

An Impact Evaluation of the Land Trust Accreditation Program's First Ten Years

July 2018

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I. Summary

A. Context and Purpose

This impact evaluation was commissioned by the Land Trust Accreditation Commission, an independent, non-profit supporting organization of the Land Trust Alliance, incorporated in 2006 to award accreditation to land trusts that meet national quality standards.¹ Upon its founding, the Commission was charged with three strategic goals, which echo and reinforce the Alliance's own:

- Build and recognize strong land trusts
- Foster public confidence in land conservation, and
- Help ensure the long-term protection of land.

Since its inception, substantial resources have been invested in the accreditation program, including the financial contributions of foundations and major donors, the time of volunteer commissioners, and the time and fees of land trusts seeking to become accredited. Having reached a decade of accrediting land trusts, the Accreditation Commission sought an evaluation of the return on this investment in achieving the goals of the program.

The Commission conducts annual evaluations which inform ongoing program and process improvements. In outlining its objectives for this ten-year impact evaluation, in its request for proposals the Commission noted:

While thorough, the Commission's internal evaluation does not include an assessment of the other two program goals from external sources (e.g., has the public's trust in land conservation increased; has accreditation reduced risks to permanence). Evaluating the accreditation program's ten-year impact on these goals is the core objective of this [evaluation], with specific focus on the external metrics of measuring the impact on public trust.

The purpose of this evaluation, then, was to assess the impact of the first ten years of the accreditation program, with a special emphasis on public confidence in land trusts and land conservation, and on the permanence of land conservation, while also touching on impacts on the strength of land trusts.

The evaluation involved analyzing data from the 2005 and 2015 Land Trust Census; surveying and interviewing conservation stakeholders, including foundations, federal, state, and local government agencies, landowners, and others; and surveying accredited land trusts.² The

¹Accreditation is a distinction awarded to land trusts meeting national standards for excellence and conservation permanence. Each accredited land trust completes a year-long review process which examines fiscal accountability, organizational leadership, transaction due diligence, and stewardship practices. Once awarded accreditation an organization must complete a comprehensive renewal process every five years.

² These information sources are described in more detail in Section V.

results of the evaluation are summarized below and explained in greater detail in the body of the report and the appendices.

Findings

Overview

In brief, this evaluation shows that the intensive investments in the accreditation program have borne fruit. The accreditation program has produced meaningful increases in stakeholder confidence in land trusts and land conservation, in the ability of land trusts to protect land in perpetuity, and in the strength of land trusts. For these reasons, the evaluation concludes that the accreditation program has had a substantial positive impact on conservation in the United States.

Public confidence

The accreditation program has greatly enhanced the confidence foundations, government agencies, landowners, and other stakeholders have in land trusts and land conservation. Overwhelming majorities of foundation and public agency stakeholders (85 percent) report moderate-to-substantial increases in their confidence in land trusts, with an equivalent proportion of landowners saying accreditation moderately or substantially increased their confidence that their land would be protected in perpetuity. Echoing this emerging four-out-of-five pattern, 79 percent of accredited land trust survey respondents said accreditation helped increase stakeholder confidence in the land trust community. Key Washington players present at the origin of accreditation and still engaged in federal issues report a sustained increase in confidence in land conservation in Congress and at the IRS, though, of course, not without limitations.

This study further found that most stakeholders are familiar with accreditation, but that they are not aware of all that it is and is not. Stakeholders are factoring accreditation into funding and partnering decisions, though for the most part they are not requiring it.

Permanence

Accredited land trusts are much better positioned to permanently conserve land than land trusts that were eligible for accreditation but are not yet accredited (EBNA). A greater proportion of accredited land trusts monitor all their conservation easements, have baseline documents, and have conservation easement amendment and enforcement policies in place. In addition, accredited land trusts have much higher balances in permanence endowments.³

³In this report, the term “permanence endowments” encompasses both stewardship and legal defense endowments.

Accredited land trusts were asked for their view on the broad impact of the accreditation program on the permanent protection of land, and 85 percent of survey respondents said they thought that the accreditation program had moderately or substantially improved the land trust community's ability to meet the promise of perpetuity.

Strong land trusts

Accredited land trusts generally grew more robustly between 2005 and 2015⁴ and ended up in a stronger position than EBNAs. In areas related to direct public support – operating funds, financial supporters, and volunteers – accredited land trusts garnered an out-sized share of the growth between 2005 and 2015. And in terms of conservation impact and basic organizational capacity, accredited land trusts protected a disproportionate share of the acres conserved between 2005 and 2015, and they experienced a greater share of the growth in staff, giving them more capacity to do conservation. In 2015, compared to the average EBNA, the average accredited land trust had a budget four times as large, three times as many volunteers, and more than fifty percent more financial supporters.

To assess whether these figures were somehow driven by the presence of large accredited land trusts in the data, a staff-segment-level analysis was conducted that looked at four metrics across four staff-size segments, ranging from the smallest land trusts (<1FTE) to the largest (10+ FTEs). This analysis indicated that the relatively stronger average performance of accredited land trusts outlined in the main data analysis was not caused by a few very large accredited land trusts. Across 16 possibilities (four staff-size segments, four metrics), accredited land trusts had *greater percentage increases* between 2005 and 2015 in 13, and *higher average figures* in 2015 in 15 of them. Across most size-segments, for most of the indicators examined in this supplementary analysis, accredited land trusts outgained, and ended up in a stronger position than, EBNAs.

