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People-Powered Parks

It's not often that a land trust is featured in the *Sunday New York Times*. Something big must be happening.

A recent article described how Craig Anderson, the executive director of LandPaths in California, is providing people access to hiking trails and preserves—thanks to an army of volunteers who lead hikes and maintain the preserves. This volunteer work deepens people's connection to the land—and to the land trust. It's what Craig calls "People-Powered Parks."

This, I think, is the secret ingredient of the land trust movement. Nationwide, the number of active land trust volunteers increased by an astonishing 70% in just five years.

With cuts in government budgets, land trusts are stepping in to create parks and respond to broader community needs. When local residents asked for a community garden, LandPaths involved neighbors in the planning process and teamed up with the city to get \$11.5 million in grants. LandPaths also is working with the Sonoma Environmental Education Collaborative to transform local landscapes into outdoor classrooms.

In New York state, the Columbia Land Conservancy acquired preserves for public hiking and recreation since the county does not have a public park system. Then it hired educators to offer field trips and environmental education for cash-strapped local schools.

We are calling this kind of work "community conservation" because it is responsive to the concerns of local communities and serves broader public needs. Community conservation starts when a land trust listens to the concerns and hopes of its neighbors and builds lasting relationships to help with public health, education, economic development and affordable housing.

Across the country, land trusts have found that community conservation expands the scale and impact of their conservation work. By engaging and serving the broader community, land trusts have seen increases in fundraising, public support and political influence. Land trusts that implement community conservation practices are reporting membership growth from 33% to 72% within five years. Craig says, "This is pure Thoreauvian civic engagement, creates benefits beyond our ability to quantify and is the most powerful tool we have seen for protecting land, working and wild."

Land trusts do not have to change their mission to embrace community conservation. It just means evolving a larger and shared purpose for that mission and broadening the range of people who benefit from it. In the end, this approach strengthens both land trusts and their surrounding communities.



KATHERINE LAMBERT



Rand Wentworth