



FOSTERING *A LOVE* OF LAND

"Community Conservation Lands" connect people to the land and each other

BY EDITH PEPPER GOLTRA



CHRIS COVEL

Land trusts, such as the Damariscotta River Association—whose camp and ice rink are pictured—are increasingly looking to identify and design projects that specifically connect people from all walks of life to each other to build a strong and loyal following for community conservation, the out-of-doors and the land trust.

STEVEN HUFNAGEL SPENT MUCH OF HIS YOUTH IN RURAL MAINE, FISHING, BUILDING FORTS IN THE WOODS AND SKATING ON PONDS. Over the years, he developed a deep love of the outdoors. Now, as executive director of the Damariscotta River Association (DRA), Hufnagel sees that many of today’s kids aren’t as engaged with nature—or with others in the community—as he was.

“It worries me,” Hufnagel says. “Because I know—and the research confirms—that early and regular experiences in nature are exactly what kids need if they’re going to care about protecting land later on.”

Toward this end, Hufnagel recently spearheaded what some might view as an unusual project for a conservation organization: the acquisition of a flat expanse of grass next to a highway. The space provides a place for kids to skate in the winter and for farmers to sell their fruits and vegetables in the summer. “People gather here to exercise, play and be together outside,” says Hufnagel. “It allows us to build a sense of community that’s rooted in the land.”

Projects like this signal a new direction for DRA and many land trusts that want to improve the lives of local people by connecting them to the land. They are focusing on the creation of “Community Conservation Lands,” which are “nature-based places, community farms or food areas, parks and downtown spaces that promote strong emotional connections between people and the outdoors,” says Judy

Anderson, who created the concept (sometimes called “Ambassador Landscapes”) and its related design components in the 1990s when she was a land trust executive director in upstate New York.

The Damariscotta River Association became interested in the idea of Community Conservation Lands as an alternative to focusing on nature preserves. “We were looking at projects that were responsive to community interests and needs and that offered new ways for people to find joy in the landscape and in the company of others,” says Hufnagel.

Why are groups like DRA exploring this concept? The reason is simple. If conservation is going to weather the test of time (and indeed, land trusts are the only type of nonprofit that pledges to be in existence in perpetuity), land trusts must think about ways to remain relevant today and tomorrow—and many years down the road.

“Our goal is to take conservation from a ‘luxury item’ to a ‘necessity,’” says Anderson, who has spent her conservation career working to create strategies to connect conservation with people from all walks of life in a manner that resonates. “When we think about what’s important to people in their community, or what addresses a community need, and then choose and design conservation projects that address those desires, we are taking another step forward in terms of making conservation *responsive* rather than *prescriptive* to a broader sector of the community.”

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The Evolution of a Concept

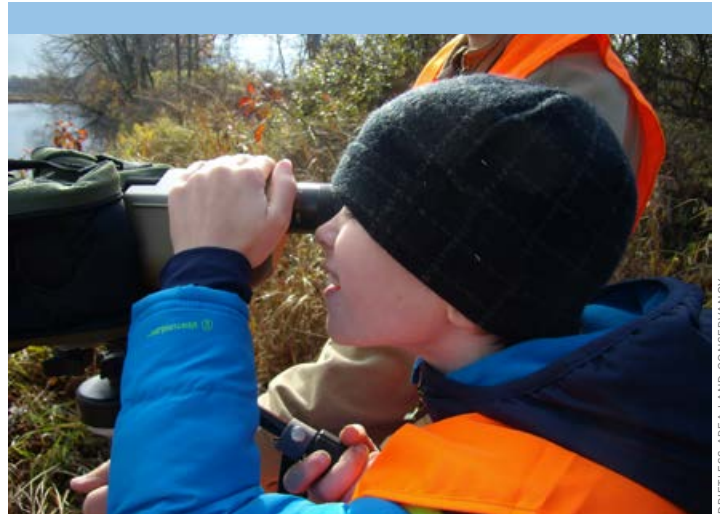
Community Conservation Lands evolved in response to what Anderson saw as gaps in the conservation toolbox. Nature preserves, for example, were focused on protecting fragile habitat and wildlife species, often at a large landscape scale, and they typically steered the public away from these sensitive areas to maximize protection. Likewise, Anderson felt, many urban parks lacked a diversity of experience, particularly with nature or nature-play. To build a broad and lasting base of support for conservation, there needed to be another tool—land that would draw people to conservation, to each other and to the land trust to build a greater sense of community and a stewardship ethic.

Community Conservation Lands can vary in size and ideally they serve a need or feature a landscape type that has not been provided in that specific community. “These lands are designed to bring people to special areas so that they can create lasting and emotional connections with those places—and then appreciate the value added to their lives,” says Anderson.

Designing with People in Mind

The Driftless Area Land Conservancy (DALC) in southwest Wisconsin was eager to incorporate Community Conservation Lands into its mission as a way to generate broad community support and boost the organization’s membership. The group developed specific acceptance criteria to make the process easier.

