By John Lounds | August 2026

MORE, BETTER, FASTER, TOGETHER.

Notes from 30 Years of Land Conservation









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FOREWORD

A few years ago, the Metcalf Foundation's Environment Program invited John Lounds to document and share his experiences and insights, helping to preserve valuable knowledge, foster learning across the sector, and inform future generations of environmental leaders.

As a former chair of the Nature Conservancy of Canada and now chair of the Centre for Land Conservation (CLC), I am pleased that we are able to provide this history and John's insights on the CLC website. This paper is also provided as part of the Ivey–CLC Conservation Leadership Program at Western University.

John has an exceptional track record and experience in growing the conservation capacity and impact of the organizations he has worked for and led. Now, his insights can support our conservation community at an inflection point of tremendous potential. The time is now. His learning and advice in the following pages are a road map for others seeking to build conservation organizations and protect more of nature.

Bruce MacLellan, June 2026

INTRODUCTION

E.O. Wilson wrote:

"The great challenge of the 21st century is to raise people everywhere to a decent standard of living while preserving as much of the rest of life — our natural legacy — as possible."[1]

Ever since I took the executive director job at the Federation of Ontario Naturalists (FON) in 1991, I have been seized by the question of how not-for-profit land conservation and stewardship organizations in Canada, particularly local and regional land trusts,[2] can realize their potential and meet the challenge articulated by Professor Wilson.

The FON had been instrumental in establishing the Nature Conservancy of Canada (NCC) in 1961 and creating NCC's objects and first board of directors.[3] When I joined the FON, it and other conservation organizations were beginning to actively promote the creation of local and regional land trusts in communities across the country in order to augment the work of NCC and meet demand coming from communities. This also involved creating associations or alliances to support these land trusts and advocating for policy changes to allow for conservation easements and improved tax treatment of ecologically significant lands. By the early 2000s there were more than 80 land trusts compared to just 12 in 1991,[4] the federal government had instituted improvements for the donation of ecologically significant lands, and all provinces had made the necessary legislative and policy changes allowing for conservation easements.

Today there more than 150 land trusts providing conservation solutions across Canada. Looking back, even though much has been accomplished in Canada since the 1990s, a lot more land conservation and stewardship work needs to be done over the next 30, 50 and 100 years if we are to meet the challenge of halting and reversing biodiversity loss.

Conservation in the future will be, and needs to be, much different from the past. Gone are the days, as the famous story attributed to Jean Chretien relates, ***"I told Aline that I drew a circle on the map and made that a park!"***

We need more, better, wiser land and habitat conservation — both the creation of nature reserves and other conserved and protected areas and also the recognition and counting of complementary conservation work being done on the broader landscape. How might we individually and collectively achieve even more outcomes, better results and faster solutions in the service of greater and lasting conservation impact? And more particularly, how can we help the executive directors and the boards of directors of land conservation organizations and land trusts be the best they can be in reaching for these goals?

If only I knew then what I know now!

If you are leading or managing a land trust or other land conservation organization, the stories and reflections in this paper have been written with you in mind. You may have already experienced similar situations. If not, you probably need to be prepared for them. I hope that the information and anecdotes in this paper help you in what you wish to achieve.

To collectively deliver more, better, faster conservation outcomes and impact, my experiences at FON and NCC[5] have led me to conclude that individual land trusts and the conservation and stewardship sector writ large

need to be professionalized to a much greater extent and need to evolve from all-volunteer organizations to ones supported by staff. Coupled with this professionalization would be the provision of the resources, knowledge and advice required to ensure these organizations can grow their conservation impact and diversify revenue sources to be sustainable as enduring "going concerns" in the service of conservation.



The paper first reviews the past and current state of the local and regional land trust sector in Canada and its potential for growth. Then it speaks to steps that land trusts can take to professionalize, such as the need to transition from project-by-project plans and fundraising to multi-year efforts, moving from an all-volunteer organization to one that is staff-supported, and how collaboration amongst and between neighbouring land trusts might yield even greater conservation outcomes, results and impact.

Throughout, I have tried to illustrate these points with examples and stories that provided me with particular lessons and insights. While there are many other organizations that are doing great things for conservation and that can provide other excellent examples, I have confined the ones in this paper to my experiences, as merely one contribution to the field, rather than exploring and commenting on the good work of others.

While I hope that many will find this paper to be useful for application to conservation work broadly, whether by government, Indigenous communities, corporations, or private landowners, it has been written first and foremost for an audience of land trust professionals, board members, volunteers and supporters — for those who are or will be leading and managing land trusts and implementing land conservation initiatives. We must design and build a stronger land trust community in Canada that can lead in ensuring a vibrant and resilient future for nature and people.

This paper sets the stage for my current adventure: working with a great team at the Centre for Land Conservation to advance conservation practice in Canada. The Centre explores policy alternatives and undertakes programs that build a strong foundation for lasting conservation efforts and allow land conservation organizations working in communities across the country to demonstrate and communicate their long-term durability.

This fundamental aspect of land conservation organizations and land trusts — that they have the resources and wherewithal to care for their portfolio of properties for the long term — is reflected in their governance, their ability to defend their conservation work, their leadership and partnerships, and the resources they hold for land care well into the future.

WITH THANKS

I have been blessed to engage with passionate, thoughtful Canadians throughout my career, including experts from a number of fields. They have challenged my thinking and strengthened my abilities. Often, they gave me conflicting advice, which forced me to consider what creative solutions might be possible. Sometimes I was "absolutely on the right track." At other times, expectations ran high — "it's all set up for you, just don't screw it up" — and on one particular occasion while I was trying to sort out in my mind whether to proceed with a major conservation project, the advice I got was "stop it — just buy the d*** property!" More on this later.

