Environmental education is like a lost puppy. Everyone likes the puppy and agrees that it’s cute, but it isn’t clear who should take care of it. Similarly, environmental education may seem like a good idea and a worthwhile pursuit, but discerning who should create and manage educational programs is a complicated matter. Many public schools have worked to incorporate environmental education into curricula, but federal and state requirements often create a schedule too full to give the environment much attention. One could argue that the introduction of children to nature should be the responsibility of parents, but a realist would quickly point out that today’s average parent is overworked and may not have experience with nature themselves.

The role of environmental educator is open for hiring, and I suggest here that land trusts may be excellent candidates for the job. In this article I explore the mutually beneficial relationship between land trusts and education and provide background information for any trust considering becoming educationally active. To this end, I have compiled a list of recommendations that may be useful in deciding if, when and how a trust might engage in environmental education. I have focused on New England trusts because New England is a region of dense land trust activity, but the lessons gained from this region are applicable to land trusts in general.

While land trusts are primarily concerned with acquiring land and obtaining conservation easements, many land trusts are already active in environmental education in some capacity. Instilling environmental awareness in local communities is closely aligned with the conservation ethics of land trusts, and in fact many trusts have included education among their stated goals. Of the 285 land trusts in New England that have filed mission statements with the Land Trust Alliance, 76 (27%) include educational goals (www.ltanet.org). Education, although not a primary objective, is a pursuit that may be of interest to the land trust community.

Existing Programs

Across a range of operational sizes and resource availabilities, many land trusts in New England have found ways to engage in environmental education. Some local land trusts produce their own educational programs for surrounding communities. The Islesboro Islands Trust in Maine, for example, takes young students on educational kayak tours around the island of Islesboro. The Harris Center for Conservation Education in New Hampshire is an active land trust that provides in-depth ecology lessons for visiting school groups that are designed around local curricula. In Connecticut, the Haddam Land Trust provides regular educational events including film nights, lectures, and moonlight paddles.

While these organizations have the staff and funding resources to produce in-house educational programming, some organizations have opted to engage in education through outsourcing. Helen Tjader of The Barrington Land Conservation Trust in Rhode Island states that approximately 10% of the trust’s annual budget is used to fund a local program run by The Audubon Society of Rhode Island that includes a visit to the trust’s site for the rearing and release of endangered diamondback terrapins. The Damariscotta
River Association in Maine collaborates with the state government to provide a free month-long stewardship course for local citizens.

When resources permit, land trusts may create educational programs on a larger scale. The Pemaquid Watershed Association in Maine offers an educational summer camp program, as does Massachusetts’ The Trustees of Reservations. In addition, The Trustees of Reservations sponsors hands-on activities on its working farms and guided educational tours of its five National Historic Landmarks. The Connecticut Farmland Trust provides outreach to farmers, including assistance with farm transfers and estate planning.

While many trusts have reasons for not engaging in education, trusts considering the development of educational programs may find that the relationship is reciprocal: education presents a number of benefits for land trusts, and the unique position of trusts may provide benefits to the cause of environmental education.

**How can Environmental Education Benefit a Trust?**

Education programs present both direct and indirect benefits for land trusts, depending on the goals of a given organization. For land trusts that include education as part of their mission statement, engaging in environmental education provides a direct benefit by fulfilling the trust’s stated aims. For these trusts, education is not a means to an end, but an end in itself. While the incorporation of education into a trust’s mission statement is not a prerequisite for engaging in educational programming, it can help avoid concerns from donors or board members that the trust is detracting from its primary goals. For example, Melanie Ingalls reports that proposals to expand educational programs at The Trustees of Reservations were met with some resistance until the trust’s mission statement was rewritten in 2003 to include education. Subsequently, there was no longer a sentiment that education was “not what we do,” and the trust now has an extensive and active environmental education program.

Even for organizations that do not include education as part of their mission statement, there are a variety of indirect benefits to be reaped from environmental education. Perhaps the most obvious is the increased visibility and community involvement that accompany education programs. Educational events provide excellent opportunities for land trusts to interact with community members in a memorable and meaningful way. Land trusts will gain visibility prior to such events through advertising and afterwards through word-of-mouth or local media coverage. Program participants and media purveyors alike will develop a greater awareness of the land trust’s presence and activity in the community and may be more inclined to be involved in future land trust ventures.

