

ESSAY SEVEN

BY Sam Passmore

What Sets *Land Trusts* Apart



Sam Passmore

Most people, upon seeing the Great Lakes for the first time, are stunned by how vast they are, and by the fact that they are made of freshwater, not saltwater. I felt this

way the first time I saw the eastern shoreline of Lake Michigan. Having grown up near Philadelphia, I simply wasn't prepared for the grandeur of this place. Now, my summer isn't complete until I've walked on the beach with 400-foot sand dunes on one side and one of the world's largest bodies of freshwater on the other. Beyond the dunes is some very productive farmland, as well as thousands of acres of protected forests. It's a unique and intricate combination of landscapes. A number of land trusts and conservation organizations are working to protect this area of Michigan, too many to name here.

I learned the value of land trusts when I worked for the South Carolina Coastal Conservation League (CCL) in Charleston before coming to the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation. As an advocacy organization that works on environmental policy, land use and growth management issues, CCL partnered closely with several land trusts and conservation organizations, notably the Lowcountry Open Land Trust, also based in Charleston. All of the partner organizations realized that working together, we could achieve results that we couldn't achieve separately. Through this experience, I grew to understand what land trusts can bring to the table.

When I joined the Mott Foundation in 2001, I learned of the Land Trust Alliance. I had worked with land trusts in my previous job, but the support system of networking

"It seems to me that every person, always, is in a kind of informal partnership with his community."
— Charles Stewart Mott, 1875–1973

and training offered by the Alliance was a revelation to me. I immediately saw its value.

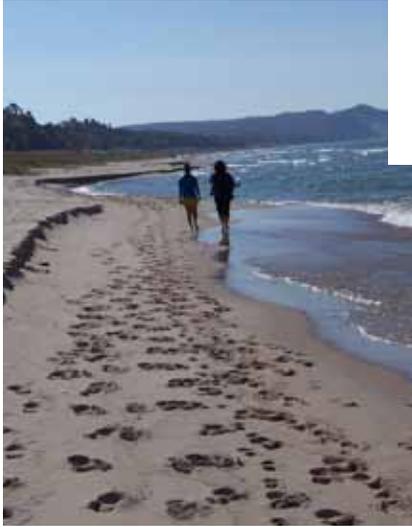
The Mott Foundation's focus on the conservation of freshwater resources, primarily in the Great Lakes basin, is what drives our interest in supporting the Alliance. We understand that our land and water resources are intimately connected, and that land conservation is an important part of any effort to protect water resources. Furthermore, we believe that strong and enduring organizations—not just good ideas and charismatic leaders—are required if we are to protect and restore our natural resources long-term. Supporting the Alliance, we

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believe, is perhaps the single best way to build strength in the land trust sector and challenge individual land trusts to consciously integrate freshwater conservation strategies into their land-based work.

Within philanthropy circles, two of the most popular buzzwords are "leverage" and "results." One reason many foundations support policy reform work, Mott included, is that relatively small levels of funding pooled together (leverage) can generate dramatic policy shifts (results). We just love it when a modest grant allows us to take partial credit for a big policy win. Who wouldn't?

Another word that you hear less often within the foundation world, but I think is just as important, is



The Arcadia Dunes: C.S. Mott Nature Preserve, protected by the Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy in Michigan, contains sandy beaches, dunes, forests and grassland. Adjacent working farms are also permanently protected. The preserve offers 15 miles of trails for hiking and biking, and allows hunting and sustainable forestry in designated areas.

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“permanence.” Land trusts can deliver permanence. The most successful policy reform campaign can be undone by the next administration in one fell swoop, or (more commonly) over time through a series of small decisions that slowly erode a policy’s original intent, what is often referred to as “death by a thousand cuts.” On the other hand, if a land trust protects a piece of property, it’s protected. Permanently. That has powerful appeal.

Land trusts also offer leverage and results. Private funds can leverage public funds to protect a parcel of land, a worthy result certainly. But the promise of permanence is what sets the land trust community apart and is one of its strongest selling points, from my perspective.

The Alliance is in the business of protecting the permanence of its members’ work, which is one reason why I appreciate the Alliance so much. The Mott Foundation was an early, and major, contributor to the land trust accreditation program, because we saw accreditation as a sensible response to an existential threat to the sector. The effort to create a legal defense fund to uphold the terms of easements across the country is another excellent example of what the Alliance is doing to ensure the permanence of land trusts’ work. Indeed, the bread-and-butter activities of the Alliance, such as networking, leadership training and conservation planning, are all about building strong and permanent organizations. After all, easements granted *in perpetuity* require nothing less. 🌿

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