To the many people who have enlightened me, mentored me and shown me a path forward, I owe the deepest gratitude. None of this work was done alone — it involved many, many thoughtful and energetic people. Thank you. A special thank you to Bob McLean, Lara Ellis, Charlotte Craig and Bob Alexander for their support and assistance in reading drafts and providing comments to improve it and help it see the light of day. And a big thank you to the Metcalf Foundation for their encouragement and support for writing this paper, and for their incredible patience with this author.

And none of this was done without the support of family and friends. I owe a deep debt of gratitude to my wonderful family: Ellen, Aimee, Scott, Melanie and Ed have always encouraged and supported me in this journey. Your love, support and encouragement have enriched my life, and continue to do so to this day.

While many helped me, the opinions and thoughts expressed here are my own, and I take sole responsibility for the material in this paper. The stories used to illustrate these points are for the most part true, at least as far as I remember. :)

JL June 2026



ME, A NATURALIST?

I took the chance, took the pay cut and made the move. When I left my Ontario government job at the Ontario Round Table on Environment and Economy for the executive director job at the Federation of Ontario Naturalists (FON) in 1991, I was sailing into uncharted territory.

I had decided that if I were ever going to work outside of government, this was the moment!

How I got there was a bit circuitous. When I had graduated with my master's degree in environmental studies in 1981, things were bleak for young graduates. The economy was in tough shape, there had been the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) oil shock, and interest rates were exorbitant at over 18 per cent[6]. Hiring freezes were on at government agencies.

Teaching English in Japan seemed like an appealing alternative, and soon enough I found myself in Tokyo, relearning my grammar so I could teach it properly and being schooled in the art of intensive drinking every Friday evening after classes were over. I wasn't sure of where I might end up, so I studiously learned Japanese. As it turned out, a job came up in energy conservation with the Ministry of Energy in Ontario, where I had worked as a student, and I started my government career.

For the following eight years, I worked with the province in various policy and program roles: in energy conservation with the Ministry of Energy; pay and employment equity with the Ontario Women's Directorate; reviewing ministry expenditures at the Management Board; and a stint writing policy papers for the Ontario Round Table on Environment and Economy, where I met a number of people who would continue to mentor me in my career.

I was at a crossroads. Stay in government? Go back to Japan? Look elsewhere? A good friend who had worked at the FON and was working at the Ministry of Energy while I was there encouraged me to apply for the executive director job. She thought I had what it took, so I threw my hat in the ring and got an interview.

I had never raised any significant funds for anything, and while I was generally knowledgeable about biodiversity conservation thanks to my university studies in urban and regional planning, I sometimes think I got the job just because I could pronounce "prothonotary warbler" and describe what it was (thanks to another good friend who had got me into bird watching).

The other thing I remember about that interview was asking the acting executive director, who was on the interview panel, why he didn't want the job. He looked down and mumbled something about it not being the right time for him. I didn't think this was a very good answer, which gave me pause. But heck, the time to get involved is when an organization needs help. If I didn't do it then, when would I?

While I often tell people that my time at the FON was the hardest job I ever had, it was the best move I ever made. Aside from my professional development as a person and growth as a manager and fundraiser, I happened to meet my partner and keenest supporter for the past 30 plus years (and her four wonderful kids!).

Not long after joining the FON, I was able to meet some of the key individuals leading other environmental organizations. People like Monte Hummel.

Monte was president and CEO of World Wildlife Fund Canada (WWF-Canada), a major player in conservation. He and his team were the architects of, among other things, initiatives such as the Endangered Spaces Campaign where WWF-Canada held governments to account for their lack of progress in establishing protected areas. Compared to the FON, WWF-Canada was a machine. And Monte was leading the charge.

One day Judy Eising, the FON's development director, came to me to complain about Monte and WWF-Canada. It seems that whenever the FON had a meeting and someone from WWF-Canada came and spoke, pamphlets promoting WWF-Canada and requesting donations would appear all over the place!! This annoyed us both to no end.

It would be fruitless to complain. We were all working for the same cause, but they were simply better at fundraising and building relationships than we were. After talking it through, Judy and I arrived at our game plan: to not get disappointed or cry ***"woe is me,"*** but to just watch, copy and borrow what they did. We upped our game, and both the FON and conservation more broadly were better for it.

Like many who end up in the role of executive director of a non-profit, I came to the FON with good government and project management experience but little to no formal experience in fundraising, general management or business. This may or may not have been a good thing, but I quickly decided that I had to learn these ropes if I was going to be able to keep my job and grow and build the organization that my board and I aspired to create. I read many books (and tried to take lessons) on management. The particularly good books I remember were Drucker's Managing the Nonprofit Organization and *The Effective Executive* [7]and Harvard Law School's *Getting to Yes*[8].

Later in my career, I took courses like the CommunityShift program at the Ivey Business School at Western University, and then I encouraged others on staff to take them too. A few times we arranged for in-house delivery of specific negotiation and leadership training with Professors Max Bazerman from Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management and

Len Greenhalgh from the Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth College, and Lyn Purdy, former associate dean of the Ivey School of Business.

I always tell people that in pursuing a career in conservation, I expected that I would need to understand government policy making and programs, land conservation securement processes, budgeting and cost control, biodiversity conservation issues and the like. But I never expected that I would also need to understand foreign exchange hedging, the legal implications and processes of job abandonment, prevention of workplace harassment, risk management frameworks and so on. There is more than meets the eye to guiding an organization as it changes and grows. As a leader, you need to change and grow too!

