

Community Conservation: An Exploration

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What is community conservation?

If someone had asked me this question three months ago, I would have had no idea how to answer. I'm brand new to the world of conservation that many KLT members have been immersed in for decades. But I'm curious to learn about land trusts and conservation, and it is that curiosity that led me to explore the idea of community conservation. In the course of my research, I did a lot of reading, conducted three interviews with members, and sent out a survey to KLT's email list. I learned a lot, and I'm excited to share what I learned with KLT's membership.

About community conservation

Community conservation is a method of conservation that focuses on connecting people with the land and meeting community needs. On one hand, it's simply a name for the methods that KLT and other land trusts have been doing for years: interacting with community members and trying their best to serve them through conservation. Without community interaction, no land trust can be very successful, especially since land trusts often rely on community donations. On the other hand, the attention that community conservation has received in the land trust world in recent years represents a shift in thinking about the role of land trusts in their communities.

In the 1980s, when conservation land trusts were rapidly popping up around the country, they were mostly founded around a single goal: to acquire and conserve as much land as possible. While that is an important goal, community conservation has emerged as a more nuanced strategy for a good reason. Instead of focusing only on the number of acres conserved, community conservation asks us who we're conserving the land for, why we're conserving it, and how we can best serve communities.

Examples of community conservation projects might include starting a public garden in an area struggling with food insecurity, allowing protected land to be used for hunting in places where many hunters live, or creating a public park in an area with not much green space. Projects like these involve input from community members along the way. Depending on the project, they can also represent a departure from the goal of conserving as much "pristine" land as possible. For



Cobbossee Stream Conservation Area in Gardiner

example, for a community to get the best use from a public garden, it might be on a small plot of land in a city rather than an expansive rural preserve.

How is community conservation implemented?

I realize that the definition of community conservation is vague and maybe a little confusing. That's because the way this type of conservation looks can be so different from one organization to the next. It depends on the communities being served, the land trust and its goals, and the landscape and natural resources of an area. The way community conservation looks for KLT in the rural Maine foothills is completely different from the way it would look for a land trust in the Boston suburbs or along the Rhode Island coast. For example, KLT's Local Wood WORKS initiative makes sense in heavily forested Maine, but it wouldn't be a useful project for a more urban land trust to take on. There are no concrete steps to follow in order to implement community conservation. Instead, it's more like a way of thinking that shapes priorities and management decisions for an organization.

For many land trusts, community conservation has also been a way to reach out to and communicate with communities that aren't traditionally involved in land conservation. The origins of the American land trust movement are overwhelmingly white and middle or upper income. Recently, however, land trusts have made a point of reaching out to low-income communities, communities of color, and other underrepresented groups to involve them in decisions. In particular, there has been a focus on reaching out to the Native American tribes that first lived on the land owned by any American land trust. Many land trusts have written a statement to acknowledge that the land they conserve is the homeland of native tribes. In Maine, a collaboration between the conservation community and Maine's Wabanaki tribes called the First Light Collaboration aims to address loss of land and resource access by expanding Wabanaki access to and stewardship of land.

As for me, I think that community conservation is a way of thinking more than anything else. As Theresa Kerchner (KLT's executive director and the main coordinator of the intern research projects) said to me, it's partly about adopting an attitude of "Why wouldn't we consider this idea?" When a neighboring landowner wants to mow a path leading to a KLT trail, why wouldn't KLT let him? When a Boy Scout troop needs a local place to camp, why wouldn't KLT allow them to? By having a "why not" attitude about community conservation, the default becomes to work with the community and honor their requests and needs if possible. Then, as in both of these real examples, the outcome benefits everyone. With a mowed path connecting KLT's trails to a subdivision, more people get easier access to public land. The Boy Scout troop got to camp locally using Leave No Trace principles while learning about the land around them. There are many different approaches to community conservation, but this one shows that a community conservation project doesn't always have to be a major undertaking. It can, and should, also be an attitude that permeates an organization.



My fellow summer interns Luke, George, and Evan, plus staff member Tyler, working on building a new trail at Ezra Smith Conservation Area this summer.

Perspectives on community conservation

To relate my research more directly to KLT, I wanted to understand how people connected to KLT think about community conservation. I sent out a survey to KLT's email list asking a few questions about the topic, and I was surprised and pleased to get over 200 responses. In general, people knew about the concept of community conservation and had noticed an increase in KLT community conservation projects. When I asked about what community conservation should look like for KLT, I got some great feedback and suggestions. Many responses mentioned youth programming, educational programming, deliberate community outreach, and increasing public access to land as ways KLT could participate in community conservation. These answers show just a snapshot of all the ways community conservation can look in the Kennebec Land Trust's service area in central Maine.

I was also able to get several more in-depth perspectives from the three interviews I conducted. I talked to people with a range of experience in KLT and the land trust world. My first interview was with Andrew Gorrill, who joined KLT last year because he wanted to support public land access. He appreciates that KLT's trails are so well managed, although sometimes he skips the trails and bushwhacks on a property with no trails. When I asked what kind of community conservation projects he would like KLT to focus on, he mentioned the need for walking-accessible trails in neighborhoods, since he doesn't always have access to a car.

My second interview was with Sue Bell, who joined KLT in 2013 and is a current board member. She approached land conservation from the perspective of a forester because of her former position as director of the Maine Forest Service. She became involved in KLT because of the Howard Hill project, which conserved the forested hill behind the Maine State Capitol and represents to her the importance of forested land in Maine. She believes in multi-use management of conservation lands, and appreciates the effort KLT has put into community conservation projects that both conserve land and provide opportunities for



The view from the top of Howard Hill, looking down at the Maine Statehouse.

recreation, such as Mt. Pisgah and Surry Hill. She also mentioned the Baldwin Hill Conservation Burial Ground as a novel and interesting initiative that she's excited about.

My last interview was with Cheryl Harrington, a past board member and president of KLT who has been with the organization since close to the beginning. During her work as a lawyer for the Bureau of Public Land, she was inspired to join KLT after seeing firsthand the strong development pressure that was building across Maine. As a longtime member, she has seen KLT grow and change over the years. When it was first founded, she told me, almost all the energy went to acquiring more land and protecting it from development. Now, with more land to

manage, stewardship of the land has become increasingly important. Cheryl also mentioned the importance of KLT's institutional memory. Now over thirty years old, KLT is able to work with town governments and other organizations on long term community conservation goals.

I loved conducting these interviews and I learned a lot by exploring the different viewpoints of a new member, a current board member, and a past board member, all with unique experiences of KLT as an organization. In conjunction with my survey results, these interviews show that there's broad support for community conservation among those connected to KLT. They also show the wide range of possibilities that community conservation encompasses, from recreation and accessibility to timber harvesting and even developing a burial ground.

Conclusion

A common misconception about community conservation is that it is in conflict with a more traditional idea of conservation, where the goal is to protect land and nature. I would argue that the opposite is true. As Sue Bell brought up in my interview with her, it is important to acknowledge the difference between conservation and preservation. While preservation is the protection of nature from humans, conservation is the regulation of human use to protect natural resources. Of course, the protection of nature and biodiversity is essential in land conservation. However, conservation is also for people, and it is for all people. Community conservation, then, is inherent in the mission of a successful land trust. It increases the number of people who love and connect with the land, in turn increasing support for the land trust in terms of time, money, goodwill, and community partnerships. With this increased social capital, land trusts are able to acquire and protect more land. It is this cycle that makes community conservation such a popular and effective framework for land trusts today.

Sources:

The Land Trust Alliance Website: <https://www.landtrustalliance.org/topics/community-conservation>

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