Even so, the association between the stronger performance of accredited land trusts between 2005 and 2015 and the fact that they became accredited during this period is just that, association. So, to better understand the connection between performance and accreditation, accredited land trusts were surveyed about the improvements their organization had made over the last decade, and the role of accreditation in motivating these changes. 82 percent of survey respondents said that their organization had made moderate-to-substantial improvements in key organizational functions – governance, acquisition/transaction procedures, stewardship systems/practices, and financial systems – and nearly 9 in 10 (87 percent) said that becoming accredited had moderately or substantially motivated them to make these organizational improvements.

⁴This evaluation analyzed data from the 2005 and 2015 Land Trust Census, corresponding to the years of the last Census before the accreditation program was implemented, and the most recent Census.

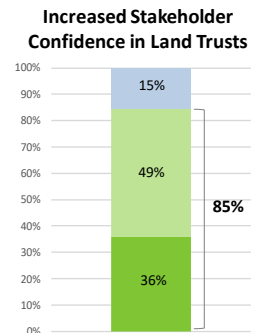
For these reasons, then – the meaningful increases in stakeholder confidence, in the ability to protect land in perpetuity, and in the strength of land trusts – this evaluation concludes that the accreditation program had a substantial impact.

II. Impact on Public Confidence

A. General impact on confidence

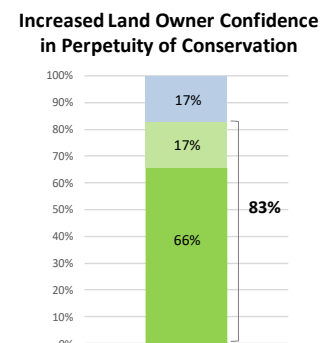
Overview

Overall, accreditation has increased the confidence that conservation stakeholders – including foundations, government agencies, and landowners – have in land trusts and land conservation. 85 percent of foundation and public agency survey respondents said that accreditation moderately or substantially increases their confidence in land trusts, with some 36 percent saying it did so substantially. A similar proportion of landowner survey respondents (83 percent) said that the fact that the land trust they worked with was accredited moderately or substantially increased their confidence that their land would be protected in perpetuity, with two-thirds (66 percent) saying it did so substantially.⁵



Stakeholders

Federal agencies and foundations reported especially strong effects on their confidence. Every respondent from these stakeholder groups said accreditation had increased their confidence in land trusts at least moderately. 75 percent of federal agency respondents and two-thirds of foundation respondents said accreditation increased their confidence *substantially*. Though not as intensely, accreditation still had a solid effect on the confidence of county and state agency respondents, with 80 percent saying it appreciably increased their confidence in land trusts, albeit with only a minority of each saying it had done so substantially.



In interviews, stakeholders explained why accreditation increased their confidence. Foundations believe accredited land trusts have stronger systems, practices, and governance.

“The rigor of the accreditation process instills confidence.”
- Foundation

“It’s a comfort knowing that the land trust has the systems and processes in place to execute the process and steward the land,” said one funder. Another added, “The rigor of the accreditation process instills confidence you’re dealing with a land trust with capacity to undertake the work you’re looking to have done.” Commented a third, “It says a land trust board has bought into the need to follow best practice.”⁶

Many landowners echoed these views. “When the transaction was done, [the land trust we worked with] was working to achieve accreditation, giving me confidence that the all-volunteer organization was moving towards assuring its sustainability and good stewardship of the land,” one landowner said. Another related, “As a result of my confidence, I have been a

⁵ In the side-charts, darker green = Substantially, lighter green = Moderately, and blue = Little/None.

See Appendix A for the results of the foundation and public agency stakeholder survey.

See Appendix C for the results of the landowner survey.

⁶ See Appendix B for the results of foundation and public agency stakeholder interviews.

continuing donor to the land trust and am currently planning an additional major land bargain sale.”

Government funders and private landowners especially value that accreditation provides credible, in-depth, third-party review of key activities. “It tells us the standards and practices of the land trusts have been scrutinized. We have a high level of confidence they’re qualified,” said one federal agency interviewee. “We sometimes work with entities that are set up just for the purposes of the transaction, to take an easement,” said a staff member from another federal agency. “But an accredited entity follows through with monitoring. And a third-party oversees them. It gives us confidence.”

Landowner’s have tremendous personal investment in the permanent protection of their land. And perhaps because of this, accreditation seems to make a particular difference for them. “Having an impartial board reinforce our decision to work with [the land trust we worked with] gave us more faith in their promises and their seriousness,” one landowner recalled. “We were, after all, expecting to place this land in a conservation easement in perpetuity.” Another said, “By giving up the right to develop our property we wanted to make sure we went with a land trust that will be around for many years to come. Their being accredited gave us peace of mind that they met a minimum level of standards for the industry.”

Several government stakeholders said that accreditation offered them a standard that helped them meet their responsibility to steward public funds. “As a public agency, you’re a custodian of public funds,” one said. “If there is a standard, you are on more solid ground.” Some interviewees saw intrinsic strength in accredited land trusts. “The same philosophy that got them to go for accreditation governs how they do their job,” said a state agency staff member.