But my most important lessons have come from mentors and colleagues who wanted me to succeed, recognized my strengths, understood my weaknesses and helped me address them — or found someone who could help. I have been blessed with many such leaders from all walks of life, and my work and life have been enriched by them.

Ever since learning from Monte, I have remained a big fan of watching and learning from leaders and borrowing their ideas. You don't have to invent things all on your own. For the most part, someone somewhere out there has already thought of it and figured out how to implement it. Entrepreneurship is mainly about innovation, not invention. Look for the best leaders and you will find all sorts of great ideas and programs to borrow, and in the non-profit world, more often than not, the best leaders are very happy to share and partner with you.

Entrepreneurial leaders such as Monte understand the importance of building strong and continuing relationships with their donors and partners. They understand that while a conservation organization serves trees, plants and animals, its customers are the people who support it. Leaders who excel at science or other technical aspects of land conservation must also excel at understanding people and why people would support nature conservation and give their time and treasure to its protection. Leaders need to be the chief relationship officer. As the old adage goes, money doesn't grow on trees.



FROM THE FON TO TODAY

I learned much during my time at the FON and was able to take that to the Nature Conservancy of Canada (NCC) in 1997, where more lessons would await me. Even though NCC was established in 1962, in the late 1990s it was still relatively small, with annual revenues of some $8 million to $10 million and no stewardship endowment funding. Today, NCC annually raises over 20 times more funds than it did 25 years ago — nearly doubling every five years — and has grown a substantial endowment to ensure the ongoing care of the lands it has secured. As of today, NCC has ensured

the lasting protection of more than 15 million hectares of ecologically significant lands and has a land and asset base in the order of $1.5 billion. And this trajectory continues. I retired from NCC in 2020 and am pleased that a large portion of this growth has occurred during the past five years.

Since retirement, I have been part of a growing team establishing the Centre for Land Conservation (CLC), a new voice for policy, performance and impact in the conservation sector. CLC is already delivering important research and policy work, leadership skills training for the sector, and a certification program that is destined to become an expected part of operations for land trusts. It is also undertaking new work on how land trusts and other organizations can best align with Indigenous conservation efforts. CLC operates to make the sector better, with much of its work focused on the organizational development of regional and local conservation entities to help them grow and have greater impact.

I get jazzed by learning and helping to grow organizations and scale them for impact. Over the course of my career, I have been privileged to work with several talented and experienced individuals[9] who have mentored my journey. Together with my own experiences and those shared with me by others, I have learned (and hopefully lived day-to-day) much about the character, competencies and commitment critical to successful non-profit management.

While the initiatives of CLC are broader than support for the growth and development of regional and local land trusts, for the purposes of this paper, I have confined my analysis and commentary largely to those organizations.[10] To start the discussion, it is useful to provide a short history.



LAND TRUSTS IN CANADA

Through my work at NCC, I have had the privilege of participating in hundreds of conservation projects across Canada. While I have been fortunate enough to engage in such projects in the central and northern parts of the country, my career has mostly focused on private land conservation and environmental issues in southern Canada.

Southern Ontario highlights the urgency for conservation in this geography. Over 70 per cent of its wetlands, 98 per cent of its grasslands and 80 per cent of its forests have been lost, while ongoing development threatens 264 species at risk. With more than 90 per cent of the land privately owned, compared to a national average of 11 per cent, private landowners are critical conservation partners.

Yet less than five per cent of southern Canada is considered fully protected and conserved,[11] despite holding the country's highest-priority biodiversity habitats. It also has most of Canada's population and continues to undergo significant land use change. This is why most of the country's land trusts have been established and are operating in southern Canada.

Land trusts in Canada and elsewhere were a civic response to failures in land use planning and government decision-making — sometimes perceived, but often real — to properly protect enough key natural areas and ensure the ongoing conservation and stewardship of these places. Beginning largely in the 1960s, their initial focus was to ensure the protection of "islands of green" across the landscape. Indeed, the genesis of many land trusts came from one particular natural property threatened with development and a community that rallied around to conserve it as a nature reserve. For the Nature Conservancy of Canada, that one property was Rattray Marsh in Ontario.

By the 1970s and 80s, it was clear to those concerned about natural heritage that failures in

land use planning — especially failures to balance the protection of nature with competing uses — were more systemic than previously understood. While land trusts were actively being established in the United States at this time, in Canada the movement did not truly gather steam until the 1990s. During that decade, governments — perhaps reluctantly — recognized the value of having private and civic involvement in conservation efforts and enacted policy and legislative changes that supported the establishment and work of land trusts.

In 1991, there were 12 land trusts in Canada.[12] Today there are more than 150. Reflecting similar experiences in the U.S. and Britain, they evolved in response to the public's desire to not just advocate for conservation but to act in communities across the country to conserve ecologically significant habitats. And recent developments to establish Indigenous land trusts such as the W̱SÁNEĆ Land Trust are leading new thinking about our relationship with the land.

By far, the largest *land trusts*[13] in Canada are two national organizations: the Nature Conservancy of Canada (NCC), and Ducks Unlimited Canada (DUC). The rest operate either at the provincial, regional, or local level.

While many land trusts have been established at the local and regional level, only a limited number of them have grown significantly and scaled up. Most have less than $1 million in assets or hold only one property. Not including NCC and DUC, 60 have assets greater than $1 million as of 2023, and only 23 have assets greater than $10 million.

