



Pulling from the Ranks:

Land trusts shape volunteers into leaders

BY Peter Lane

The economic downturn has brought new challenges to many land trusts, making it easy to forget that times of upheaval also offer opportunities for creativity and transformation. For many nonprofit organizations, that means thinking of new ways of accomplishing their mission, using their human and financial resources with a focus on what is core to their work, and deepening their relationship with the community through volunteer leadership development.

The last 20 years has seen both an increase in the number of land trusts (almost doubled) and “professionalization” as small, often all-volunteer run organizations have hired staff and grown. There are many good reasons for this professionalization, especially given the unique nature of land trusts, but along the way many organizations (not just land trusts) have lost volunteer engagement and energy as a key component of their organizational culture. Now is the time to renew that commitment to volunteers, not just because it’s a good, inexpensive way to involve the

community, but because it’s an essential strategy for land trusts to develop knowledgeable and energetic new leaders for the future.

On a recent visit to the South Jersey Land and Water Trust, I had the opportunity to talk with a new board member who came to get me at the train station. She first became aware of the land trust at an event where she picked up a brochure. Although her professional background is in education and she didn’t know much about land trusts, she was intrigued by the organization’s work and became a volunteer, first helping with events and later joining the development committee. Two years later she accepted an invitation to join the board of directors.

Other land trusts are also working to establish volunteer programs that allow individuals to learn about the organization and its important issues, and to deepen bonds among volunteers, staff and board members. “Over time we ask volunteers to take on leadership roles,” said Doreen MacGillis, executive director of the York Land Trust in Maine. “Many of them become board members after having served on committees and contribute a lot of time, talent and resources to the organization. They are more willing and prepared to accept an officer role (president, secretary) when they have served as a committee chairperson or campaign chairperson.”

MacGillis also explained that by nurturing these individuals the land trust has a clearer sense of their skills and interests. More importantly, the volunteers gain a deep understanding of the organization, its mission and all areas of its work. “We have several volunteers—all of whom have

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served as board members—who have raised millions of dollars for our land protection projects over the years,” said MacGillis. “They have been involved in many different parts of the organization’s work and this has contributed to their success as fundraisers. It takes time and resources to support the efforts of these kinds of volunteers, but the results have been amazing. We are so grateful for what they have contributed and for what we have learned from them, as well.”

Building volunteer leadership with the kind of substantial benefits that the York Land Trust has experienced requires an investment. It takes an organizational commitment from the very top and the development of a structure and processes that will make a volunteer’s experience positive. In fact, according to a 2009 study by the Corporation for National and Community Service, one of the top reasons why people stopped volunteering was because of a “disorganized volunteer experience.” Word-of-mouth plays a significant role in the effectiveness of many volunteer programs, and can ultimately affect the credibility of a land trust in its community.

“Many of our volunteers come to us through a connection with their peers,” said Christie Trifone, director of development for the Jo Daviess Conservation Foundation in Illinois. “There is a social aspect to volun-

Committing to volunteers is an essential strategy for developing knowledgeable and energetic new leaders.

teering, and volunteers can speak to friends and family directly about the work they do and their overall experience.”

Measure Your Success

Whether you are just now creating a volunteer program to nurture and develop leadership, recreating it or simply retooling it, keep in mind these five questions you can use to measure your success:

1. Does your land trust have an *organizational commitment to volunteers*?

This commitment is less about an “oh yeah, volunteers are a good thing” attitude and more about creating a lasting culture that views volunteers as a valued resource critical to the organization’s effectiveness. For example, the Eastern Shore Land Conservancy’s strategic plan explicitly states that public involvement is a key goal towards achieving its mission. Through a matching grant, the conservancy now has a volunteer coordinator on staff and is developing a variety of volunteer opportunities. Other keys to developing this organizational commitment include:

- Incorporating volunteer program and participation goals in annual work plans;
- Making volunteers everyone’s responsibility, not just a coordinator’s;

- Providing support and training to staff on effective strategies for involving volunteers and supporting them.

