



COASTAL MOUNTAINS LAND TRUST

Coastal Mountains Land Trust has already protected 84% of the land within its oldest focus area, the Duck Trap River, first identified as a priority in 1996.

A plan

The Benefits of Strategic Land Conservation Planning

In the 264 square miles of western Penobscot Bay, Maine, where the Coastal Mountains Land Trust works, there are scenic vistas, waterways, farmland, woods and coastline aplenty to tug at conservationists' heartstrings. But the land trust's focus is laser-sharp. It has delineated six focus areas—just over 11 square miles of its service area—as the places it will spend its time, money and other resources protecting.

“These focus areas offer the best opportunities to protect the core conservation values of our service region, each of which is under great pressure to be converted to residential or commercial uses,” says Scott Dickerson, executive director.

Along the Northern Rocky Mountains of Wyoming, Idaho, Montana and into the Canadian provinces of Alberta and British Columbia, a collaboration of 24 national, statewide and local land trusts are working to create a network of protected private lands to tie into vast areas of public lands. The land trust partners of the Heart of the Rockies Initiative have already protected nearly one million acres, and are planning to protect much more. One of the collaboration's primary goals is to save habitat and

migration corridors for large-ranging species such as grizzly bears, antelope and elk, as well as regionally important rangelands to support agricultural economies.

Whether looking at an area crossing 15 New England towns or at an expanse of the Rocky Mountains from Wyoming to southern Canada, these land trusts are using strategic land conservation planning to identify and protect their highest priority conservation lands, and to work as efficiently as possible.

Getting Started

To make a strategic land conservation plan, a land trust must have a sense of its identity and direction. A mission statement, a general service area and land protection criteria—a defined process for selecting

land or easement projects—are required, says Ole Amundsen, strategic conservation program manager for The Conservation Fund and author of the Land Trust Alliance's upcoming curriculum book on this topic.

Land trust board and staff need to have a sense of the questions they want the plan to answer, he says. Do they want to identify landowners in target areas? Do they need more information about where the highest concentrations of certain natural resources can be found?

One of the questions Catawba Lands Conservancy in North Carolina wanted to address in its plan was which lands were the most threatened by development. Using satellite imagery and statistical analysis of past growth patterns, the University of North Carolina at Charlotte developed computer models that forecast locations of future growth. This data can overlay conservation resource

maps using geographic information system (GIS) technologies.

“It's great when you know where high-priority conservation lands are located and which of those are under the greatest threat from development,” says Dave Cable, Catawba Lands Conservancy's executive director.

GIS is a common tool for many land trusts developing maps for their strategic conservation plans, but paper maps can work too, Amundsen says. “In between paper maps and GIS are the web-based mapping tools like Google Earth and LandScope America (see p. 34). They are low-cost and can be helpful in basic prioritization schemes,” he says.

Conservation organizations using GIS can tap into federal and state data about natural resources and county records on land ownership for analysis, but “the amount of information that's available for GIS analysis is not uniform across the country, and you need to budget time and money for this initial research,” he says.

Before any GIS analysis, land trusts should know their land protection priorities. “The way you set up your GIS at the beginning drives the answer

continued on page 22

FOR THE LAND



The working Hunter Farm in North Carolina, protected by Catawba Lands Conservancy, also serves as an outdoor classroom.

continued from page 19

that you get,” explains Doug Koop, executive director of Little Forks Conservancy in Michigan. “If you determine that riverfront property is more important than farmland, you will assess a higher point value to those areas with riverfront property.” For Little Forks Conservancy, whose focus has been protecting the Tittabawassee River watershed, riverfront has always been a top priority. And properties near other protected lands are given increased importance, so the land trust tends to create clusters of conservation lands.

Coastal Mountains Land Trust’s focus is the result of two rounds of strategic land conservation planning by its board and staff within the last eight years. Board, staff and some community volunteers came together to create the plan, based on GIS analysis of the land trust’s conservation priorities: biological diversity, water resources, working farms and forests, and scenic lands.

Planning’s Payoff

With a staff of five working in an area of more than five counties, strategic land conservation planning is essential for Arizona Land and Water Trust to be efficient and effective, says Diana Freshwater, executive director. “We work in rural areas with high conservation

values, like Cochise County, where our outreach and GIS analysis show a large, intact ranching landscape with areas of high biodiversity. Conservation planning also helps us prioritize communities where we’re hoping to support their efforts to secure public finance mechanisms for conservation.”

Quick Take

DEFINITION:

Strategic land conservation planning

is a process that produces tools to aid decision-makers in identifying, prioritizing, pursuing and protecting those specific tracts of land that will most effectively and efficiently achieve the land trust’s mission.

Like Arizona Land and Water Trust, other land trusts report that their strategic land conservation plan helps them prioritize and focus their time and energy, resulting in more conservation.

Western Reserve Land Conservancy in Ohio has an admittedly ambitious goal of protecting 200,000 acres. “In the first iteration of our [plan], we were able to rank the top 1,200 properties, representing about 100,000 acres, which we think is manageable given our current staff size,” says Anne Murphy, director of stewardship and conservation resources. “We now have every priority

property assigned to project managers or field directors. Each field director is assigned 250 properties within their three-county field regions. We hope to leverage our work with that of our conservation partners to collectively preserve the remaining 100,000 acres.”