Of the 150 provincial, regional and local land trusts, the top 60[14] constitute the lion's share of conservation activity of such groups. Together these 60 have assets of $1.16 billion (as of 2023), representing over 95 per cent of the assets held by all 150 of such land trusts. In fact, the top 12 are responsible for most of these assets, holding over $825 million or 70 per cent of all assets of these land trusts.

Top 60 provincial, regional and local land trusts by asset range

Range (Assets $M)	Number of Organizations	Asset Total, 2023	Asset Growth 2018–2023	Average Asset Growth Per Organization 2018-2023
>$40M	8	$690,698,706	$378,721,489	$47,340,186
$15M–$40M	9	$244,104,547	$111,656,609	$12,406,290
$10M–$15M	6	$79,386,255	$29,440,208	$4,906,701
$5M–$10M	11	$82,964,704	$34,883,777	$3,171,252
$2M–$5M	16	$51,513,151	$21,796,689	$1,362,293
$1M–$2M	10	$15,195,837	$5,039,399	$503,940
Total	**60**	**$1,163,863,200**	**$581,538,171**	
Average		**$19,397,720**	**$9,692,302**	

The top 60 collectively grew their land assets by more than $100 million per year between 2018 and 2023, indicating that a maturation of the sector may well be underway. Equally promising, though not reflected in these numbers, is the evolution of land trusts from focusing only on protecting "islands of green" to embracing whole-landscape conservation and the intersection with community economic and social development.

How might these trusts be poised for even more rapid growth?



THE POTENTIAL FOR CONTINUED GROWTH OF PROVINCIAL, REGIONAL AND LOCAL LAND TRUSTS

It seems that there are at least three groupings of land trusts by size at this stage:

- **Larger, sustained organizations (over $15M in assets)**
- **Medium-sized organizations ($1M to $15M in assets)**
- **Small organizations (<$1M in assets)**

The first two categories make up the top 60 land trusts, with 17 of those trusts having over $15 million in assets. In discussions with the leadership of several of these top-60 land trusts, they have expressed the need and interest to:

- **Grow their capacity to meet increasing demand for services**
- **Guide their development to leverage their accomplishments to date**
- **Take their conservation impact to the next level**

Within those 60 land trusts lies the potential to lead the acceleration of conservation impact in southern Canada. But while they are, for the most part, growing measurably, they are not growing fast enough to contribute to halting and reversing biodiversity loss in the communities in which they operate. The status quo is not good enough.
To meet this challenge, they need to accelerate their development and increase their organization's impact, and that of the sector, so that they can conserve more land, raise more funds, share innovation and provide rewarding, stable careers in conservation for young professionals.

If these 60 could double their rate of conservation output every five years for the next 20 years, they could add almost 1.75 million hectares to Canada's conservation estate in those geographies where biodiversity is most threatened and land is at the greatest risk of conversion (see Appendix 1).

FOUR REASONS TO INVEST IN THE GROWTH OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL LAND TRUSTS TODAY

Besides the urgent need to close the gap between conservation progress to date and conservation objectives, four reasons stand out as to why now is the time to make a capacity investment in Canada's top local and regional land trusts:

- We are in the middle of the greatest intergenerational transfer of private wealth in the history of Canada, creating opportunities for legacy gifts.
- The need for active reconciliation with Indigenous peoples and the importance of land in reconciliation requires thoughtful, engaged work in communities across the country, which land conservation organizations are well placed to contribute to.
- The political frame in Canada has changed for conservation, creating a stronger narrative on taking care of our country, our communities and our home places, not only from a conservation perspective but also from economic and social perspectives.
- The land trust sector in Canada is at an inflection point in terms of its development, thanks to its growth in revenues and assets, the hiring of professional staff teams, and renewed leadership in many organizations. This should be capitalized on.

A significant intergenerational transfer of private wealth

Much of the growth of these land trusts over the past several years has been propelled by government matching funding programs — recent federal ones include the Nature Smart Climate Solutions Fund and the Priority Places program. A main one has been the Natural Heritage Conservation Program,[15] which NCC pioneered with the Government of Canada in 2007. This program has continued in one form or another to this day.

While matching funding support from government is a positive driver of conservation activity, it has been my experience that in communities across the country, there is a large reservoir of individuals with "quiet wealth" waiting to be tapped. These individuals are interested in participating in positive conservation work, and they've built up significant net worth, but because they don't flaunt that wealth, they're not identified as potential major donors.

We are also in the middle of the greatest transfer of private wealth in our history,[16] with bequests to charities at an all-time high. While donations to conservation and environmental charities are still significantly smaller in proportion to giving to other causes such as health, education and religion, durable land conservation can be one of the more attractive causes for such donations, given the "forever" aspect of land securement and stewardship.

Land trusts are well positioned to attract a share of that funding to advance the conservation challenges in front of them. If they worked together, using a coordinated approach to build awareness among potential donors, such bequests could provide much more funding to land trusts. The pie is bigger than we think.

A key to NCC's outstanding success has been its ability to tap into this quiet wealth, building and leveraging private sector[17] support and investment. It is critical that local and regional land trusts spend the time and energy needed to cultivate

their private donor base. With the right investment and guidance, a land trust can and should grow its private-sector fundraising and its conservation impact dramatically. Growing private-sector fundraising also puts an organization in a stronger position to request and receive matching funding from government.

And this private-sector fundraising is not just about raising money today. It's also about arranging for a charitable cause to receive a portion of the benefit when future wealth transfers occur. As an example, the NCC has been building its Nature Legacy Society program: a program that counts over 2,500 individuals who have committed to leaving a bequest to NCC. A file such as this is likely worth more than $375 million today, and perhaps as much as $750 million in future years.

