

An Ecosystem of Services

Learning your way wherever you are

BY Christina Soto



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Eight years ago, the Kennebec Estuary Land Trust (KELT) in Maine had one administrative person on staff for one day a week, a \$10,000 budget, and had saved 1,100 acres of land in its first 17 years of existence. Today, KELT has two full-time staff and five part-time staff, shares staff with neighboring land trusts and has a \$350,000 annual budget. It has doubled its land protection portfolio to 2,300 acres, and has diversified its conservation approach to include a local farm/local food program, a regional trail initiative, several habitat restoration projects and a water quality testing program. What is its secret?

The first key to KELT's success is the leadership and dedication of its board and staff. The second key is a menu of training and services the Land Trust Alliance provided in partnership with the Maine Land Trust Network to help KELT grow and become a more sustainable and effective land trust. Think of the menu as an "ecosystem of services."

Evaluating Ourselves

In a recent study to evaluate the Alliance's accreditation preparation services, Peter Szabo of Bloomingdale Management Advisors found that nearly 90% of the 122 land trusts surveyed used more than one Alliance service for their specific circumstances as they prepared their organizations for accreditation. In fact, these land trusts benefitted from 28 different combinations of services.

Land trusts face a range of issues and operate within a wide variety of circumstances in regard to their organizational, local community and conservation goals. Realizing this tremendous diversity of needs, the Alliance has built a training and capacity-building program that provides an ecosystem of services to meet the particular needs and circumstances of each land trust. Providing a range of services in a number of different forms has proved to be the right formula in helping land trusts learn, grow and succeed.

The Right Formula

By leveraging the ecosystem of services offered by the Alliance, KELT

completed a strategic plan, applied for accreditation and strengthened staff and board capacity through the Alliance's Leadership Program.

Erin Heskett, the Alliance's national director, describes how the ecosystem evolved: "We developed pilots in Michigan and Maine in partnership with the Heart of the Lakes Center for Land Conservation Policy in Michigan, and the Maine Land Trust Network. We worked with 20 land trusts in each state to test how a tailored approach to providing services to land trusts can work most effectively. In both pilots, we've seen tremendous results from our ecosystem of services approach. Land trusts are pursuing accreditation successfully, growing their

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organizations and building stronger collaboration among the two state-wide communities of land trusts."

Gavin Ricklefs, executive director of the Bitter Root Land Trust in Montana, can attest to how well this approach works. "The Alliance's investment has focused on providing the resources needed to take BRLT from an underfunded, underperforming 'startup' (a growth phase we were unable to move past in the first 11 years of our existence) to a strong

community partner with a clear strategic direction, now employing 4.5 permanent staff," says Ricklefs. "During that time, our annual operating budget has increased from \$175,000 to \$375,000, we have secured nearly \$3.5 million for conservation acquisitions, we have doubled the number of conservation easements we hold and have quadrupled the number of acres we've protected. I can say with certainty that this kind of exponential growth would never have happened in the absence of the Alliance's multiyear commitment to our organization."

Big Impacts

"With Kennebec Estuary Land Trust we had the opportunity to add some fertilizer to good soil," says Kevin Case, northeast director for the Alliance. "Regardless of the size of the investment and training program, they all have big impacts. And the beauty of our approach is its flexibility and adaptability in providing land trusts with the training they need and in the form that works best for them."

KELT Executive Director Carrie Kinne agrees. "The support from the Alliance helped us to expand capacity where we have raised over \$2.5 million in funding for land protection and

\$1 million for capacity building and conservation programs. The training and resources from the Alliance gave us confidence to pursue many new opportunities, expanding our organization and strategically preparing us for accreditation. We are a stronger organization today because of the Alliance's investment in KELT."

To start your search for the right services, go to www.lta.org/training or contact your Land Trust Alliance regional office. 🌿