



The Impact of Accreditation

by Christina Soto

A new report quantifies the impact of the first 10 years of the accreditation program

The first 39 accredited land trusts crossed the stage at Rally 2008: The National Land Conservation Conference in Pittsburgh. “So it was fitting,” says Tammara Van Ryn, executive director of the Land Trust Accreditation Commission, “that at Rally 2018 in Pittsburgh we celebrated highlights of a new report quantifying the land trust community’s return on 10 years of investment in accreditation.”

The seeds of the accreditation program started germinating in response to the 2003 Land Trust Census, which revealed the land trust community was not well prepared to meet its promise of perpetuity. Only 16% of land trusts had funds set aside to defend their conservation interests, and less than half of land trusts holding conservation easements had baseline documentation reports for each easement and monitored them annually. In the wake of a series of negative news articles about a conservation organization, Congress was starting to look more closely at land trusts and, Van Ryn notes, “the community was vulnerable.”

“With over 400 accredited land trusts now holding nearly 80% of all land and easements held by land

trusts, we wanted to know if the significant investment land trusts have made in accreditation had made a difference,” says Van Ryn. Peter Szabo, the author of the independent evaluation report, found that “these intensive investments and labors have paid off.”

The report quantifies that the third-party verification of the standards provided by accreditation resulted in 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,” said Szabo, “the evaluation data sets point overwhelmingly in the same direction, and for this reason, this study found that the accreditation program has had a substantial positive impact on conservation in the United States.”

Lifting All Boats

What does this impact look like on the ground?

In one of the snowiest places east of the Rockies—with over 200 inches annually—the Tug Hill Tomorrow Land Trust works in the region between the Adirondack

Mountains and Lake Ontario in Upstate New York.

Executive Director Linda Garrett began her career with the New York State Tug Hill Commission as a natural resources coordinator in 1988. She helped the Commission partner with local community leaders to create the Tug Hill Tomorrow Land Trust in 1991.

“Having worked for both the public and private side, I know how important partnerships are to moving projects forward and getting more done with less,” says Garrett. “But before we were accredited there were some state agencies that had doubts about our ability; we weren’t invited to the table. That all changed when Tug Hill became accredited in 2011.”

Garrett explains that as soon as the director of one regional agency saw an article in the local paper about Tug Hill Tomorrow Land Trust earning accreditation, “He called to congratulate me and then said he had a project he wanted to partner on with us.”

“The entire land trust community benefits from the network of accredited land trusts,” says Sylvia Bates, Land Trust Alliance

Analyzing Data

The evaluation, conducted by Peter Szabo of Bloomingdale Management Advisors, included data from a wide range of sources. It involved analyzing information from the 2005 and 2015 land trust censuses; surveying and interviewing government agencies, foundations, landowners and other stakeholders; and surveying accredited land trusts. Find “An Impact Evaluation of the Land Trust Accreditation Program’s First Ten Years” and more details at www.landtrustaccreditation.org/about/impact-evaluation.

director of standards and educational services, “in reputation, public trust and assurance of permanence. These things are intertwined. We cannot continue to save land unless we have the public’s confidence. When accreditation was first designed, it helped reassure a nervous Joint Committee on Taxation that the land trust community could police itself. Fifteen years after the

ACCREDITATION & TRUST

79%

of foundation and government stakeholders said **accreditation factored into their organization’s DECISION-MAKING**



83%

of landowners said **accreditation increased their confidence that their land would be PROTECTED IN PERPETUITY**



85%

of public agencies and foundations said **accreditation increases their CONFIDENCE IN LAND TRUSTS**



80%

of landowners said they **considered accreditation when deciding to WORK WITH A LAND TRUST**



The Impact of Accreditation



ZACHARY WAKEMAN

Tug Hill, protected by the Tug Hill Tomorrow Land Trust. According to Executive Director Linda Garrett, accreditation opened doors for the land trust.

committee's concerns, instead of legislative or regulatory disruption, we have an enhanced federal tax incentive for conservation easement donors."

A Concerted Effort

"It took a village to create the accreditation program," says Erin Heskett, Alliance vice president of national and regional services, adding, "Accreditation has professionalized the land trust movement. It has created a shared priority to operate in a way that ensures the permanence of conservation, the sustainability of land trusts and their ability to operate at the highest level from a management perspective. The investments made by land trusts in these areas have instilled a higher level of confidence among land trust donors, partners and landowners in private land conservation."