Realizing the promise of reconciliation

It has been reassuring to see the growing efforts to support active reconciliation with Indigenous peoples, their communities and their governments — efforts that are overdue. But let's begin with the obvious understatement: there is much more to do to achieve true reconciliation.

When I was a policy advisor at the Ontario Round Table on the Environment and Economy prior to joining the Federation of Ontario Naturalists, I was privileged to work with Dean Jacobs from Bkejwanong First Nation (Walpole Island), who was director of the Walpole Island Heritage Centre at the time. Bkejwanong, situated in Lake St. Clair at the mouth of the St. Clair River in southwestern Ontario, had faced serious problems from pollution of the river from the industry upstream in Sarnia. My education and experiences up until then had been like so many others who come from European heritage, and Dean helped me start on a more informed path.

I have had the privilege of working on great conservation projects that have been important to the Indigenous communities that live there. These include working with the Little Red River Cree on the establishment of the Birch River Wildland Provincial Park in Alberta and removing the threat of a ski development at Qat'muk, a sacred natural site for the Ktunaxa First Nation in British Columbia.

Often, projects like Qat'muk are more complicated because they almost always involve the federal and provincial governments as well as many other interests in their resolution. In this case, the proposed development was on lands administered by the province and claimed by the First Nation. The province had approved the ski resort development, leading to the beginning of construction. This was followed by public outcry and subsequent on-again off-again negotiations to resolve the situation.

Many years passed with the situation in a standoff. The Ktunaxa Nation maintained their position and pressure, and work was halted on the site. Eventually, to try and resolve the issue, NCC was invited by the Nation to help remove the threat of the ski development. With the support of the federal government and private donors, they reached an agreement with the ski area developer to purchase the rights that he had obtained from the province. The agreement was key in allowing the province and the Nation to work together to ensure the ongoing protection of Qat'muk.

Land trusts are in an excellent position to contribute to reconciliation with Indigenous peoples and communities in the geographies in which they are active. They have the opportunity to earn the trust of Indigenous communities and to bring us all together around treating the land with respect.

Today, the framework within which land trusts need to engage with Indigenous communities has evolved considerably, and that context matters considerably. Canada's adoption of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) — and its implementation through federal legislation — has established free, prior and informed consent as a foundational principle for any project or initiative affecting Indigenous lands and rights. At the same time, Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas (IPCAs) have emerged as a recognized and rapidly growing tool, enabling Indigenous nations to lead conservation on their own terms and according to their own governance traditions. For land trusts, these aren't peripheral considerations — they are the context for genuine partnership with Indigenous communities. It will mean engaging within these structures, not around them.

The changing political frame

The phrase "the only certain thing about the future is uncertainty" applies without reservation to economies and governments. One can never assume that the situation today is what tomorrow will bring. Today, with the current and ongoing political changes at home, in the United States and elsewhere, Canada needs to become a more successful autonomous country. Citizens are thinking more about their homes and communities as a result. Pride in country and community is extremely high, and having natural areas nearby and accessible is a key part of ensuring a continued great quality of life in Canada. As is often said, the great outdoors is at the heart of the Canadian identity.

This is bringing a shift in government policy (amongst all levels and stripes of government) to fostering more locally based conservation efforts that build communities and engage citizens. Land trusts can build a robust conservation community place by place. There is no bad time to invest in and build the entrepreneurial capabilities of land trusts to meet our conservation goals and to seek matching government support for local efforts, and now is a better time than ever.

An inflection point for the development of land trusts and the sector

The base capacity now exists in many local and regional land trusts, with a significant number of them of reasonable size and growing. With a more systematic undertaking to build the sector and provide leadership training, there is potential to double or even triple the sector's conservation impact.

Up to now, growth has been largely from the ground up, with many individual land trusts almost totally reliant on volunteer capacity and capability. Canada's land trusts are supported by over 10,000 volunteers and 1,500 staff who steward land, monitor conservation agreements, conduct ecological surveys and support governance and fundraising.[18] For several reasons, experience and expertise in organizational development has not yet been well shared between land trusts. With improved collaboration, sector-wide initiatives can take advantage of this new level of capability, which did not exist a decade ago.

At the same time, there has been increasing demand from landowners who love their lands to enter into conservation agreements or donate those lands to land trusts, most likely attributable to the number now at an age where they are considering what might happen to their lands that they have cared for over many years.[19] As an example, one land trust I am familiar with was processing one or two land donations a year. Recently, they had nine such donations that qualify

as significant properties being offered to them, but they lacked the capacity to process them as quickly as they wished. Such demands put enormous pressure on largely volunteer organizations, causing them to seek to add capacity to keep up with community interest, or causing them to seek additional funding to add that capacity.



MOVING FORWARD

At the heart of it, while biodiversity loss is a global issue, all conservation action is local. It is in communities across the country where conservation will be achieved — or not. Might we do for all ambitious local and regional land trusts what is happening with the top regional and local land trusts and what happened at NCC and DUC? Can we create a stronger force for nature — land trusts able to accelerate land conservation efforts across the country? Might we set a collective goal to double the impact of the land trust sector every five years? Given how much there is still to do to reach our conservation goals, it is an understatement to say that, at the very least, we need to try!

The next section looks at this question from the frame of these two challenges:

- **Moving from project-by-project outcomes to multi-year strategies and fundraising campaigns, and**
- **Moving from entirely volunteer-driven to staff-supported organizations**

While volunteers are important and necessary to the success of any non-profit, as organizations grow, the ability of volunteers to provide the time and capacity to manage growth and meet new demands is limited. So, in several cases, a key challenge will be to move from a volunteer-led and operated organization to a staff-supported organization that continues to engage its volunteers (albeit in new or changed roles) and grows its supporter base, with proper governance and standards to achieve long-term conservation and ensure its sustainability as a going concern. In organizations that already have staff support, the other challenge will be to establish multi-year science-based strategies and campaigns for financial support and to create legacy fundraising programs.