The goal may be demanding, but their plan provides clear direction. “It’s much easier to be focused and strategic rather than waiting for the phone to ring,” says Murphy.

A strategic land conservation plan can also help land trusts say “no” to projects. Koop of Little

Aside from increased efficiency, strong strategic conservation plans bring literal payoff by presenting a clear case for support to funders. “I think donors really like to know that you’re pursuing the landscapes that offer the public the greatest set of benefits,” says Dickerson of Coastal Mountains Land Trust, adding that land trusts will need to fundraise to complete their plans. “When you go from accepting donated land as it comes to you to honing your focus on the most important areas, inevitably some of those areas aren’t going to be donated. You’ll have to raise money to purchase them.”

Large-Scale Collaborations

Collaborations with a planning component like the Heart of the Rockies Initiative; the Lake Superior Land Trust Partnership in Michigan, Minnesota, Wisconsin and Ontario; and the Maine Coast Protection Initiative have all brought additional resources to land trusts—from training and capacity-building to funds for land protection. These collaborations often appeal to foundations and other funders by providing an opportunity to participate in large-scale land protection.

Land trusts participating in Heart of the Rockies, extensively supported by Wilberforce Foundation, LaSalle Adams Fund, Kendall Foundation, and Brainerd Foundation, laid out three overarching criteria for their shared land protection strategies: biological importance, strategic ranchland and lands of importance to local communities.

Forks Conservancy tells of a property that neighbors wanted the land trust to buy, but the property ranked fairly low in the land trust’s conservation planning analysis. “We told them it wasn’t high enough priority for us to put that kind of effort into, and they would have to take the lead on fundraising,” he said.

A strategic plan can be very helpful *within* a land trust if members of the board and staff don’t see eye to eye on whether to take on a proposed project, says Amundsen. “If both staff and board can refer to a neutral document to help them evaluate the project, it can help diffuse the situation.”

RESOURCES

www.landtrustgis.org
www.landscape.org — see p. 34
www.greeninfrastructure.net

Watch for the Land Trust Technology Clinic at Rally 2009, Portland, Oregon, and the release of the strategic conservation planning curriculum book: www.landtrustalliance.org

The coalition has broken into smaller geographically based groups to make more specific strategic conservation plans. Within the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem planning area, eight land trusts have protected nearly 500,000 acres in Idaho, Montana and Wyoming.

A broadly collaborative conservation plan has also been completed to protect 516,000 acres in 10 years in the Crown of the Continent—an area that includes northern Montana, the panhandle of Idaho, and southern British Columbia and Alberta.

In addition to direct land protection, the collaboration has leveraged funding for land trust training and capacity-building, and helped with local government bond initiatives for open space in some locations.

But Still Local

Even when you're trying to protect habitat across state and national borders, private land conservation all comes down to the community, notes Michael Whitfield, Heart of the Rockies Initiative coordinator. "We think planning at the landscape scale is important because of the wide-ranging species we're trying to protect. But the reality is that private land conservation is voluntary, and it's always local. It takes place property by property, with local land trusts working with willing local landowners."

Each of the three large geographic planning areas under Heart of the Rockies is broken into eight to 10 "focal areas" for specific land protection planning at the commu-

nity level. When developing strategic land conservation plans for each focal area, "we generally reach out and invite everyone we can get to the table," Whitfield says. Participants include federal land managers, federal and state wildlife officials, nonprofit organizations with resource expertise, conservation district officials, community leaders such as county commissioners and "opinion leaders" such as influential landowners or agricultural representatives, he says. "We're trying to achieve two things: to get expertise in the room to best identify priority lands for conservation, and get engagement from local people to implement the planning."

Catawba Lands Conservancy recently recognized that sophisticated GIS analysis alone does not make a strong conservation plan. The land trust began developing local committees to guide and assist its land protection in the six counties of its service area around Charlotte. "We are very committed to making our work community based," Cable says. "There are diverse communities around here, and they don't want anyone coming out of Charlotte and telling them what's best for them. We want to give them ownership and say about what's most important in their community."

Committee members are already helping the land trust reach more landowners, Cable notes, telling about one member's friend who is well-connected in the farming community. "We had lunch

with him and he immediately gravitated to what we're doing. He said, 'I know all these landowners. Let's invite them to a dinner and have a low-key information session about what land conservation means to farmers and their family heritage and financial situation,'" Cable recounts. "The value of that as opposed to one of us trying to pick up the phone and call someone is phenomenal."

Evaluating Success

One aspect of strategic conservation planning that is often overlooked is how to evaluate the plan, Amundsen says. "I encourage people to include measures on how to evaluate the plan and a timeframe for doing it," he advises. "There are board changes and staff changes that take place, and with that comes the loss of organizational memory. That's why you write things down and include them in the plan."

Land Trust Alliance Northeast Director Kevin Case encourages land trusts to think "out of the box of acres protected" for more creative ways to evaluate the resources they've protected. For example, if agricultural lands are a focus, take a look at the quantity of local foods your protected lands produce, he says.

"Whether helping focus time and energy on those projects that will best achieve its mission, engaging stakeholders, attracting funders or enhancing credibility with landowners, strategic conservation can have a tremendous impact on a land trust's organizational success," Case says. "All land trusts, with a board and staff dedicated to strategic conservation, regardless of size or scale, have the potential to establish their conservation vision and a path to see it achieved." 🌱

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