



## PROFILES IN EXCELLENCE

# Placer Land Trust

## Accreditation & Strategic Conservation: A Happy Synchronicity

EXCERPTED FROM *STRATEGIC CONSERVATION PLANNING*, BY OLE AMUNDSEN, III

In 2007, the Placer Land Trust decided that accreditation was vital to its success in conserving land in Placer County, the fastest growing county in northern California. Placer County has abundant recreation and scenic areas as well as prime farmland, and Placer Land Trust's mission is to work with willing sellers to protect these lands for future generations.

Over the course of 2007, the trust devoted time at each of its monthly board meetings to review a standard from *Land Trust Standards and Practices* and create the necessary policies and procedures. During their accreditation preparation, land trust staff and board realized that a sound strategic conservation plan was also vital to their success. At this time, the land trust had a checkerboard of properties across the county and a set of land protection processes that needed to be both streamlined and upgraded. According to Assistant Director Jessica Pierce, as Placer Land Trust created its new policies and procedures, it did so with an eye to a future strategic conservation plan. For example, the trust revamped its project criteria checklist and prioritization methodology to fit the goals of its future strategic conservation plan.

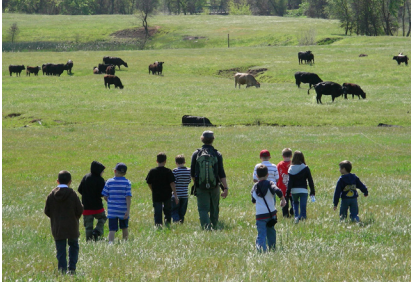
Once Placer Land Trust earned accreditation in 2008, the trust dove full force into strategic planning, made easier by the accreditation preparation. The trust was lucky to have staff with GIS expertise so they were able to conduct the planning entirely in-house, which saved a considerable amount of money. Within two years, the trust had a "working draft" and was waiting on the county to finish its conservation plan so the two could be coordinated (the county's conservation plan was highly contentious and over 10 years in the making). Despite the trust's plan not being "final," staff and board use it to guide their conservation choices today.

The change brought about by accreditation and strategic conservation has been astounding, considering Placer Land Trust's history. In 2002, after protecting a scant 78 acres over 11 years and operating only with a volunteer board, the trust hired a full-time executive director, and in 2005 added a second staff person. After earning accreditation the trust staffed up considerably to five staff members with two full-time paid interns and several contractors, and the pace of conservation accelerated rapidly. Today Placer Land Trust has preserved over 5000 acres throughout Placer County.



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ASSISTANT DIRECTOR JESSICA PIERCE



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Placer Land Trust found that accreditation helped kick-start their capacity because funders greatly valued the credibility demonstrated by accreditation.

“Accreditation helped in ways we had never even considered,” stated Pierce. Pierce says that now that the land trust is accredited they no longer have to complete an onerous process to be eligible to hold mitigation lands for the California Department of Fish and Game: “Now all we do is check a box. Accreditation was worth it just so we could check that box!”

According to Pierce, having a strategic conservation plan has also enabled the trust to go to funders with a plan. “We can show funders that we have a long-range vision for our county and have strategies for achieving our vision. It has been very helpful,” she said. The plan also opened the eyes of both board and staff to the need to partner with other conservation groups. In late 2009, the trust partnered with the Nevada County Land Trust and the Trust for Public Land to create the Bear-Yuba Partnership, a strategic landscape-scale initiative to protect the waterways, historic ranches and oak woodlands of the Sierra Nevada foothills in the Bear and Yuba River watersheds. This partnership has not only raised the profile of the trust in its community but also the state and beyond. The San Francisco Chronicle published a story on the partnership and its conservation efforts in the Bear River watershed, which was then picked up by Morning Edition and broadcast on National Public Radio to the rest of the country. After the broadcast, the trust saw a dramatic uptick in contributions from people across the country, some as far away as Ohio and Indiana, who heard the story and wanted to help protect this land.

Within eight years Placer Land Trust grew from a small organization doing great work on a local scale to a thriving organization partnering with national groups on landscape-scale projects. “Just a few years ago, we would never have imagined where we are now. Accreditation and strategic conservation planning moved us to put our house in order, look at our priorities carefully and think beyond past limitations. We kept asking ourselves ‘why didn’t we do this earlier?’” notes Pierce.

For those land trusts considering drafting a strategic conservation plan and applying for accreditation, Placer Land Trust advises that they hire an outside facilitator to run the meetings to assist in moving the process along quicker and more effectively. In addition, she notes: “Do the organizational assessment first to find any holes. Then give yourself time to work through *Land Trust Standards and Practices*. As you rework your policies and procedures for accreditation, keep your strategic conservation plan in mind so you don’t have to reinvent the wheel. Use the resources out there including the Strategic Conservation Planning courses at Rally, S&P courses, The Learning Center and other trainings. Getting accredited or creating a strategic conservation plan can appear daunting, but benefits really do outweigh the costs.”

### PLACER LAND TRUST

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ACRES OF LAND SAVED	5,350
STAFF	5
ACCREDITED	2008