These challenges must be met head-on if we are to do more, better, faster. In both cases, the prerequisite is to have the people — volunteers and staff — that have the “fire in their belly”: the drive, desire, persistence and perspective for growth and improved outcomes and results. In short, ambition coupled with entrepreneurial mindsets and skills.



FROM PROJECT-DRIVEN TO MULTI-YEAR CAMPAIGNS TO DIVERSIFIED REVENUE STREAMS

The subject that most often dominates my conversations with land trusts and their partners is fundraising. It's not that land securement, stewardship strategy, governance and management aren't important. It's that for almost any non-profit organization, the purposes, goals and demands are always far greater than the available resources.

A land trust is, first and foremost, a business. Its business is conservation, and like all businesses, it needs to operate with at least a break-even cash flow, or it won't be around very long — at least in any shape to do what it was set up for. Which means that, for a charitable organization, at some point you need to ask for donations and contributions to your cause, your plans, and your programs and projects.

For the past 25 to 30 years, the establishment and growth of land trusts can be likened to the start-up and growth of small businesses. Those volunteers who get involved from the beginning to get a land trust organized and on its feet are people who think like entrepreneurs but apply those skills to growing a not-for-profit organization rather than a for-profit entity. They take calculated risks and show flexibility when necessary and, above all, demonstrate that trait of persistence — the greatest predictor of success in business.[20]

And while profitability is not the key measure of success, growing a non-profit means making sure you have net income rather than net losses in the service of the goals and results you wish to achieve. Since you don't have political power, you need to have money to realize your dreams.

There's a legendary story (which may even be true!) about conservation fundraising from several years ago…[21]

> Imagine you're a young fund development officer for the U.S. Nature Conservancy. You and 50 of your colleagues from across the country have gathered at a conference centre somewhere in Mississippi to learn and share fundraising techniques, but most especially to meet and hear from your president and CEO, Pat Noonan.
>
> It's a hot, muggy summer day and the air-conditioning has broken down, and the group has all gathered for the highlight of the conference. Pat is going to deliver his remarks on his secrets to fundraising. Everyone in the conference room is sweating under the oppressive heat, but no one is leaving the room. Everyone wants to hear what he has to say.
>
> He is late. Quite late. This just makes the sweltering heat more oppressive.
>
> Finally, he bursts into the room and makes his way to the podium. The murmur in the room quiets down, and Pat looks over the eager faces waiting to hear what he has to say.
>
> After surveying the crowd for a moment, he begins to speak.
>
> "***Ask!!!***" he exclaims.
>
> Then, as quickly as he came to the podium, he exits the room and leaves the building.

I love this story. It is so fundamental to fundraising. You need to ask for something — anything! It doesn't have to be money. You can ask for information, advice, or perspectives or perhaps to learn what personal history has led someone to be interested in conservation. I often find that people are afraid to ask even basic questions, for all sorts of reasons, and in the process leave lots of valuable information undiscovered.

Of course, you also need to avoid being a pest and listen well. As Kenny Rogers sang: "You need to know when to hold 'em and know when to fold 'em." It is important to take the time to get to know people and understand where they are coming from. But then you should always be asking for something that is appropriate to where that particular individual or organization is in their journey with you.

It is fine and good to have a dream and goals, but it is resources that are the essence of a durable conservancy strategy that protects land and biodiversity and provides for long-term, stable conservation careers. Ongoing, diversified funding and long-term strategies, rather than project-by-project fundraising, are the future for many land trusts and local and regional land conservation organizations. Success comes from having a strategy that iteratively manages the growth and scale of goals and resources. I have yet to find a better way of doing this than by designing and implementing a well-considered multi-year fundraising "campaign for conservation" with an associated and compelling case for support.

> *"A vision without resources is simply a hallucination." – Greg Moore, CEO Emeritus, Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy*

Developing, implementing and communicating a multi-year fundraising campaign for conservation, especially the planning and creation of your case

for support, clarifies your strategy and provides the promotional materials needed to attract more funders, sustain funding over the longer term and, through the process, add to your funding audience. The campaign design needs to include fundraising goals that go beyond just implementing projects in the short term. It also needs to fund the development of the organization's capabilities to deliver lasting conservation — its long-term funding, its good governance, its legal defence, its ability to hire, train and retain great staff and volunteers, and what the organization needs to continue to do after the campaign is over.

And it helps to keep you focussed on maintaining positive cash flow. This brings additional benefits beyond growing your business. Being in the black reduces the chances that board members and staff will meddle in each other's spheres of responsibility. A campaign case keeps everyone focussed on priorities.

Your organization's volunteers and staff members get involved because of the purpose and effectiveness of the organization to do good in the world. The problem is, without the focus that drives a for-profit organization (i.e., does it make money or not), people can run off in all directions and feel justified in doing so. A campaign is a chance to set the tone and effort for a three-to-five-year period.

One day, a key and highly productive staff member phoned me and asked: "John, have you ever ridden a horse?"

"What?" I said.

He repeated his question. After containing my surprise at the question, I mumbled some reply that I had indeed ridden a horse a few times, but that was long ago.

He said: "John, I am that horse — tell me where we're heading, and I'll go there!!"