“The same philosophy that got them to go for accreditation governs how they do their job.”
-State agency

Accredited Land Trusts

Accredited land trusts largely validate this increase in public confidence, with 79 percent of accredited land trust survey respondents saying accreditation helped increase stakeholder confidence in the land trust community.⁷ “Having an external, third party standard is important to us to demonstrate to the public our existing commitments, and has created more credibility for the whole movement,” commented one respondent. Another offered, “I believe elected public officials are more likely to not only believe and trust us, but partner with us as well because of accreditation.” A third said, “Accreditation has resulted in more respect for us and our work. Landowners particularly seem to have more confidence in us, and it has led to new land protection partnerships with the private sector and to more successfully competing for funding from federal agencies.” Summed up another, “Being accredited has made us stronger and people recognize the gold standard of excellence it symbolizes.”

⁷ See Appendix D for the results of the Accredited Land Trust Survey.

A large majority of accredited land trusts (70 percent) feel their own organization's effort to become accredited has yielded a benefit to the whole land trust community by contributing to the broad effect on stakeholder confidence. It is this broad change across the movement produced by the collective effort of many individual actions that many land trusts feel had particular value. "Being able to say we are an accredited land trust is huge," explained one land trust, "but being able to say that land trusts across the nation hold themselves to the highest standards possible with regard to best practices, due diligence, honor and respectability, especially when faced with issues raised by fraudulent deals, the IRS, etc., it gives us a much higher and more respected plateau to stand on."

B. Awareness of/familiarity with accreditation

Awareness of the accreditation program is broad, though somewhat shallower than one might expect. An average of 78 percent of foundation and government agency stakeholder survey respondents, and 77 percent of landowners said they are somewhat or very familiar with accreditation. Input from accredited land trust survey respondents rounds out, and is consistent with, this perspective, with 80 percent saying their foundation and agency funders are somewhat or very familiar with accreditation.

And yet, in general, the awareness and understanding of the accreditation program is somewhat shallow. Many stakeholders interact frequently with land trusts, and may even be aware of their accreditation status, but still are not terribly familiar with the accreditation program. For instance, 60 percent of foundation and agency stakeholders said they interacted frequently with land trusts, though only 30 percent said they had a high degree of familiarity with the accreditation program. And while 91 percent of landowners were aware the land trust they worked with was accredited (likely the result of the fact that 86 percent of accredited land trust survey respondents said they promoted their accreditation status), only 20 percent were very familiar with the accreditation program.

Looking more deeply at the responses of foundation and government agency stakeholders, awareness seems related to the degree of interaction with land trusts. About 90 percent of those who said they were very familiar with accreditation interacted frequently with land trusts, while nearly three-quarters of those who were not at all familiar with accreditation interacted only occasionally with land trusts.

The reputation of the program, and strong promotion of their status by accredited land trusts, appears to have had an effect on stakeholder awareness of the accreditation program. However, there is likely still room for advances in awareness of the accreditation program generally, and familiarity with the specifics of what it is and what it is not.

C. Use of accreditation

Most stakeholders say that accreditation is an important consideration in their funding, partnering, and land transaction decisions. 79 percent of foundation and government

stakeholder survey respondents said accreditation factored into their organization's decision making, with nearly four in ten (37 percent) saying it was a major factor. A similarly high proportion of landowners (80 percent) said that they considered accreditation when deciding to work with a land trust. 41 percent of landowner respondents said accreditation was a major factor.

Government agency survey respondents and interviewees said they gave extra weight to accredited land trusts in their funding process, that they relied on accreditation as a quality or competence standard, and that accreditation was at times a supplement or substitute for their own due diligence. "There is an expedited process for groups that are nationally accredited," said one federal agency staffer, while another said, "All else being equal, if an applicant has an accredited land trust partner, they get extra points." Added a third, "Accredited land trusts move more quickly through deed/appraisal reviews. It will play a more prominent role for us in the future."

Explaining the way accreditation status factors into their due diligence and decision making, one federal agency said, "You have to demonstrate the capability to be able to undertake the acquisition and protect it in perpetuity. We don't have to dig into the details as much if a group is accredited." Another said, "We're not trained in due diligence. Here's this national entity that is qualified to do just that. It gives us more confidence that these projects will last in perpetuity."

"We're not trained in due diligence. Here's this national entity that is qualified to do just that. It gives us more confidence."
-Federal agency

Foundations use accreditation in ways similar to government. "Accreditation status is mentioned in every grant-write up for our board," said one foundation staff member. A few use it for gating eligibility for capacity building funding, and in still fewer instances, as a qualifying criterion for capital grants.

"Accreditation is not a requirement...We can't lose the flexibility."
-Federal agency

However, while it is a consideration for most funder respondents, it is a requirement for few. Funders explain that many of the geographic areas they fund in have few land trusts, and in some cases, there are no accredited land trusts. Further, some say that the existing grantees and partners that are not accredited are performing satisfactorily. "Accreditation is not a requirement because we have too many partners who are not accredited and won't be soon," said one federal agency interviewee. "We can't lose the flexibility. But going forward, accreditation might increase in importance." Added a foundation staff member, "It's not a requirement – there are some geographic areas where the only land trust option is not accredited. But in those cases, there is extra due diligence."

