Land Trust Accreditation
2018 Ten-Year Impact Evaluation
Introduction

An independent external evaluation of the impact of the first ten years of the accreditation program shows the land trust community's investment in accreditation paid off, and the impact can continue to grow.

Fifteen years ago the land trust community was **ill prepared** to live up to the promise of perpetuity and was **under legislative and regulatory threat**. The Land Trust Alliance created the accreditation program and the Land Trust Accreditation Commission as a **solution** and offered a suite of related accredited preparation services to its members.

Today, **accredited land trusts far outpace those not yet accredited**. They have significantly bigger budgets, more staff and volunteers, **and 8 times more money invested to steward and defend their conservation lands** than their peers of similar size – they also **save 3 times more land.**

Accreditation was **a strong motivator for change** in land trusts; 87% of accredited land trusts responded that **accreditation moderately or substantially motivated** them to make organizational improvements. These groups strengthened their governance, transaction, stewardship and financial systems as part of the accreditation journey.

Public confidence in land trusts increased as a result; 85% of public agencies and foundations say accreditation increases their confidence in land trusts and 83% of landowners feel the same way. Instead of legislative or regulatory disruption there was acceleration of tax benefits and conservation funding.

These positive impacts can grow as more land trusts join the program, accredited land trusts continue to improve their practices in accordance with the revised 2017 Standards and stakeholders are provided with more information about the program. A full report of the evaluation findings will be in the winter 2018/2019 edition of *Saving Land.*

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

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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 full report is available from the Commission upon request.

[1]Accreditation 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.

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 evaluation results are summarized below and explained in detail in the full report and appendices (available upon request).

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]

[2] These information sources are described in more detail in Section V of the full report.

[3] In 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 2015[4] 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.

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.

[4]This 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.