Now doubly surprised, I thought of how apt his notion was of the energy that people bring to working in a charity. You don't need to motivate people — they are already raring to go! They believe in the vision, mission and purpose and have joined the cause to make a difference. But unless you put blinders or guardrails in place, your team and your colleagues can — and might — run in all directions. His comment is a metaphor for why a multi-year campaign is so helpful: it focuses the efforts of many to much greater effect.

IF YOU BUILD IT, THEY WILL GIVE

Organizations with a strategic mindset and multi-year planning will set their sights higher and are more likely to achieve greater success. They can inspire the change we need. A bigger vision (with a realistic plan to achieve it), will bring more resources than smaller goals, simply because a bigger vision requires larger contributions and more resources — and you can therefore engage with donors who have a greater ability to invest. A $20 million campaign with great impact allows you to position your organization for larger individual gifts than would ever be possible with a $2 million campaign. Simply by communicating a bigger number (with clearly identified and transformational conservation outcomes), your likelihood of attracting larger gifts grows. My experience is that people want to be part of positive, transformational change, and they will support organizations that demonstrate a vision and plan to achieve that change.

In a recent meeting with a land trust that wished to move beyond the project-by-project model, my advice was as described here — that they needed a multi-year conservation strategy and fundraising campaign that set a high bar. They had an executive director, but not a development director, and were already raising about $1 million a year.

I suggested that they test the feasibility of a $20 million campaign over the next five years. Several people in the meeting gasped and expressed concern that the number was too big. They were worried about what might happen if they were unsuccessful in reaching the goal.

Sometimes we are our own worst enemies. In terms of fundraising for conservation, this is where we need to channel entrepreneurial thinking and focus on managing risks rather than allowing them to become barriers. As Pogo said: "We have met the enemy, and he is us."[22]

The risks associated with not meeting a $20 million campaign goal are extremely low, as a programmatic conservation fundraising campaign is not the same as a capital campaign for a building with fixed (and often underestimated) costs to cover. A well-run conservation campaign has flexibility built into it. If only $15 million is raised by a certain date, it is not a failure — it represents $15 million more for conservation than one would have raised without the goal. Other ways to ensure campaign flexibility include extending the campaign timeline to allow a land trust to reach its target.

Fundamentally, the financial and reputational risks associated with not undertaking plans and campaigns are far greater than any stumble in trying to stretch for a more robust goal.

A well-considered and well-developed multi-year campaign, more than anything else, aligns the efforts of an organization toward a stated goal. Since there is no simple mechanism that shows profit or loss in a non-profit, it is more challenging to set work priorities. The good news is that given the purpose and vision, you rarely need to motivate staff and board members to act and implement. But you do need to channel their energy, focus people on common goals, and demonstrate and celebrate success.

So, what did that land trust eventually do? They organized a campaign with a $10 million goal — still a good number for fundraising purposes! It is important that the stretch is something that the organization believes it can achieve, and it is important to test the feasibility of the goal through discussions with supporters and potential major donors. The goal needs to be a bit uncomfortable but not beyond the realm of believability. I have no doubt that their next campaign goal will be $20 million or even more.

Informed and capable leadership + an excellent science-based conservation strategy + an ambitious multi-year fundraising strategy = a campaign case for support with a high likelihood of success

While each campaign and its case will be slightly different, there are many common features that can be borrowed and applied. What follows are some that might be helpful.

Develop your science-based, multi-year conservation plan

The "what will you do" of a campaign is based on a compelling multi-year conservation strategy. It is not good enough to have a conservation strategy that is simply a science-based document; it must also inspire, be easily communicated and establish long-term fundraising goals.

There are several good examples of such planning efforts — they result in identifying the priority areas for work based on an analysis of which areas have the greatest biodiversity or the potential to be restored, coupled with a review of the threats to those places from conversion or other pressures.

This conservation planning work is critical, as it sets the direction and underpins the ambition of the land trust. But it is not a conservation campaign document — that comes from considering other factors alongside a conservation plan.

While I was at NCC, one of my board members posed the question: "What will it take to finish the job — to conserve everything we need to conserve?" That's one of those questions like "How long is a piece of string?" but I needed to come up with something.

Conservation takes time, so I asked my team to estimate how much land might need conserving over the next 100 years and the cost of doing so. The answer was in the millions of hectares and many billions of dollars. Then we divided by 20 and came up with something that became our BHAG: our big, hairy, audacious goal for the next five years.

You can't do everything, and your funders know it. They will look to you as the experts to identify those places where it is important for the land trust to focus. The priority or focal areas you choose become your blueprint for your work planning over the next several years.

And while conservation planning should guide your work, you must always remember that it is guidance. It is not a substitute for ongoing decision making that considers and responds to other factors affecting the land trust's ability to do its work, such as economic downturns, political changes or weather damage from an ice storm. As well, opportunities not identified in your planning may arise that, after review, are judged to have become priorities.



Build your project pipelines

Strategic conservation planning underpins effective conservation work. This planning helps identify and build the project pipeline (especially for properties that are being purchased, not donated). Conservation projects are always dynamic. Every project requires negotiation with partners who have their own agenda, timing and needs and who could walk away from the table at any point. Additionally, the legal and financial aspects of a deal may delay or derail the project.

Experience suggests that an organization needs a project pipeline at least three to six times larger than is required to meet annual targets. In other words, to complete five projects a year, an organization needs as many as 15 to 30 potential projects in the hopper, with different prospects at different stages. Only by having an abundance of projects in development can a land trust ensure ongoing delivery of conservation successes.

Timing is everything. A robust project pipeline allows an organization to be ready to act when the time is right. It provides options for completing other projects when a particular negotiation is not moving forward favourably.