Intermediaries⁸ and conservation lenders said they often looked to accredited land trusts to handle more complex, more sophisticated transactions. However, for these relatively few stakeholders who must undertake the deeper financial and other due diligence needed for underwriting a loan, accreditation factors less centrally into their decision making.

⁸Organizations that re-grant and/or loan funds for foundations.

Accredited land trust survey respondents said that foundation and government funders were factoring accreditation into their decisions via preferences rather than requirements, which is consistent with what these stakeholders reported in the survey and interviews.

D. A special note on public confidence

Several individuals who were key players in Washington, D.C. at the time accreditation was conceived – and who continue to have relevant relationships and work there – were interviewed about their experience with the origins of the program and their thoughts on its impact on confidence in the land trust community. These conversations offered a reminder of the risks to conservation at that time, and the role accreditation played, and continues to play in policy consideration.

Abuses of conservation easement donations had the full attention of the U.S. Senate Finance Committee. “The problem in conservation was about more than just The Nature Conservancy,” a former senior Senate Finance Committee staff member said, “it was about best practice in the field.” The Committee was open to self-regulation solutions based on a best-practice standard. So was the IRS. “The Alliance proposed accreditation based on Standards and Practices and we were supportive because we saw best practices as a start at drawing the line between the good, the bad, and the ugly,” recalled a former senior IRS official.

Had there been no Alliance and no accreditation program, the IRS would have been brought into the situation. According to these officials, highly unfavorable changes in the tax code, in reporting requirements, in the frequency of landowner and land trust audits, in appraisal requirements, in minimum transaction size, and transaction approval processes, among other changes, were all in the works and were almost entirely headed off by the advent of accreditation. “Just look at what we did with credit counseling in 2005,” the former Senate Finance Committee staffer pointed out. “There’s the path we would have gone down, very prescriptive. Dos/Don’ts for what should constitute a conservation organization able to receive conservation easements. We would have come up with you have to do A, B, C.”

Instead of these changes, there were minor increases in Form 990 reporting requirements and in examinations. Instead of disruption, there was acceleration in the pace of conservation. “Accreditation allowed the Alliance to talk to Congress,” said the former IRS official. “They would not have had the following success – the extended and improved [federal income tax] deduction – without it.”

Many accredited land trusts appreciate the link between the rigorous process they are asked to undertake to become accredited and the particular effects on federal laws and regulations. “It [accreditation] went a long way to get the federal government to understand and support our work and to defend land trusts from burdensome regulation,” commented one accredited land trust survey respondent. “Increased confidence of Congress in the land trust community is the overriding reason for our continuing participation [in the accreditation program],” said

another. "The tax incentive for conservation easements is a very important tool in protecting land. It was important that this tool be retained amidst the troubles of 2002," reflected an additional respondent. "If accrediting land trusts and appraisers was what it took to make that happen, it was/is a good thing. I also think the accreditation process will be important as we face current and future challenges to the system."

A number of accredited land trust survey respondents spoke more specifically to these ongoing risks and challenges. Getting right to this point, one respondent said, "I think national accreditation is vital at a time when unscrupulous organizations have abused federal IRS regulations. Accreditation separates us from those organizations and I believe may help the IRS and other relevant government agencies distinguish what we do from the bad actors."

Washington interviewees affirmed this continuing value of accreditation. "Does accreditation increase confidence in land conservation on The Hill? Yes," summed up the former senior Senate Finance Committee staff member. But he went on to stress the ongoing importance of accreditation. "There's a new chair and new ranking member, plus staff turnover on the Committee since I was there. Still, there's still a feeling that land trusts are trying to engage in best practices. This does matter," he explained. "It helps protect them from policy intervention."

He cautioned, however, that a new scandal that implied a "Wild West" had broken out again would cause trouble for the conservation community. "You don't have to be perfect," he concluded, "but you do have to have good-faith quality control."

III. Impact on Permanence

A. Overview

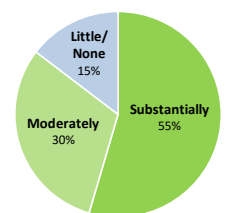
The accreditation program may have impacted stakeholder confidence in land trusts, but did it impact the internal policies and practices that help assure the permanence of land protection? To assess this question, an analysis was conducted using Land Trust Census data for 2005 (before accreditation started) and 2015 which looked comparatively at the changes in accredited land trusts and EBNAs.⁹ Even as most of the land trusts studied progressed during the period, the data shows large differences between these two sets of organizations.

To be sure, the data alone does not prove that the accreditation program was *the* cause of these differences. To explore the contributions of accreditation to the changes in key practices, as well as other areas, accredited land trusts were asked about them directly via a survey. Their responses highlight the meaningful role accreditation played in driving change in land trusts.

In the area of stewardship, between 2005 and 2015, many more land trusts – both accredited and not – put key practices and policies in place and grew their permanence endowments. And yet, even as most land trusts eligible for accreditation advanced the state of their stewardship, the Census analysis shows consistent and significant differences between accredited land trusts and EBNAs. Accredited land trusts became even better positioned to permanently conserve land than EBNAs over the period. A higher proportion of accredited land trusts monitor all their conservation easements, have baseline documents, and have conservation easement amendment and enforcement policies in place. In addition, accredited land trusts have much higher balances in their permanence endowments.¹⁰

Asked to assess the contribution of accreditation to improvements in land trust stewardship practice, 85 percent of accredited land trust survey respondents said they thought that the accreditation program had moderately or substantially improved the land trust community's ability to meet the promise of perpetuity.