Education also offers future benefits for trusts. Programs designed for younger community members can be considered an investment in local youth. Through environmental education, land trusts have an opportunity to share their goals and ideals with young students who are still forming their environmental ethics. A 1999 study by psychologist Lynnette Zelezny found that active participation in environmental education significantly affects environmental behaviors. In these formative years, exposing children to ideas of environmental appreciation and conservation may increase the likelihood that these children will grow to become members of a land trust or otherwise active in conservation.
**How can Land Trusts Benefit Environmental Education?**

There are three major characteristics of land trusts that make them uniquely able to fill the role of environmental educators. Namely, land trusts can provide education that is developmentally appropriate, place-based, and unrestricted by legislation.

1) **Land trusts and developmentally appropriate education**

The multigenerational appeal of land trusts and their operational flexibility as private organizations afford them the ability to design educational programming for an age range considerably larger than that of public schools. This ability greatly enhances the effectiveness of their programs as a whole because the land trust can offer a suite of experiences that are developmentally appropriate for young children, teenagers, or adults.

The concept of developmentally appropriate education has been championed by David Sobel, a professor at Antioch New England and a specialist in environmental education. According to Sobel, the development of environmental curricula should parallel the cognitive development of the brain such that different age groups are interacting with nature in different ways. He suggests that developmentally appropriate education can be most effective when framed around one of three curricular foci: appreciation (for younger students), exploration (for young adults), and activism (for older teenagers and adults). Rather than burdening students with information that may be too complex, Sobel’s framework creates a foundation of environmental empathy on which later discoveries and actions may be based.

Given their access to all members of a community, land trusts have a unique opportunity to provide developmentally appropriate education to children, teenagers, and adults of all ages. For example, young children can enhance their appreciation of the environment by visiting land trust properties with their parents or youth groups. Older children and teenagers can explore conserved lands independently or through organized lessons. There are myriad opportunities for interested adults to engage in environmental action by volunteering or donating to the land trust. Because these opportunities are multigenerational, trusts are better positioned to engage the community as a whole than traditional educational organizations.

2) **Land trusts can provide education that is place-based**

As organizations rooted geographically and socially in a community, land trusts are poised to offer education that is place-based. Students, especially younger children, are better able to conceptualize ecological concepts when framed in a familiar setting. Students learning about the water cycle by observing a stream on a local land trust property may be more likely to remember key concepts than those who learn in the classroom. Lessons that use local places to illustrate ideas offer the opportunity of hands-on learning, which enhances a student’s understanding and more significantly impacts environmental attitudes later in life.

The ability of land trusts to incorporate a sense of place into education may be particularly relevant in today’s mobile society. Between 1995 and 2000, 45.9% of the population above the age of five changed residence (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003). For adults and children alike such mobility may decrease attachment to the local environment and community. By offering inclusive educational programming, local land trusts may
help restore a sense of community in newly arrived families and foster a desire to connect with and conserve the local environment.

3) Land trusts are unrestricted by education legislation

Another unique aspect of land trusts is their freedom from educational requirements common in public schools. As private organizations, land trusts are free from the obligations of educational legislation such as the federal No Child Left Behind Act. While this act mandates only assessments and not specific curricular requirements, many states have created curricular standards designed to help students prepare for federal assessments. Educators in public schools are, to some degree, constrained by curricular requirements and time and may not be able to focus on environmental education. Land trusts are free of such constraints and can pursue an environmentally focused curriculum that utilizes protected lands.

When Does Environmental Education Not Benefit a Land Trust?

The primary stated goal of most land trusts is land acquisition and conservation. Under certain circumstances, environmental education could be seen as a distraction from this goal, especially when resources are constrained. While resource abundance varies widely among trusts, a potential generalization can be made regarding funding allocations and the age of a trust. Logically, the availability of land and the abundance of landowners interested in conservation easements are likely to be highest in an area where there has been no previous land trust activity. Thus, newly formed local land trusts might acquire land and easement rights at a higher rate than older organizations. Land trusts in this early phase of rapid acquisition are likely to invest a high percentage of their capital in activities that will build the organization’s portfolio of properties and rights. This strategy leaves fewer resources available for secondary pursuits such as environmental education. Older trusts acquiring land at slower rates may have more financial and operational freedom to pursue educational interests.

Trust resources typically fluctuate and decisions of when, if ever, to invest in education are at the discretion of the board of directors. A genuine interest in education may be a more fundamental requirement than available capital for land trusts engaging in educational programming. Such is the case in both Maine and Rhode Island, where, according to respective regional network managers Chris Fichtel and Rupert Friday, land trust educational activities are related to staff and board preferences rather than the age of trusts.

