



"You cannot protect the environment unless you empower people."

—Wangari Maathai, 1940–2011

BY Elisabeth Ptak

CAPTURING Hearts & Minds

How land trusts stay relevant to their communities

Can conservation organizations thrive in a vacuum of permanently protected landscapes without taking other community objectives into account? On the other hand, can a land trust take up challenges like food security or affordable housing and still remain true to its mission?

In her forthcoming second book on conservation finance, Story Clark writes: “Let’s ask the question: *How can conservation be seen as relevant to human needs and human prosperity?* I say *relevant* because if conservation doesn’t matter, then why does the threat of its loss matter? I say *prosperity* because Americans don’t just want the bare necessities; we want to thrive. A path to the bare necessities won’t sell and is disingenuous anyway because conservation can offer so much more. To capture hearts and minds (and more funding), conservation must create a vision for a better world.”

Land trusts today are different creatures than they were 30 or 40 years ago, when their primary mission, understandably, was acquisition of land or easements. While this work continues, many land trusts are looking at the big picture—that land already protected will only *stay* protected if people care about it. These land trusts are listening to what their communities need, and are allying with other organizations to the advantage of all.

Responding to a Need

Westchester Land Trust (WLT) in Bedford Hills, New York, recently found itself addressing the issue of relevancy as part of its strategic planning process. “We are looking at all of our programs to be in line with community needs and still be a conservation leader,” says Executive Director Candace Schafer.

Located just 30 miles from New York City, Westchester County is notable for large estate property, much of which was once farmed. Today, celebrities like Bill and Hillary Clinton, and Martha Stewart call it home. But the 450-square-mile county also has populous cities like Yonkers, where a significant percentage of residents live below the poverty line. WLT helped establish a farmers’ market in Yonkers, and the Westchester Food Bank hired a young farmer to cultivate part of WLT’s Sugar Hill Farm, where the land trust offices also are located. “We wanted to capture the energy of the local food movement. How can you have that without local land?” asks Eileen Hochberg, director of conservation outreach.

WLT estimates there are about 11,000 acres of Westchester County land suitable for agriculture. Its “Local Land, Local Food Farmers Network” connects new farmers—many of whom trained at Stone Barn Center for Food and Agriculture in Westchester County and Glynwood Farm in Cold Spring, New York—with landowners interested in lending their property for farming, often at little or no cost to the farmer. The network (now some 200 strong) also brings together diverse stakeholders to discuss issues of mutual concern related to the local foodshed. Participants have included farmers, chefs, landowners, schools, retailers and institutions.

One institution, Northern Westchester Hospital, is enthusiastic about the land trust efforts. Hatsy Brown Vallar,

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the hospital's senior vice president of External Affairs, says, "The ability to source locally is an important goal of our new food service model, which is based on the philosophy that 'food is care.' WLT has been an integral partner in this initiative, given their commitment to local farming and the creation of their Farmers Network."

Jumping on the energy of the local food movement was not so much mission-driven as a response to something that was needed, says Schafer. "Everyone can relate to the benefits of locally grown food. As a land trust, we have access to property owners whose land can be used for agriculture; our hope is to protect it with conservation easements—forever. Now, that is relevance!"

Creating a City Oasis

In the case of a 166-acre Dallas property threatened by development, building a coalition was key. David Marquis, who lives in the neighborhood where the project is located, was part of a group of local activists who in 1999 worked with the Texas Land Conservancy (TLC) to propose a mix of uses that would appeal to both environmentalists and developers. "If we didn't get things done in this way," Marquis says, "someone would have come along and bulldozed it."

The project resulted in 250 units of senior rental housing, an elementary school, a LEED Silver-certified public library and a 120-acre sanctuary, which is permanently protected by TLC as the Oak Cliff Nature Preserve. The mixed hardwood urban forest is now surrounded on all sides by housing developments. "As the fourth largest green space in Dallas, the preserve is a significant oasis in an otherwise concrete jungle," says TLC Development and Communications Director Kate Vickery.

Now a new partnership has evolved. Austin-based TLC found it difficult to maintain the Dallas preserve. Today it partners with the Dallas Off-Road



Tessa Rissacher, a community actor with the Imaginists Theatre Collective, plays guitar at the LandPaths/Imaginists play called "Everybody Eats/Todos Comemos."

Bicycle Association, which built and maintains the preserve's eight miles of trails. "This is a resource that can withstand that kind of use and still protect the conservation targets, which include the water quality of a major tributary of the Trinity River, the chalk prairie habitat and the riparian hardwood forest," says TLC Stewardship Director Daniel Dietz. The bicyclists also participate in work days sponsored by the conservancy. "That has been a real boon to us," says Vickery. "They can mobilize a lot of users quickly. They love this place."

