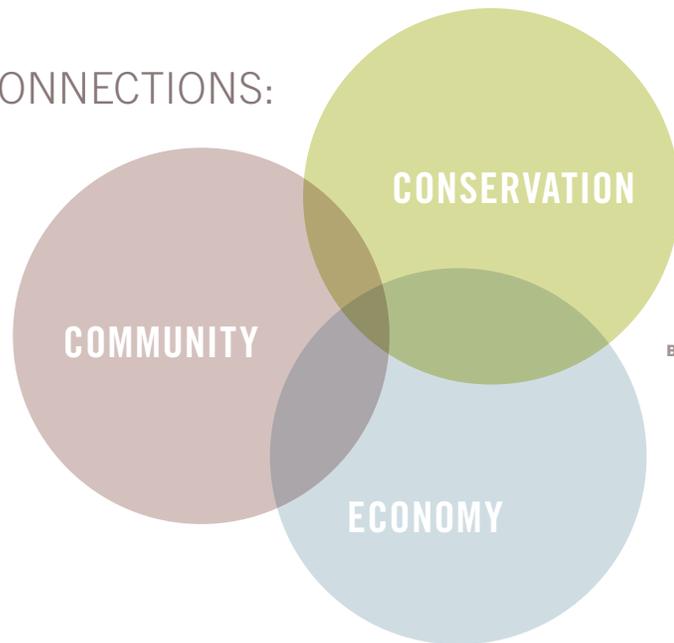


MAKING CONNECTIONS:



BY Megan Shore

Imagine a place—
the community in which you
work and play—where there
are vibrant cities and villages
in close proximity to abundant
and accessible natural areas.

THINK ABOUT WHAT IT TAKES FOR A COMMUNITY TO BE VIBRANT: a sound economic base, sufficient and affordable housing, good schools, thriving arts and cultural activities, and lands providing wildlife habitat, clean water and fresh air, recreational opportunities and agricultural productivity. As the land conservation movement matures we are challenged to consider the role that land conservation can play in nurturing vibrant communities.

In Maine, as elsewhere, land trusts are charting a course that increasingly makes and strengthens connections between conservation, economy and community health. Take a look at what is happening in the rural community of Grand Lake Stream located in central Washington County, Maine.

Grand Lake Stream is an area where forestry, recreational fishing and hunting are the base of the economy. Here, the Downeast Lakes Land Trust is playing a leading role in conserving the Grand Lake Stream community's economic base. The group is firmly rooted in the rural area and has deep understanding and concern for its well-being.



Shortly after incorporating in 2001, the trust developed an ambitious conservation proposal for nearly 375,000 acres of forests and wetlands. The trust and its partners have since secured permanent conservation and public access to over 350,000 acres, including a 33,708-acre community forest owned by the land trust. These lands include hundreds of miles of lakeshore, wetlands, deer wintering areas and other wildlife habitat, and serve as a continued source of sustainable forest products and public recreation—the lifeblood of this rural region’s economy. In December 2008, Downeast Lakes Land Trust signed an option agreement to acquire an additional 21,700-acre community forest, the keystone property in the conserved landscape that immediately surrounds the village.

The long-term family owners of the forest recognized its importance to the local community, and when they needed to sell, they sought a buyer who would work with the land trust and the village. Through partnerships with the land trust and Coastal Enterprises, Inc., a community development corporation, the Lyme Timber Company was able to secure financing through the federal New Market Tax Credits Program. This created a unique

impact; concerned that they will be straying from their core mission and using already stretched resources for work that takes them further away from completing what their organization has set out to do. Fair questions.

These and related questions were grappled with at a recent Maine Land Conservation Conference where land trusts, public agency representatives, funders, community development specialists and business leaders came together to discuss this very issue. In the words of Bruce Hazard, director of the nonprofit community development group Mountain Counties Heritage and steward of the Maine Woods Consortium, an open association of businesses, nonprofits and government agencies organized around landscape resources, community revitalization, and economic restructuring, “This is not about mission creep. It is about viewing our missions in a larger context.”

“Think of a community as a recipe. It is made up of many individual pieces or ingredients that, when mixed together, create something wonderful,” says Lynne Seeley, a land planner and board member of GrowSmart Maine and Maine Audubon, as well as a representative of Maine’s Environmental Funders Network.

In working more deliberately to use land conservation activities to build and enhance communities, land trusts need not take on all of the work of community building. Using affordable housing as an example, the land trust, by virtue of being connected with those in the community that are focused on the issue, will be aware of the community needs, thus facilitating a partnership in which both land and housing needs can be met. The land trust can focus on assuring protection for the conservation values of the property while others address the housing elements of the project. The land trust is not the developer of the land or the affordable housing expert. Instead, the trust takes the extra step to look for additional ways in which the land could be used (or not) to benefit its community. *Land conservation becomes a vehicle for meeting broader community needs while still protecting lands for their varied and important conservation values.*

CONSERVATION AND ECONOMIC WELL-BEING

In a variety of downeast coastal communities Maine Coast Heritage Trust is partnering with local groups to increase natural resource-based economic opportunities. When MCHT assumed ownership of Bog Brook Cove and its 80 acres of conventionally managed blueberry fields, Regional Steward Melissa Lee began researching the industry to learn whether MCHT could play a supportive role. Melissa convened the region’s 13 organic blueberry growers to explore areas for cooperation. With funding from MCHT, the group hired a consultant to help them identify a major new buyer who would ensure price and demand stability for all the growers. The group is also seeking capital for processing infrastructure. Conserving this single parcel has an economic impact that goes well beyond its immediate boundaries.