Recommendations for Land Trusts

Because land trusts are diverse and typically independent organizations, there is no single educational strategy that is uniformly applicable to land trusts as a whole. However, for organizations that are interested in developing educational programs, the following is a summary list of seven recommendations that may help such trusts identify the method of environmental education best suited to their needs.

1) Recognize how and when environmental education fits with land trust goals

For most organizations, education as a goal is secondary to land acquisition and the creation of easements. Because their resources are limited, it is important for land
trusts to prioritize the use of funds and volunteers in a way that accurately reflects the interests of the trust. Placing education amongst other goals may be an issue of timing: the age of a trust may determine whether staff and financial resources are available for education use. If a trust is ready to undertake educational programming, it may be beneficial to incorporate “education” into the trust’s mission statement to better conceptualize and describe organizational goals.

2) Know your options for creating and maintaining programs

In creating educational programs or materials, land trusts have two fundamental options: use in-house resources, or outsource. These choices can have widely different logistical implications for land trust staff or volunteers. In-house programs could require more effort on the part of the land trust, and maintaining programs or products that are continually used will require long-term management. This option may, however, be less expensive than outsourcing. The decision to produce programs in-house or through another organization may also be driven by quality concerns. If land trust staff or volunteers do not have a background in environmental science or education, outsourcing may be a better option.

3) Design your programs to build community

Rupert Friday, of the Rhode Island Land Trust Council, suggests that in a highly mobile and nature-deficit society, land trusts have an opportunity to engage community members who might not otherwise interact with local spaces and people. Designing and advertising programs around the involvement of children and newly arrived families will help create a more cohesive community with civic pride in conservation. Local land trusts are place-based organizations that both support the local community and are supported by it. When land trusts help create a sense of local pride and investment, everybody wins.

4) Be as place-based as possible

Land trusts are organizations that exist within a given place and have strong geographic and cultural identities. Thus, land trusts are in a unique position to create place-based education. There are multiple benefits to framing environmental education in a local context. Younger students will be better able to conceptualize information when local spaces are used as examples. Adult volunteers may be more strongly engaged in programs that focus on local resources in which participants are emotionally invested. Focusing education on familiar, personally relevant issues can help build community support and increase the visibility of the trust.

5) Explore ways to be cost-effective

Most land trusts have budget constraints. For land trusts with limited financial resources that want to pursue environmental education, there are a number of options to reduce development costs. Creating long-lasting and reusable education materials can reduce long-term management costs associated with education. For example, a land trust could invest money in creating an educational book or Web site that community members can use and share. Alternatively, land trusts could create environmental curricula for other groups, including schools, to use. Both of these options remove the costs of
operating and managing an ongoing education program, but still allow trusts to translate their organizational ideals into educational outreach.

6) Enjoy your freedom, but remember the restrictions of others

Private organizations such as land trusts are free from educational legislation that dictates content and style of lessons. While this freedom may allow trusts to achieve their educational goals, it is important to remember that potential collaborators may have educational requirements to meet. Organizations that collaborate with public school groups would do well to learn about state curriculum standards or expectations, as such legislation often dictates what topics a public school teacher must cover. Land trusts that align their educational programs with state curriculum requirements help facilitate collaboration and may be more appealing partners for public schools.

7) Volunteers can be a land trust’s greatest resource

As members of the local community, volunteers are in a position to assist land trusts achieve any and all of the previous recommendations for pursuing environmental education. Local volunteers are likely to be familiar with the goals of the trust and can help conceptualize how and when educational programs might be created. Volunteers may have personal connections with outside organizations to which the responsibilities of program management might be outsourced. Alternatively, volunteers may have a background in environmental science and assist with in-house program development. Socially active volunteers may assist in engaging local youth and newly arrived families. Most important, volunteers who are long-time community members have invaluable local knowledge that can help make education place-based and relevant to a community’s curriculum requirements and local ecological issues.

Land trusts are not required to adopt the lost puppy of environmental education, but trusts that are interested in education may be well suited to give it a home. The conservation ethic of trusts and the promise of environmental education go hand in hand. Through community building and information sharing, land trusts have the opportunity to gain support and further their goals while helping to create the next generation of conservationists. Environmental education, then, may assist with both the preservation of land trusts and conservation of local environments.
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