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Stronger Than Ever

While hiking through the tall oaks and mountain laurel of the Catoctin Mountains, I stopped to listen to the flute of a wood thrush and the hammering of a pileated woodpecker. If I had been in the same spot 100 years ago, it would have been devoid of all life. After the discovery of iron ore deposits in the 1770s, the local iron furnace cut 11,000 acres of trees each year to make the charcoal. After the furnace closed in 1903, grass and shrubs slowly took hold, followed by young pines, and then, in time, an oak hickory forest—a process known as forest succession.

All of nature runs in cycles of change and regrowth, and land trusts are no different. Many land trusts that started in the 1980s are now changing their structure, board and staff as the founding leaders retire. Some land trusts have protected everything in their service area and are shifting their mission to stewardship and environmental education. A few are dissolving and transferring their easements to another land trust. It is important to carefully plan for all of these changes.

Last year, Colorado Open Lands and Colorado Conservation Trust decided that they could save more land and raise more funds if they merged. And, in northern Ohio, 11 land trusts agreed to merge to form a new entity called the Western Reserve Land Conservancy. Many other land trusts are collaborating with neighboring land trusts to share costs and increase their impact.

Mark Ackelson discussed a succession plan with his board at the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation several years prior to his planned retirement. The organization got its records and policies in order through the accreditation process, and the board had plenty of time to discuss what they were looking for in a successor. In the end, the board ensured continuity by recruiting a long-time employee and asking Mark to stay on as president emeritus.

Smart organizations talk about succession planning before anyone is thinking about leaving. Many include a written succession plan as a regular part of their strategic planning process, and they build their financial reserves to buffer any disruption in fundraising that may come from a change in staff. It is especially important to recruit younger staff and board members and then give them leadership responsibility. Many boards have decided to limit the terms of board members and officers to push the organization into recruiting younger leaders.

The Alliance will be offering training and coaching on succession planning, collaboration and mergers, and you can find more information on The Learning Center (<http://learningcenter.lta.org>). In nature, succession leads to a healthy forest, and, with careful planning, transitions can make land trusts stronger than ever.



KATHERINE LAMBERT

Rand Wentworth