

What is the Role of Land Protection in the Future of Your Region's Communities?

Session 2A – Main Ballroom
2017 RCP Network Gathering

Speakers: Ryan Owens, Kristin DeBoer

Moderators: Rebecca Washburn, Rob Aldrich

Intro: What is Community Conservation? – Rebecca Washburn, Land Trust Alliance

- Difficult to define and varies community to community
- Shared characteristics:
 - An authentic, deliberate approach that engages a diverse constituency in stating its shared values, needs and goals
 - A continuum including outcomes that are as diverse as our communities
 - Dependent on a rich understanding of people, place and history and the relationships between these
 - Forward-looking, enhancing a community's capacity to be healthy and sustainable
 - Serving the community and the land trust, making both stronger and more resilient

Ryan Owens, Monadnock Conservancy

- Monadnock Conservancy recognized for tools being used rather than the outcomes they wanted (reputation for granting tax breaks for wealthy landowners, as opposed to protecting land)
- Risk management: if people don't care, all the work and preaching we do can be undone and is for naught
- Environment and climate change are low in priority what the public wants the government to address, as evidenced by partisan polarization and little philanthropic attention
- Monadnock didn't have to change what they were doing – instead, we changed how we did it and how we talked about it
 - Ex: conserving farmland for a family, not just for the land
 - Ex: protecting an area where children can play in an afterschool program
 - Ex: Cheshire Walkers at Porcupine Falls
- More attention from people, funders, other social interest groups
- Stresses and some risks and doing things differently, but new energy and enthusiasm
- Board members often put up resistance when organizations start community conservation initiatives

Kristin DeBoer, Kestrel Land Trust

- Re: largest land restriction in MA, "so what, who cares?" –Judy Anderson

- Started down path of community conservation in response to this
- Conserve
 - Reframe conservation projects and causes in ways that make them matter to others (farms, parks and trails, forests for water)
 - Make current stewardship projects places people can engage with: use the areas that people didn't care much about and get people on the land to connect with it ("sacrifice areas")
- Care – stewardship: Bolstering volunteer program, 2 to >100 "stew crew"
- Connect (programs): change from "the only reason to do programs is to get more donors" to "how can we use programs to connect with more people" e.g., art and music in the outdoors
- Community
 - Community conservation is not just a program, but a perspective
 - Breaking through the "tofu curtain" in the Pioneer Valley and engage youths in Holyoke (underserved community)
 - Now partnering with another initiative to get more teens outdoors
 - 5 colleges, connecting youths to their land
 - Political leaders: getting political leaders out to natural places

Questions and audience discussion about community conservation for the panel – Rob Aldrich, Land Trust Alliance

- How to overcome opposition, esp. board members?
 - Kristin: Start from where people are, e.g., Kestrel started with tenuous situation with funding, parks and trails. We also changed our mission.
- Critical factors that are necessary to start community conservation?
 - A logical partner in the community, e.g., community service organization that worked with children that could provide mentors and case workers to come with the kids to make it feasible. Be able to pitch self-serving motive in addition to the benefit to others.
- Role of town government in the process?
 - Kestrel is finishing a community forest project in Pelham, MA, a collaboration with the town to make a project more meaningful than just open space. There's a capacity issue and need support from land trust, but they really own it.
 - In Monadnock area, there was a program (sunsetted; funded by Jessie B. Cox) that harnessed town pride and priorities. Coming in neutrally, facilitating their project on their community. They found that people ended up prioritizing what we (conservationists) would have, 9 times out of 10. Their ownership and coming to that conclusion made support stronger.
- Any ways to impact development, planning/zoning? Ex: Shutesbury, MA doing things. We are developing a statement on where we think development should go.
- Thinking of land trust as a community institution with a specialty and set of skills, like library or food bank. Mark Smiley says that land trusts must become "too important to fail" in the community.

- Jim Bonesteel brought in towns to regular meetings, “we want to update you on our strategic planning” and then “what do you want to talk about?” Let them talk with little guidance, and talked a lot about things relevant to conservation. Now they’re very excited to talk.
- Any words of advice for people who want to start or get better at community conservation?
 - Starting with stories and “why” is a good place to start. Listen and act on what you hear. Don’t be a monoculture – involve more people.
 - Identify community values and all the things you could link to. Look at nonprofit and philanthropy focuses in the community as how people identify what is important to them, as a logical place to start. Start small, and recognize something you’re already doing that can be tweaked/reframed as impacting people.
 - Know yourself, know your community, take one step