2. Do volunteers have a positive experience working at your land trust? An effective volunteer program requires some structure and systems that ensure volunteers are welcomed, treated well and have opportunities to perform meaningful work connected to your mission. That structure may include:

- Timely follow-up when they contact you about volunteering;
- An application process that is not cumbersome;
- Clarity around roles, expectations and the support and training they will receive;
- Ongoing and varied ways of celebrating and thanking volunteers for their contributions.

3. Does your volunteer program have structure and flexibility? Effective volunteer programs offer individuals a variety of opportunities related to the three T’s:

- Time – people can volunteer for varying lengths of time, weekdays or weekends, during the day and in the evening.
- Talent – your land trust is looking for people with different skills and interests,

PREVIOUS PAGE TOP LEFT: Volunteers plant trees at Arcadia Dunes, protected by the Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy. AT RIGHT: Trapp Farm stewards for GTRLC.

PREVIOUS PAGE LOWER LEFT: Volunteers enjoy a break at Casper Bluff Land & Water Reserve, owned by the Jo Daviess Conservation Foundation in Illinois.

Websites:

In just five years, the number of land trust volunteers climbed dramatically to 90,871 in 2005, a 63% increase from 55,597 in 2000.

Check out these websites for information on volunteers:

www.icl.org
www.idealist.org/en/vmrc/index.html
www.energizeinc.com
www.volunteermatch.org



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not just those who have an interest in being a land steward or doing data entry.

- Take-away – people volunteer with different motivations; sometimes it's to build their résumé, to socialize or to make a tangible difference in their community. Pay attention to how your volunteer opportunities and recognition efforts match their motivation for volunteering.

At the Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy in Michigan, volunteer coordinator Rolf von Walhausen met with staff to allay any concerns about volunteers and to help brainstorm innovative ways of involving them. “We asked staff to think creatively about how volunteers could really contribute, and divided possibilities into three categories: critical to our mission, a priority, and really cool things to do,” said von Walhausen. “We’re also open to suggestions from our volunteers. For example, we organized a group of volunteers to help us demolish a building on one of our properties. One volunteer suggested we recycle the materials, which was a great idea that generated even more interest.”

4. How does your volunteer program build connections? Successful volunteer programs build community. They create bonds between staff and volunteers, and between volunteers in a way that creates energy around your mission. Simple acts such as inviting volunteers to lunch with staff and celebrating birthdays are some ways. Asking for specific feedback about the

work they are involved in, or involving them in brainstorming or planning sessions are others.

The Jo Daviess Conservation Foundation has created volunteer groups that serve a social need while fulfilling a functional role. A “Friends” group has formed for one of the foundation’s properties that now maintains and improves trails, is a voice for the property, and even fundraises for it. Another group was instrumental in helping the foundation acquire a property that it had been trying to protect for 15 years.

5. How well are you making use of volunteers as “ambassadors” for your program?

According to the Corporation for National and Community Service, volunteers in focus groups said they began volunteering because a family member or friend asked them to. In fact, in 2008, 27 million volunteers in the U.S. started serving after someone asked them to serve. Land trusts can take advantage of this recruitment strategy by identifying key ambassadors, using social networking sites and encouraging volunteers to talk about their volunteer experience with family and friends.

Develop Volunteer Leaders

Many land trusts intentionally structure their volunteer program in a way that creates new opportunities for volunteers to increase their commitment and to take on new leadership roles. The “Volunteer Leadership Mountain” [see graphic] is one way to analyze your

current volunteer activities and areas where you would like to increase opportunities, thereby creating new pathways to leadership.

At the bottom of the mountain are short-term, easily replicated volunteer activities or events that offer a way for volunteers to enter the organization. It is important to collect names and contact information, and to follow up with people by thanking them for attending, inviting them to an upcoming activity or letting them know about other volunteer opportunities. Your goal is to move volunteers up the mountain. At the second level are longer-term commitments. At the third level, you may ask volunteers to take on increasing responsibility by coordinating groups of volunteers, training volunteers or serving as the chair of a committee.

Developing and sustaining an effective volunteer program takes time. Think about one step you can take in the next six months to put you on the right path and involve current volunteers in the process. “Working with volunteers and developing leadership from within takes time,” said Christie Trifone. “But it’s been worth it for us. I come to work every day inspired by their commitment and talents, and by what we’ve been able to accomplish together.”

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