Improved Promise of Perpetuity



B. Financial preparation for permanence

Having resources dedicated to funding stewardship and delivering enforcement is foundational to assuring permanent conservation. Between 2005 and 2015, there were welcome advances in being financially prepared for permanence among all the land trusts in the Census analysis. Many more land trusts established permanence endowments. Importantly, the number of land trusts that had legal defense funds tripled.

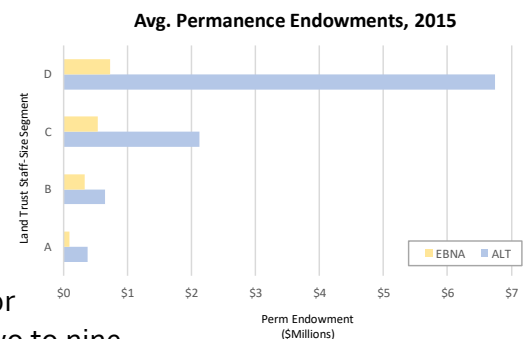
⁹ See Appendix E for the Analysis of Land Trust Census Data.

¹⁰ As noted in Section I, I use the phrase “permanence endowments” to mean both stewardship endowments and legal defense funds/endowments.

But even as the number of EBNAs with either kind of permanence endowment (that is, stewardship or legal defense) grew faster than the number of accredited land trusts with them, by 2015 the proportion of accredited land trusts with a permanence endowment still substantially exceeded the proportion of EBNAs, 95 percent to 69 percent. Moreover, the average accredited land trust permanence endowment grew 50 percent more between 2005 and 2015 than the average EBNA permanence endowment.

Of some note is that a sizeable minority of EBNA that have established either kind of permanence fund (20 percent) have only established a stewardship fund. By comparison, 99 percent of accredited land trusts with a permanence endowment have *both* stewardship and legal defense endowments.

A staff-size-segment level analysis of the Census data was conducted to see whether larger accredited land trusts were skewing the results. This analysis will be discussed further in the next section, however, the permanence endowment figures will be touched upon here. Briefly, the analysis found that accredited land trusts grew their permanence endowments at a *faster rate* than EBNA in three of four segments, while the *average balance* of permanence endowments in 2015 was larger for accredited land trusts in every staff-size segment, ranging from two to nine times larger.¹¹



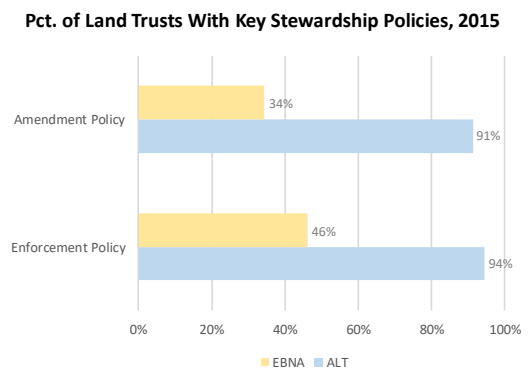
Accredited land trusts saw a substantive role for accreditation in helping drive a range of improvements in stewardship funding and systems. “The accreditation process focused our attention on how to maintain and improve our financial position relating to the defense of easements,” one accredited land trust survey respondent commented. “We also made improvements to our record keeping. Accreditation enhanced our confidence in our ability to meet our perpetual obligation to defend and enforce our easements.”

C. Stewardship policy and practice

¹¹ See Appendix F for the results of the Analysis of Staff-Segment-Level Census Data.

Stewardship and legal defense endowments are essential to assuring permanent conservation. At least equally so is having sound stewardship and enforcement policies and practices in place. In terms of specific Land Trust Alliance Standards and Practices related to monitoring and baselines, as a group, accredited land trusts were far more widely implementing best practice. The proportion of accredited land trusts monitoring all of their conservation easements yearly, and the proportion with baseline documents for 100 percent of their conservation easements, were 40 and 50 percentage points higher, respectively, than the proportion of EBNAs.

As far as amendment and enforcement policies, there was brisk growth in the number of land trusts with these essential guiding policies in place. And yet, here too, the gap between accredited land trusts and EBNAs was substantial. 91 percent of accredited land trusts had amendment policies in place by 2015, while 94 percent had enforcement policies in place. These were 60 and 48 percentage points higher, respectively, than the proportion of EBNAs.



Accredited land trusts realized clear benefits from these changes in stewardship policy and practice. For example, 60 percent of accredited land trust survey respondents said that their organization had experienced easement challenges or violations, or fee management issues, since becoming accredited. Among these respondents, 61 percent indicated that the changes they made to become accredited made a moderate or stronger contribution to helping them address these issues.

More broadly, accredited land trusts say that accreditation played a considerable role in driving the changes that helped them achieve widespread relative strength in stewardship policy and practice. In the accredited land trust survey, roughly half of respondents said that becoming accredited contributed moderately or more strongly to improvements they made in a wide range of stewardship and acquisition policies, practices, and procedures.