Heskett ticked off the ways the Alliance prepares land trusts for the rigorous accreditation process:

- Grant support to offset staff costs that land trusts incur in preparing for accreditation.
- Coaching and technical support by consultants and Alliance staff.

- Guiding land trusts through each step of the accreditation process from beginning to end.
- Training on *Land Trust Standards and Practices* and the accreditation requirements.
- Convening land trusts that are going through the process so they have a network of peer support—for renewal and first-timers.
- Providing technical support by phone from consultants and/or Alliance staff who can answer questions about the Standards, accreditation requirements and the application itself.

Heskett points out that "accreditation may not be appropriate for every land trust, but there is no doubt that the program—along with the investments in accreditation preparation by the Alliance—have made land trusts much stronger."

Confidence

Linda Garrett's story about the accreditation seal opening doors is not unusual for land trusts that have gone through accreditation. The report's survey found 85% of public

agencies and foundations say accreditation increases their confidence in land trusts and 83% of landowners feel the same way.

Szabo also interviewed many stakeholders as part of his study, including foundations that fund land trusts. As one foundation executive said, "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."

Public agencies partnering with land trusts were also interviewed. "We sometimes work with entities that are set up just for the purposes of the transaction, to take an easement," said a federal agency representative. "But an accredited entity follows through with monitoring, and a third-party oversees them. It gives us confidence." (Read more about public agency confidence in accredited land trusts on page 31.)

Strength

"Strength" is the number one word used by accredited land trusts when asked what prepping for and going through the accreditation review gave their organizations. The impact report states that "accreditation was a strong motivator for

ACCREDITATION & **STRENGTH**

100%

Accredited land trust average increase in

ACRES CONSERVED

2005–2015



87%

of accredited land trusts said accreditation motivated them to make **ORGANIZATIONAL IMPROVEMENTS**



107%

Accredited land trust average increase in

OPERATING BUDGET

2005–2015



160%

Accredited land trust average increase in

NUMBER OF VOLUNTEERS

2005–2015



change in land trusts; 87% of accredited land trusts surveyed as part of this project responded that accreditation moderately or substantially motivated them to make organizational improvements.”

Adam Moore of Sheriff’s Meadow Foundation in Vineyard Haven, Massachusetts, can attest to that. He says prepping for and going through the accreditation process “has strengthened our organization in every way. Because of accreditation, we created a comprehensive, easy-to-understand accounting system for each and every one of our many funds, special gifts, restricted donations, endowments and the like. Because of accreditation, we created a complete inventory of each and every acre that we own or protect with an easement. Because of accreditation, we created an excellent record-keeping system with on-site and off-site paper and electronic records. We implemented a five-year boundary marking program and identified all of the boundary issues on our properties. We adopted policies to guide our work in land acquisition. We concentrated on ensuring that we have sufficient funds to maintain our lands.”

This perseverance pays off. The new report shows that in areas related to direct

public support—operating funds, financial supporters and volunteers—accredited land trusts garnered an outsized share of the growth between 2005 and 2015 among all land trusts eligible for accreditation.

Permanence

“Before the impact report we knew that going through the accreditation process helps land trusts become stronger,” says Van Ryn. “What the land trust community did not have was data showing how accreditation has advanced public confidence and how accreditation makes a difference in terms of permanent conservation.”

The report’s findings overwhelmingly show accredited land trusts are well positioned to ensure the permanence of the lands they have conserved. This is evident from the frequency with which they monitor their conserved lands and create baseline documentation reports.

“One of the most dramatic gains is in the amount of money set aside to steward and defend conservation lands” says Van Ryn. The report found the number of land trusts that had legal defense funds tripled during the period from 2005 to 2015. The report also analyzed land trusts in four segments

based on staff size and found “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.”

Van Ryn notes, “This new evaluation shows that the time and money invested by land trusts, the Alliance and volunteer commissioners over the past decade mattered. The entire land trust community benefits from the increase in public confidence, and, most importantly, land trusts are better positioned to make sure their conservation efforts endure forever.”

“Accreditation is about assuring our work can live up to the lofty goal of conservation in perpetuity,” says Peter D. Ter Louw, president and executive director of Southwest Michigan Land Conservancy. “We find it easier to fully grasp the meaning of perpetuity when we see the excitement of children visiting our preserves. Thinking about the impact these places will have on their lives, that will then be passed on from generation to generation, we can’t help but be inspired to strive to do more—and do it well.”

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