities like retirement homes, youth groups, church groups, etc.

- Start with the organization; focus on DEIB education and interviewing/hiring diverse candidates to begin the process of equity from within. Along with more diverse hiring practices. The organization and individual staff members must do the ongoing work to ensure that everyone at the organization feels included and like they belong at the table.

Section 6: Conclusions

In conclusion, the land trust model continues to grow and protect an incredible amount of acreage across the United States. Within California alone, the area protected would be about the size of Oregon. With this increasing amount of land under the stewardship and protection of land, an increasing amount of responsibility falls on land trusts to impact the environmental conservation landscape. As the challenges of climate change and habitat loss continue to grow, land trusts have stepped up to meet that challenge and offer educational programming to supplement. The increased stewardship requirements have also brought in increase funds and increased acreage further accelerating the cycle.

The goal of this research was to examine this land trust model and look for ways to improve upon it. The current cycle is growing rapidly, but after thorough analysis and

expert interviews it may be unsustainable. Without an introduction of certain priorities into the space, the support from both funders and users may drop. With lowered interest the land trusts ability to impact and affect change could be diminished. Couple this with the environmental devastation if more is not done in the fields of conservation and climate change, and the very lands that are protected in perpetuity may not be the same place.

Hopefully this work can be used by land trusts to move their organizations into a more sustainable future. The implications and recommendations offered were the result of seven expert interviews with individuals across Northern California working in different land trusts. Along with this, a literature review accompanied the interviews and research process to better understand the current prevailing thoughts.

Limits of the research included the time and limited number of organizations interviewed. Given the short time span for this project, along with other work and school responsibilities, an exploratory case study with interviews was the best approach. My particular weakness in quantitate analysis and lack of standardized statistics for this topic ruled out other approaches.

I hope to continue this project and further expand on improving the land trust model or at the very least utilize it in my future career. Ideally, my future includes a position at a land trust that will allow me to both work and pursue research in this topic. Some areas that I would like to expand include:

- The collaboration between indigenous tribes and land trusts
- Diversifying the donor base of land trusts
- Improving accessibility to under resourced communities
- Cooperation between land trusts and other social service organizations
- Land trusts as a tool for targeted conservation easements

Whatever the future holds, land trusts will continue to play an important role in my life and the lives of everyone who interacts with them. The importance of open space and protected lands cannot be understated and we will need all hands-on deck to meet the challenges of climate change, habitat loss and environmental destruction.

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Author's Bio

Originally from the Western Mountains in Maine, Peter Talbot changed up his surroundings to attend New York University for his undergraduate. Graduating with a B.A. in Journalism and Politics in 2018, Peter wanted to work in a more hands-on environment. He soon applied for the Peace Corps and found himself living in the South-East of Madagascar, working on food security and organic agriculture projects. After just over one year in the country, Peter was evacuated along with every Peace Corps volunteer across the globe due to the Covid-19 Pandemic.

After taking some time to regroup and focus on what was important to him, he found himself in California. His goals include working in the programming and education sectors of a nonprofit focused on the environment or conservation in the Bay Area or Tahoe Basin. In his spare time, Peter tries to get outdoors as much as possible and can often be found camping, skiing or paddle boarding somewhere in Northern California.