Specifically, a solid majority of accredited land trust respondents said that becoming accredited had contributed moderately or more to a range of stewardship systems and acquisition procedures, including having and updating baseline documents, documenting stewardship and acquisition procedures, creating management plans, and avoiding risky transactions. 67 percent of respondents said becoming accredited contributed moderately or more to maintaining and increasing stewardship funds. A sizeable minority of respondents (± 40 percent) said becoming accredited contributed moderately or more to inspecting/monitoring all fee and easement properties yearly, and drafting and amending conservation easements.

That even more than roughly 40 to 60 percent of respondents did not attribute moderate or stronger impacts on their stewardship systems from becoming accredited likely reflects the fact that accreditation emerged from a long history of implementing Standards and Practices.

The observations of one accredited land trust help put this in perspective: "I have seen firsthand the improvements in coordination and greater understanding of responsible governance, financial, and protection/stewardship practices among more than 40 accredited and an additional 15-odd preparing land trusts in the New England area, and can say for certain that these land trusts are better prepared for lasting, meaningful land conservation – and that their constituencies are responding to this – due to the Standards & Practices and the accreditation program."

IV. Impact on Land Trust Strength

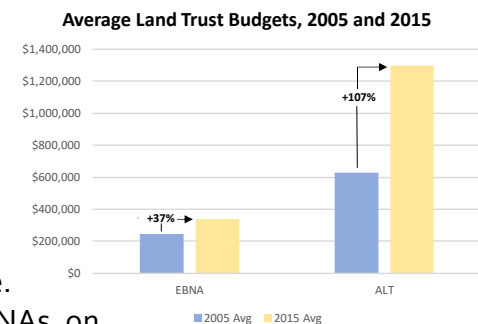
A. Overview

Accreditation has substantially impacted stakeholder confidence and meaningfully contributed to gains in the permanence of land protection. How did it impact land trusts that became accredited? We have seen pieces of the answer to this question in prior sections. Here, we look more comprehensively at it. In brief, across a wide range of metrics, the growth in the capacity of accredited land trusts stands out, and it is clear that accreditation contributed substantively to this growth.

B. Public support and conservation impact

Public support: Operating funds, financial supporters, and volunteers

In areas related to direct public support – operating funds, financial supporters, and volunteers – accredited land trusts garnered an out-sized share of the growth between 2005 and 2015 among all land trusts eligible for accreditation. The average operating budget of an accredited land trust doubled over the period (107 percent increase), as compared to a 37 percent increase for the average EBNA, and was four times larger than the average EBNA in 2015. The average number of financial supporters per land trust grew by approximately 15 percent for accredited land trusts and 10 percent for EBNAs. While these gains were modest and comparable, in 2015, the average accredited land trust had 55 percent more financial supporters than the average EBNA. As far as volunteers, the average accredited land trust had 160 percent more in 2015 than in 2005, while the average EBNA had about 60 percent more. Accredited land trusts had three times the number of volunteers as EBNAs, on average.



Conservation impact: Protected land and staffing level

In terms of conservation impact and basic organizational capacity, accredited land trusts protected a disproportionate share of the acres conserved between 2005 and 2015, and they experienced a greater share of the growth in staff, giving them more capacity to do conservation. While the total acres conserved by the average EBNA grew by roughly 70 percent between 2005 and 2015, the average accredited land trust conserved 100 percent more acres. By 2015, the average accredited land trust had conserved nearly three times the number of acres of the average EBNA. As far as staffing, 77 percent of accredited land trusts added staff between 2005 and 2015, as compared to 38 percent of EBNAs. The average accredited land trust had nearly four times the number of staff of the average EBNA in 2015.

C. Data validation

To recap the full span of the data analysis, looking at both questions of permanence and other changes in land trusts, accredited land trusts ended the 2005 to 2015 period better positioned to deliver permanent land protection, with measurably more operating funds, financial supporters, and volunteers, and having conserved more land and with more staff capacity to deliver on their conservation missions than EBNAs. The differences between the data on accredited land trusts and the data on EBNAs are indeed formidable.

However, as mentioned earlier, it could well be the case that very large accredited land trusts skewed the averages on which these findings are based. In an effort to see whether, indeed, this was the case, a deeper analysis was conducted that looked at a sampling of four distinct indicators – operating budgets, volunteers, acres conserved, and permanence endowments (stewardship and legal defense funds) – across four staff-size segments. These segments, labeled A through D, ranged from the smallest land trusts (A = <1FTE), to more moderately sized land trusts (B = 1 to 4 FTEs; C = 5 to 9 FTEs), to the largest land trusts (D = 10+ FTEs).

The results were compelling. The staff-segment-level analysis indicates that the relatively stronger average performance of accredited land trusts outlined in the main data analysis was not caused by a few very large accredited land trusts. Across 16 possibilities (four segments, four metrics), accredited land trusts experienced *greater percentage increases* between 2005 and 2015 in 13 instances, and had *higher average figures* in 2015 in 15 of them. Across most size-segments, for most of the indicators examined in this supplementary analysis, accredited land trusts outgained, and ended up in a stronger position than, EBNAs.

Accred Land Trust Segment > EBNA?