Elsewhere, the Greater Lovell Land Trust is experimenting with a local forestry cooperative intended to instill local demand for non-commodity, locally produced forest products, and to support the local forestry infrastructure while increasing

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opportunity for the village of Grand Lake Stream to acquire land for future development. The town established a public process to identify appropriate lands for future growth, including light industry and affordable housing, and acquired 182 acres through donation and fee purchase. The project provides clear evidence that meaningful land conservation can not only complement, but truly advance, the fulfillment of community needs not often associated with land conservation. To reach their goal of permanent conservation of the West Grand Lake Community Forest, the land trust is now working to raise \$24 million. The local community has led the way, with a unanimous vote by residents of Grand Lake Stream (pop. 120), to appropriate a \$40,000 contribution. Of the project, Louis Cataldo, local guide and town selectman notes, “This project is one of the greatest things to ever happen to Grand Lake Stream.”

The connections between land conservation and economic development in Grand Lake Stream are clear. Without the land base the region’s land- and water-based industries would not be possible. Elsewhere the value of land for ecosystem services, human physical and psychological health, recreational opportunities, as a draw for businesses, and as the core of natural resource-based economies is well documented. As a movement, land conservationists have the opportunity to strengthen these connections and in so doing strengthen the communities in which they reside, all the while serving their land conservation missions.

A LARGER CONTEXT

Land trusts considering their role in actively addressing broader community needs—those frequently seen as “non-conservation” activities—may pause, questioning how they can have an

Communities need protected lands for fresh air, clean water, local food and wildlife habitat, among other reasons.

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MELISSA LEE/IMCHT

consumer connection to the forests and stewards and providing incentives for sound forest management.

Facilitating the reinvention of a region's economy may not be what first comes to mind when thinking about the role of a land trust, yet this is just what the Androscoggin Land Trust is doing. The trust serves a region that has long survived on heavy industry rooted in pulp and paper manufacturing. As the industry fades and the economy worsens the towns are searching for new paths.

In recognition that its future relies on a strong downtown connected to the land and river assets surrounding it, the Town of Lisbon, Maine, recently gifted an island located in the Androscoggin River to the trust. The trust will convene the area trail and conservation commissions to engage in a public process for determining uses for the land that will augment economic development. An excerpt from the Memorandum of Agreement reads, "The Town of Lisbon is interested in preserving land for open spaces and public use while encouraging development that forwards the economic and community development visions for the Town of Lisbon. This includes utilizing the Androscoggin River as a vital tool for economic and community development." Jonathan LaBonte, executive director for the trust, notes "we have to reach out to create new ways to do our work, to chart the course for a strong future that integrates conservation, land use and economic opportunity."

Across the country, PCC Farmland Trust in Seattle, Washington, secures, preserves and stewards threatened farmland in the Northwest to ensure that generations of local farmers productively farm it using sustainable, organic growing methods. Founded in 1999 by PCC Natural Markets as a separate, nonprofit organization, the land trust takes its mission one step further by working to place farmers on the properties.

PCC Farmland Trust is not only setting aside land for organic farming and wildlife habitat, but is supporting the continued livelihood of local farmers and the farming community, and is increasing the availability of local, fresh organic foods. The protected Delta Farm grows organic produce for Red Cross disaster relief and the Senior Nutrition Program of the Olympic Area Agency on Aging and Community Action. Much of the farm is leased by longtime farmer Nash Huber, who is widely known and respected for his apprentice program that trains a new generation of farmers.

Through its efforts, PCC Farmland Trust helps create community and fosters a sense of partnership between the people who grow the food and the people who eat it.



PCC FARMLAND TRUST

ABOVE: Organic farmer Nash Huber gives a tour of Delta Farm on the Olympic Peninsula of Washington.

TOP RIGHT: When MCHT assumed ownership of Bog Brook Cove's 80 acres of blueberry fields, it set out to make the conservation of this single parcel have an economic impact beyond its immediate boundaries by working with the blueberry growers to explore areas for cooperation.

THE EVOLUTION OF CONSERVATION

These land trusts are taking an important next step in the evolution of land conservation. They are actively connecting their goals and missions to those of their communities. Is it easy? No. Does it take resources? Yes. Is it worth it? They believe so, and are not alone. Back at the Maine Land Conservation

Conference the energy and enthusiasm around this concept was palpable and continues to reverberate.

What is it that is so different from what land trusts have done for years? After all, land conservation is all about providing public benefits and is local and community-oriented in nature. The distinction here is that land trusts are stepping beyond the established boundaries of what land conservation is. They are being deliberate in thinking about how to make their conservation work even more meaningful to the communities they serve. Instead of focusing on ways to increase support for land conservation per se, they are talking with *and listening* to the varied voices in the community. They are asking "how do we conserve what is important *and* use those lands, those transactions, those connections to support a wider array of community needs." It is a subtle language change, but the meaning goes deep. And in the end this change will bring about more meaningful conservation giving rise to vibrant, healthy communities. 🌱

MEGAN SHORE, LAND TRUST PROGRAM MANAGER AT MAINE COAST HERITAGE TRUST FOR EIGHT YEARS, NOW WORKS FOR THE ELMINA B. SEWALL FOUNDATION AS ITS GRANTS MANAGER.