Diversifying the Ecological Web

Land Partners through Stewardship (LandPaths) was born to be nimble. So says Executive Director Craig Anderson, who has headed the northern California nonprofit since 1997. An offshoot of the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District, LandPaths has a reputation for successfully taking on conservation projects that might not fit under the rubric of other nonprofits. It has partnered with state, city and county parks, and established an urban community farm in a largely Latino neighborhood. It also owns or manages other rural properties, which it makes accessible to the public through its program of hikes and events.

That accessibility is key to LandPaths' determination to be relevant. "We're simply taking a cue from nature by branching out and diversifying our ecological web to work with a true

cross section of our community so we're meeting their needs through our mission," says Anderson. Whether that means managing a property for another agency or using it to educate kids about stewardship, this focus gets people out on the land. All kinds of people. "We demand of ourselves at LandPaths that our programs be open and truly accessible to everyone."

Since 2003, the organization has been guided by a diversity statement put into meaningful practice in the public activities offered, as well as in hiring practices and board member selection. Staff diversity—LandPaths has five employees who are bilingual in Spanish and two who are bi-cultural—has helped the conservation message resonate better with native Spanish speakers.

Getting it right wasn't always easy. Anderson tells a story about the first hike LandPaths offered to the Latino community. Using traditional publicity tactics, the group ran Spanish-language stories and PSAs and hung bilingual posters all over the county. Three people came.

"We didn't have credibility yet in the Latino community," says Anderson. LandPaths learned to make connections at churches, schools and health centers. "If you truly want to diversify your organization, you have to go to that community and talk to people."

Learning to Listen

When Executive Director Judy Steckler describes the region the Land Trust for



KERRY OLENIK, TEXAS LAND CONSERVANCY

Texas Land Conservancy hosted a bike ride at the Oak Cliff Nature Preserve in 2009. TLC and the Dallas Off-Road Bicycle Association care for the preserve together.



LTMCP

City of Gulfport Councilwoman Ella Holmes-Hines tries her hand at fishing in Turkey Creek. The Land Trust for the Mississippi Coastal Plain partners with residents to care for the creek.

the Mississippi Coastal Plain (LTMCP) is trying to protect, she is blunt: “This is not a wilderness area.” The local economy is tourist-oriented with 11 casinos and more on the way. There are no large parcels of land with great biodiversity, and yet there is a complex and interconnected web of natural habitats and human history. The area is a melting pot of Slavic, French and Vietnamese immigrants, and it’s also the setting for a settlement founded by freed slaves in the mid-nineteenth century, even now populated by their descendents.

Still, it was conservation business as usual for LTMCP until Hurricane Katrina struck in 2005—a turning point in many ways. Faced with the enormity of the issues affecting the people of the area, Steckler says, “Katrina caused us to take a different direction.” At that time, the land trust was awarded an EPA grant to develop citizen-based watershed planning groups. Through these groups, LTMCP heard directly from community members about what they valued, and the land trust listened very carefully to what was envisioned.

One of the most compelling stories emanated from a hamlet on the banks of Turkey Creek, just north of the Gulf of Mexico. In 1866, a community of recently emancipated men and women had purchased 320 acres of bottomland, freshwater marsh and floodplain there. They worked determinedly and successfully to make the land productive. The area thrived until the 1980s, when annexation by Gulfport and other challenges almost destroyed it.

The creek itself, the traditional location of baptisms, bankside picnics and fishing had become mostly inaccessible because the shoreline was privately owned. “We realized the thing that could protect us was to recast the creek as a public asset and Gulfport’s premier inland urban waterway,” says Derrick Evans, who leads the Turkey Creek Community Initiatives. But they needed a partner. “This is not a place where you usually find a land trust,” says Evans. “It’s a testament in that context to how great Judy and the land trust have been—an indispensable ally in my community’s survival.”

LTMCP worked with residents to plan greenways and trails on the buffer lands, reaching agreements with the local airport and the highway department and other creekside landowners.

Joint projects with scouts, birders, recreationists and businesses have all evolved into area-wide conservation successes, including the greenways and a network of blueways that have proven to have economic, safety and aesthetic benefits. “One thing leads to another when you involve different groups of citizens,” says Steckler.

Envisioning a Better World

“Investing in people in a way that respects their needs and enhances their lives will be key to long-term conservation success,” says New York-based land conservation consultant Judy Anderson.

But for many land trusts, especially in today’s economy, money is a fundamental issue that keeps them from extending

themselves. LandPath’s Craig Anderson asks them to think forward. “I’m convinced that years from now, the growing spectrum of people who come to our programs will be supporting our organization because they realize its relevance to their lives in clean water, clean air, local transportation, farmers’ markets, parks and vistas.”

“If you start with a can-do attitude and your reasons are for the betterment of the community, it’s totally do-able,” says Craig. “It’s really just thinking about what our community needs and making the programs open and just. When you involve those historically underserved by our parks and open space efforts, there’s no doubt they will speak for the land for the long term. They will say, ‘This is my place.’”

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Quick Take

Land trusts thrive when they form lasting connections to their communities by:

- Listening carefully to what the community needs
- Partnering with community groups to leverage resources
- Providing people with experiences on the land