Metric	05-15 %Increase				2015 Average			
	A	B	C	D	A	B	C	D
Op Bud								
Volunteers								
Acres								
PermEndow								

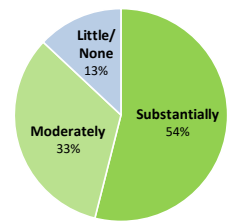
D. Role of accreditation in this change

The data on the breadth of change across different-sized accredited land trusts would seem to be solid, but what is the connection, if any, to accreditation? The fact that accredited land trusts sought and achieved accreditation in the period during which, as a group, the growth in their capacity substantially exceeded that of EBNAs, is, in the end, association. And association is not causation.

It could be the case that the changes needed to become accredited, or the credential itself, produced growth. Or it could be the case that land trusts with a strong desire to grow seek to improve their practices regardless of accreditation. To try to shed more concrete light on this important question, accredited land trusts were asked in the accredited land trust survey about the role of accreditation in their organizational development.

Overall, most survey respondents said accreditation had been a significant factor in the development of their organization. 82 percent of respondents said that over the last ten years their organization had made moderate-to-substantial improvements in key organizational functions – governance, acquisition/transaction procedures, stewardship systems/practices, and financial systems. And nearly 9 in 10 (87 percent) said that becoming accredited had moderately or substantially motivated them to make these organizational improvements.

Motivated Org Improvement



“Accreditation, and especially renewal, transformed our organization, lit a fire under our board members and staff and helped us operationalize and professionalize our land trust,” said one accredited land trust, while another commented, “Our organization was relatively young and grew fast. The accreditation process provided an excellent framework to address all aspects of needed improvements.”

Importantly, fully one-quarter of accredited land trust survey respondents said that without the goal of becoming accredited they would not have been motivated *at all* to make the improvements their organization made over the prior decade. Half said they would have been only moderately motivated to make the improvements without this goal. Asked to imagine how their organization would have fared without accreditation, about half of respondents felt their organizational sustainability and conservation impact, as well as their ability to protect and steward land, would have been less.¹²

In regards to specific organizational functions, on average, 66 percent of respondents said that becoming accredited had made a moderate or stronger contribution to improvements in governance, acquisition/ transaction procedures, stewardship systems/practices, and financial systems. The biggest impact was on governance, where four in five (82 percent) said becoming accredited had contributed moderately or more to improvements in this function.

A number of accredited land trusts spoke specifically to the topic of governance in their open-ended survey comments. “The accreditation process had the biggest impact on the Board in terms of their understanding of all this nit-picky work we do for an acquisition and for our stewardship program,” said one respondent. “They also got to know more about our policies and how we conform to them, but most importantly, why our policies lead to a more secure organization.” Describing the effect of accreditation on their board, another accredited land trust staff member said, “I have enjoyed the fact that my board members always say, ‘What do you think accreditation would say about that?’ –meaning high standards are at the front of their minds when making decisions.”

¹² Very few land trusts, 4 percent and 2 percent respectively, thought that their organizational sustainability and conservation impact, and their ability to protect and steward land, would have been greater without accreditation. The balance thought it would have been about the same.

Some respondents mentioned the value of accreditation in helping people who have recently joined the board learn about the responsibilities of the organization. "Going through the exercise of accreditation and re-accreditation -- reviewing all of our policies and procedures -- has been a good way to help new board members get a better understanding of what we do," commented one respondent.

As the survey indicates, accreditation was not the factor that drove *all* change across all organizational functions. Organizational change is driven by a wide range of circumstances and conditions. And yet, the survey does show that becoming accredited was a major factor in the improvements land trusts made in their organizational systems and performance in the last decade. In reflecting on the overall effect of accreditation on their organization, one survey respondent said, "We have always been a good land trust. Accreditation made us a great land trust. The impact of accreditation runs through our organization now, whether donors and landowners see it specifically or not. They just know that we are a professional, solid and transparent organization that stands out among local non-profits and NGO's." Another respondent, weighing the costs and time required to tackle the accreditation process, felt the investment was paying off: "Accreditation, while it was a distraction for a while, has freed us to focus on land conservation with the confidence of knowing our organizational structure is sound and practices defensible." Still another summed up the impact on their land trust this way: "Becoming accredited in 2008 was a game changer for our organization. We would not be the high functioning land trust that we are today without having gone through that process." While this attitude predominated, in open-ended survey comments, a number of land trusts expressed ongoing concerns about the time and expense of participating in the accreditation program.

**"We have always been
a good land trust.
Accreditation made us
a great land trust."
-Accredited land trust**

E. Stakeholder perspective on changes in the land trust community

Along with surveying stakeholders about their awareness of accreditation, how they used it, and how accreditation impacted their confidence in land trusts, they were interviewed about, among other things, how the land trust community has changed over the last ten years, and the role they thought accreditation played in that change, if any. In summary, over the last ten years, foundation and government stakeholders see the land trust movement as continuing a trend of maturing and professionalizing, with accreditation contributing productively to this trend.

