

→ **PRIVATE LAND CONSERVATION IS MORE COMPLEX TODAY THAN EVER.**

It demands expertise in organizational management, fundraising, stewardship, board governance, tax and real estate law, and more. Obtaining the best and most up-to-date knowledge, and then turning that knowledge into practice, can seem overwhelming, but the Land Trust Alliance has developed a process and a set of tools designed to make excellence attainable for *all* land trusts. This diagram serves as a map for those land trusts willing to embark on a journey of continual improvement needed to ensure that the land they save today is protected tomorrow. The circle form highlights the reality that knowledge is ever expanding and land trusts must continually learn and grow.

THE  
Path TO A  
STRONGER  
Land Trust

BY Rob Aldrich, *Communications Director*

**Land Trust Standards and Practices**

At the heart of the diagram is *Land Trust Standards and Practices*, the ethical and technical best practices for running a land trust and the surest way to secure lasting conservation. The numbered steps and arrows surrounding *Land Trust Standards and Practices* serve as sign posts and directional indicators on the path to excellence. Because each land trust is different, each journey will be different. One land trust may need training on how to implement a practice while another will not. One land trust may go straight from implementing *Land Trust Standards and Practices* to demonstrating that fact through accreditation, while another needs to upgrade its programs to meet best practices. No matter the path taken, the ultimate goal is the same: continual organizational improvement to ensure permanent land conservation.

### 1 Review and Adopt

The first step in the journey is to adopt *Land Trust Standards and Practices* as the guiding principles for operation.

#### “Adopt” indicates that the organization:

- Has reviewed *Land Trust Standards and Practices*;
- Agrees that *Land Trust Standards and Practices* are the ethical and technical guidelines for the responsible operation of a land trust; and
- Adopts *Land Trust Standards and Practices* as guidelines for the organization and commits to making continual progress toward implementation of these standards and practices.

The Alliance encourages all land trusts to implement *Land Trust Standards and Practices* at a pace appropriate for their organization.

### 2 AYO - Assessing Your Organization

Adopting *Land Trust Standards and Practices* is the essential first step, but it’s always a good idea to periodically check to see how an organization is performing. *Assessing Your Organization* (AYO) enables land trusts to conduct a detailed assessment of their progress toward implementing the standards and practices. While the Alliance recommends that a land trust hire an outside facilitator or trained assessor to guide the group through the process, land trusts can complete it in-house.

Completing this assessment is a group activity because it is likely that no one person in the organization will know all the information needed to respond accurately to all of the questions. Sharing information will also help participants better understand all facets of the organization’s operations, which will benefit the land trust for years to come. The completed assessment is a snapshot in time and will provide an invaluable record of the organization’s growth and development.

The assessment results will indicate places where the land trust needs to improve its practices and where it is succeeding. Based on the results, the land trust will move to either step 3 (more training) or step 4 (implementation).

### 3 Training

Once areas for improvement have been identified, the land trust can take advantage of the most current, authoritative and comprehensive information on private land conservation to improve its practices. Authored by some of the

best conservation experts in the community, each course in the Standards and Practices Curriculum was put through a rigorous review and pilot process to ensure that land trusts have not only the best information but that the information represents the diversity of good land trust practices throughout the country. Each course identifies which practices are covered so land trusts can easily determine what to take and not waste time.

This curriculum is readily available to *all* land trusts, regardless of size, budget or geographic location, through a suite of self-study workbooks and Web courses, and in-person training events. The Alliance specifically designed these courses to help land trusts implement the practices; they include action planning with next steps and additional resources.

### 4 Implementation

The Alliance recognizes that land trusts use a wide range of methods to put the practices into operation, and this variety is one of the community’s great strengths. Practices are also constantly evolving because land trusts are learning all the time and implementing what they learn to save the places they love for all time. As community organizations with recognized nonprofit status, they must live up to the expectations and trust of their communities and of the agencies that regulate them. How each land trust conducts itself reflects on the entire land conservation community.

### 5 Improve

Of course the cycle doesn’t stop with implementation because for every person and

every organization, there is always room for improvement. Once a land trust has implemented a practice, it should periodically determine whether improvement is needed. The complex and ever-changing landscape of private land conservation means land trusts must be committed to creating cultures of continual improvement.

### 6 Accreditation

Those land trusts that desire public recognition for implementing best practices in private land conservation and working in the public interest can take the accreditation path. The Land Trust Accreditation Commission, an independent program of the Land Trust Alliance, conducts an extensive review of a land trust’s operations and grants accreditation—and the right to use the accreditation seal—to land trusts that meet the practices.

The accreditation seal is a mark of distinction in land conservation, demonstrating that an organization meets national standards for excellence, upholds the public trust and implements practices to ensure that conservation efforts are permanent. Accreditation increases public awareness of, and confidence in, land trusts and land conservation.

The land trust’s journey doesn’t end with accreditation. Ideas and laws change, systems improve, people move on and best practices evolve (think about those easements written 20 years ago!). Because change is such a constant, the most effective land trusts make an ongoing commitment to excellence to ensure the land they save today remains protected for future generations. 🌱