After learning that teachers at a local elementary school were hoping to engage kids with hands-on learning in an outdoor environment, DALC knew that a beautiful, rolling property beside the school would make an outstanding outdoor laboratory. “This,



DRIFTLESS AREA LAND CONSERVANCY

Identifying community needs and how conservation can help, such as enriching educational experiences by providing lands near schools to function as outdoor classrooms, is part of a strategy that land trusts, such as the Driftless Area Land Conservancy, are focusing on to build their community relevance.

as well as the fact that the land is adjacent to a village park, were considerable drivers in our decision to purchase the property,” says Dave Clutter, DALC’s executive director. Funds are now being raised for improvements. Meanwhile, DALC is working out the site’s overall design in partnership with the school, town and community members.

“We are undertaking the trail and management planning differently than we would with a nature preserve,” says Clutter. “We are considering the visitor experience from the outset. Our property isn’t a park, per se; it’s a wildlife and community conservation area that’s next to the school playground and designed to connect people to the place.”

DALC is working on creating handicap accessible trails and signage that is visually engaging and welcoming to new visitors. “We will be creating spaces that are great as outdoor classrooms and for family picnics, yet also offer places for solace, reflection and a number of other nature-based outdoor activities,” says Clutter.

Changing Lives

This approach to connecting people to the land—or using the land to address a community problem or challenge—is often important not only because of the land itself but also because of the community programs that can be associated with them. In 2013, Tennessee’s Lookout Mountain Conservancy (LMC) and the Howard School, a local high school, teamed up to launch Environmental Connections, an environmental education and outdoor classroom project.

The process really began two years earlier when Robyn Carlton, LMC’s chief executive officer, went to a Land Trust Alliance leadership training session and heard Judy Anderson talk about the concept of Community Conservation Lands. “It was the first time I’d ever heard about this,” says Carlton. “Judy was talking about engaging the community in meaningful ways other than just



Community programming to build self-esteem, academic skills and job training—using the land as the classroom—is often an important part of the success of projects, such as Lookout Mountain Conservancy’s work with the Howard School.

LOOKOUT MOUNTAIN CONSERVANCY

Community Conservation Lands: A Framework

1. Lands are chosen and designed with the purpose of connecting people to the land, and people to people, to build a sense of community. Conservation “closer to home” is often one of the goals.
 - They may be rural, suburban or urban.
 - They can be small (a single lot) or large (hundreds of acres).
2. These projects promote the land trust’s mission in a way that is interactive, fun, accessible and relevant to people from all walks of life, which differs from the primary goal of nature preserves.
3. Lands often address community challenges or needs:
 - Physical barriers, such as disenfranchised people not having land on which to play, grow food or gather together, close to home.
 - Social and cultural challenges, such as disengaged or underserved populations, especially youth or the elderly.
 - Economic barriers, such as lacking the means to afford to travel to or own land near a natural feature, such as a stream, lake or forest.
4. Projects are located within a land trust’s service area in order to directly connect with people and add regular and tangible value to their lives.

Community Conservation Lands Features

1. Community Conservation Lands provide a safe, welcoming and comfortable experience for those new to the place or to the outdoors in general. Signage and communications are more visually intuitive and engaging.
2. Sites are selected and designed to be kid- and family-friendly. There are different levels of user intensity; for example, trails may be wider than is typical, so two or more people can walk side-by-side. Parking areas often allow for school buses or vans.
3. Lands include community gathering areas; they may be intimate (for small groups of three-to-five people) or larger (for extended-family gatherings or school programs). Some factor in an area for larger community events such as farmers markets or concerts.
4. These lands may include iconic landscapes for a specific community; “ordinary” lands also can be elevated to become a community treasure.
5. Based upon concepts within environmental psychology, the visitor experience is often varied, with multi-textural landscape features, such as open views and windy areas, sunspots in a wooded area, streams or wetlands, prairies/grasslands or places to rest, gather and interact.

hosting walks on our properties several times a year. It opened our eyes to what conservation could include, and why.”

The resulting Environmental Connections project serves an adjacent, high-risk community commonly known as “Ground Zero” because of its gang violence and drugs. Howard School students spend many hours restoring the property and improving the site. All the while, they’re building a broad range of life skills and receiving academic training. “In the beginning, I was telling a Howard teacher that the students would first have to learn how to use their tools, meaning the shovels and the rakes,” says Carlton. “The teacher looked at me and said, ‘You call them tools. We call them weapons.’ That was my ah-ha moment. That was when I knew we were here for a reason, that maybe this land could end up changing lives.”

Caring About Land and People

These special lands often address complex community problems in creative, land-based or programmatic ways. “We ask, ‘what needs do people have? Where are community lifecycle stress points?’” says Anderson. “By identifying where people are hurting or who has

not historically had access to the land, land trusts can help provide innovative solutions.”

This creative problem-solving is attractive to foundations and local supporters alike. “We’ve had people tell us that they thought we only worked with wealthy landowners or those who owned a lot of land,” says DRA’s Hufnagel. “But now we are known in the community as a group who cares about people as much as the land. It’s gotten us attention as well as new members.”

For many land trusts, Community Conservation Lands will be part of the group’s overall conservation focus. DRA, for example, creates nature preserves and conserves working landscapes as well as Community Conservation Lands to serve direct community needs.

“We’d love to be able to say that we found ways to touch people’s lives, close to home, in a manner that they will never forget,” says Hufnagel. “If we can do that, we feel confident that our land trust will stand the test of time and our conservation work will expand and flourish.”

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