Foundations say they have observed growth in the movement, from early days, to the development of Standards and Practices, to accreditation. "I have seen improvements in land trusts -- in their sophistication and efficiency, in their sense of empowerment and pride," said one funder. "Land trusts have grown up," said another. "They are more aware that they need to have solid stewardship plans in place, and need to be able to defend them." A third reflected, "When the movement was young, the systems were invented on the fly. There's been a natural progression over time: develop, promote, then require Standards and Practices. It's part of growing up." Within this, some foundations saw distinct effects from accreditation.

"Accreditation has increased land trust performance, increased their reliability, and increased what a board knows about their land trust," observed a foundation executive.

In addition to increased professionalism, government agencies have seen a broad strengthening across the community. "The pool of land trusts is more organized, has deeper benches and more expertise than 10 years ago," said one federal agency staff member. Another said, "There's a lot more professionalism in the land trust community over the last 10 to 20 years."

Public agencies believe accreditation played an important role in these developments. "The minimum practices are understood. Accreditation is a part of that change," concluded one government interviewee. "The process of getting and remaining accredited helps further refine the strength of the organization," said another. "They have to write down things they never had to. Formalizing can help with turnover in staff and board. Groups that are not accredited struggle when there's turnover." A state agency interviewee commented, "The land trusts that have gone through accreditation are leaner and stronger. The big groups that went through it matured."

"The minimum practices are understood. Accreditation is a part of that change,"
-Public agency

Intermediaries see land trusts generally thinking increasingly about what perpetuity entails. They also see a broader benefit to the land conservation field. "For the land trust community, it provides inoculation against the narrative that we don't know what we're doing," said one intermediary.

Concluding thoughts

Accreditation has involved substantial investments by those supporting, establishing, and managing the accreditation program, and by land trusts seeking to become accredited and to renew their accreditation status. This evaluation concludes that these intensive investments and labors have paid off. The accreditation program has produced meaningful increases in stakeholder confidence in land trusts and land conservation, in the ability of land trusts to protect land in perpetuity, and in the strength of land trusts. In brief, the evaluation data points overwhelmingly in the same direction, and for this reason, this study finds that the accreditation program has had a substantial positive impact on conservation in the United States.

V. Methodology

This evaluation is based on six sources, contained in the appendices attached to this report:

A. Stakeholder Survey

The survey was conducted in the first half of December 2017. It was emailed from the Commission to some 431 foundation and public agency stakeholders. The list of state and county agency contacts encompassed all public funding programs around the country included in the Trust for Public Land's database of such programs. The list of federal and foundation contacts was provided by the Land Trust Alliance. In total, 50 responses were received, for a response rate of 12%. Of these 50, 11 indicated that they were not at all familiar with accreditation and were not asked additional questions about how they use accreditation and their confidence in it. The remaining 39 represent 9% of those contacted.

B. Stakeholder Interviews

Interviews were conducted with 31 foundation and public agency stakeholders, intermediaries, and other players, between December 2017 and March 2018. 30 of these individuals were not respondents to the stakeholder survey. Interviewees were not asked about familiarity with accreditation because it was known in advance that all were familiar with it. Because of their work with the conservation community, among other things, interviewees were asked about the effects accreditation has had on land trusts over the last 10 years, if any.

C. Accredited Land Trust Survey

The accredited land trust survey was emailed to 360 accredited land trusts and ran between March 13 and March 23, 2018, with late responses accepted for another week beyond this date. In total, 259 accredited land trusts completed the survey, a response rate of approximately 70 percent.

D. Landowner Survey

The landowner survey was conducted from late March to early April 2018. At the end of the accredited land trust survey, participants were asked whether they would be willing to forward to landowners they had worked with a link to a landowner survey. 45 of 259 respondent land trusts said they would forward the link to landowners, and were provided with such a link. In total, 35 responses were received from landowners in 13 states, 60 percent from the East, and 40 percent from the Midwest and West.

E. Analysis of Land Trust Census Data

The data analysis outlined in this document looked at the changes in accredited land trusts (ALT), and land trusts that were eligible for accreditation but were not accredited (EBNA), between 2005 and 2015. Specifically, the set of land trusts examined included all land trusts eligible for accreditation as of the 2015 Land Trust Census that also appeared in the 2005 Census (one year before accreditation was launched). In total, there are 859 land trusts in this cohort, including 323 accredited land trusts (as of February 2016), and 536 EBNA's. The cohort is comprised of 92 percent of all land trusts eligible for accreditation in the 2015 census (931), including 97 percent of ALTs and 89 percent of EBNA's.

F. Analysis of Land Trust Census Data: Staff-Segment Level

To delve deeper into the question of whether large accredited land trusts drove the results of the main data analysis, a follow-up analysis was conducted which divided land trusts into four staff-size segments. Land trusts were grouped by their 2005 size-segment, and the analysis explored how each segment fared between 2005 and 2015, as land trusts entered and experienced the initial period of accreditation. The segment definitions were:

Segment A = <1 FTE (Full-Time Equivalent staff members)

Segment B = 1-4 FTEs

Segment C = 5-9 FTEs

Segment D = 10+ FTEs

These definitions were established in 2008 for a longitudinal analysis of land trusts conducted as part of the development of a services strategy for the Land Trust Alliance. They have been used regularly since then to assess the impacts of a number of land trust excellence programs.

In the follow-up, staff-segment-level analysis, four distinct areas of performance were reviewed: operating budgets, volunteers, acres conserved, and permanence endowments (stewardship and legal defense).