Once you get the river under your skin, you never want to leave. It’s the place I call home,” said Andrew Wood, executive director of Thousand Islands Land Trust.

Wood isn’t the only islander who feels a deep connection to the river and land. The land trust’s dedicated staff and board have conserved almost 8,000 acres along the St. Lawrence River, and as an accredited land trust they are certain their work will stand the test of time.

The push for accreditation began in 2007 and was led by Aaron Vogel, the executive director at the time. Vogel’s love of learning and desire to preserve the scenic beauty of the region led him to pursue accreditation for his land trust. In November 2008, days after submitting the accreditation application, Vogel suddenly passed away, and Wood assumed the position of executive director.

Even in the face of tragedy, the cohesiveness of the board and staff brought them to the decision to continue the accreditation process, preserving the legacy of Vogel and his land.

“Aaron wanted to perform his conservation work in a highly professional way to ethically serve the people and the land,” said Ted Mascott, a previous president and board member. “Accreditation helped us achieve this,” he said.

Before Vogel passed away, he and Wood, then director of land conservation, and a five-member accreditation team collaborated to complete the application. Vogel offered his expert knowledge of the inner workings of the land trust whenever a question arose. His advice and teamwork enabled the land trust to continue its conservation projects during the rigorous process.

More insight into the importance of accreditation came from Mascott, a member of the Standards and Practices steering committee. Mascott personally recognized the value of Land Trust Standards and Practices, and as president in 2004 he implemented them into their policies.

Mascott’s professional organizational management skills, combined with Vogel’s conservation expertise, garnered an appreciation and understanding of Standards and Practices as the cornerstone of a land trust’s ethical behavior.

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EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR ANDREW WOOD
“We enjoyed watching each other’s growing capabilities, his in professional organizational management and mine in land conservation. Our teamwork left us no doubts that accreditation was for us,” said Mascott.

Though prepared for accreditation with excellent insight and staff, the application was challenging. The staff learned their strengths and weaknesses very quickly, realizing where to invest their time and effort as they strove for excellence.

“You have time to get the deal done. You have time to steward the property. You have time to manage it, but you don’t always have time to write down every detail. Recordkeeping — it was the hardest hurdle, and still is,” said Wood.

When you’re passing information from one executive director to another, and that person is no longer there to answer questions you must be able to rely on your records explained Wood. He suggests writing everything down and placing it in a file. Keep records that are understandable for your staff 50 to 100 years from now.

“Upon his death, Aaron could have taken his institutional knowledge with him, but instead he left a legacy of strong written policies and records,” said President Susan Smith.

Wood encourages other land trusts to leave the same legacy. When he is asked by other organizations, “Should we apply?”, his answer always is, “Yes, and even if you don’t apply this year, download an application and begin to work your way through it.”

The value of accreditation is that it pushes your own organization forward, but you also have a benchmark to judge your progress explained Smith. “Standards exemplify your strive for excellence, and practice is the way to get there,” she said.

“By abiding by Standards and Practices and achieving accreditation, we are confident we will forever continue to live on, work on, and play on the water every day— just as Aaron would have wished,” said Wood.

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