"Sometimes the tide is in, sometimes the tide is out. You need to do different things depending on the tide." – Personal correspondence with Sheldon Bowles, co-author with Ken Blanchard of the management books Raving Fans and Gung Ho!

Sometimes a project remains in the prospect phase for years until conditions are right. Often a donor needs time to consult and work out details with family members or other parties. And sometimes there are disagreements about appraisals that need to be resolved. I have been involved in some that took over a decade to be completed.

Recognizing when conditions are favourable and seizing that moment are critical to success. To develop and nurture projects, an organization needs the capacity to cover the costs of managing a robust prospect list.

Campaign leadership

There are many people in communities who are recognized leaders: former elected officials, respected business leaders, elders of Indigenous communities and philanthropists. In considering your campaign for conservation, having the right key individuals associated with your effort as volunteer campaign advisors or as a campaign cabinet lends credibility and can open doors to previously untapped resources. That these people volunteer their time, names and reputations to your cause is an extremely important aspect of campaign leadership — it's not just staff seeking salaries!

Many of these people may well be interested in your cause, but they are usually extremely busy and committed to other causes and matters as well. It is the job of your staff to make their involvement as easy as possible, requiring as little of their time as possible, and to make the time that they do give as psychologically rewarding as possible — purposeful, successful and fun.

In my experience, when you solicit the help of these leaders, it is often best to ask them to do something not too onerous. This could be writing a letter (which you draft for them) to five potential contributors, attending one or two celebratory events and speaking briefly, and considering a contribution themselves.

You do not need these people to join your board, nor do you need them to attend a host of meetings. I made the mistake once of asking one of our campaign leaders to consider coming onto our board. His response was "John, you don't want me on the board, because I know myself and I will want to take things over."

After reflection, I agreed — that was in his nature. He saved me from myself! The best use of him was where he was, as a campaign leader in support of an excellent board that paid attention to the running of the organization. The right seat on the bus for him was as a campaign leader: a role that used his connections and abilities to open doors and pitch our case for support.

Because we were operating across Canada, it was difficult to find times for everyone to meet virtually or in person (although we did so at a few key times in the campaign when it made sense to gather people together). Instead, we usually just provided individual updates through staff or a board member helping to coordinate the campaign. The board of directors had a campaign coordinating committee, but they themselves were not usually the public face of the leadership of the campaign — that fell to the campaign leaders.

In these ways, we were able to coordinate our campaign efforts without holding long, tedious meetings on every detail and to achieve the key goal, which was to make sure that the right person was meeting the right potential donor and making the right ask (and to make it fun and rewarding in the process!).

Other points to remember in developing multi-year plans and fundraising campaigns

Identify the "est." What is it about your plans that is superlative and distinguishes a campaign so that people will want to invest? What makes the campaign stand out from anything you have done before? It is useful to consider the "est" of your campaign: is it the largest ever, will it conserve the rarest species in the community, or will it have the biggest donor base? Sometimes these "ests" are referred to in management parlance as BHAGs: big, hairy, audacious goals. What are your BHAGs? Establishing and promoting these will not only get more conservation done but also attract more donors, since donors are captivated by the potential of significant and transformative impact. Your campaign is an opportunity to showcase that impact.

Always ask! As captured in the opening story for this section, always ask for something. Too often meetings are organized with donors and then no one asks. And you don't need to ask for money necessarily, unless you have had several previous conversations. You might simply seek information, names, advice or ideas. (As the fundraising maxim goes: "If you want advice, ask for money. If you want money, ask for advice.") But always ask.

But always actively listen as well! Of course, it is just as important that you listen to your donor. Are they are ready and interested? If so, where they might wish to invest their dollars? What's important to them? There are many ways a person can spend a hard-earned dollar, so if you are asking someone to give that dollar to you, you need to make it worthwhile for them. This doesn't mean you shy away from asking for money, but there is a right time and place, and knowing when is as important as knowing what you are asking for.

Think about your need for improved government relations. With multi-year plans and campaigns there is also a need for improved government relations work, involving the generation of ideas and programs that resonate with both the civil service and politicians. Government relations is not just a simple ask; it is an ongoing effort requiring an understanding of the government's current priorities and where your conservation efforts can help achieve those goals.

And say thank you and thank you again! There is no requirement that people donate money; it's not like taxes. Always say thank you, even if it's for advice you didn't want to hear.

One of our key campaign leaders related a story to me about his experience raising funds for another cause. For this particular campaign, they had decided they should ask potential donors with capacity for a contribution of $250,000. He had set a meeting with one of these potential donors to make the ask. Prior to the meeting, the donor sent a message that he had considered the request and would be willing to contribute $150,000.

This was below the target contribution, so what did this campaign leader do? He went back and tried to press that donor into making the $250,000 gift instead of $150,000. The donor's response? "Fine, I'll give you nothing then."

Afterward this leader remarked to me: "I did exactly the wrong thing. What I should have said was: 'Thank you! Thank you very much!'… And then go back later in the campaign if a top-up might make the difference between success and failure."

Include the longer term as well

Make sure your campaign case for support includes a component that is about the development of the organization and its operations, such as building ongoing stewardship capacity, marketing and communications, and government relations. The initiatives to be funded in these areas should cover what is needed over the course of the campaign but also make investments that equip the organization for the years beyond the campaign.

Many donors will be more interested in contributing to what your organization will do in the short term, but there are always some who see the benefit of ensuring your long-term success. It comes back to the fact that if you don't put these longer-term organizational items in your campaign materials, you haven't asked. And if you haven't asked, then why would anyone know that they can give to these needs?

Therefore, one of the key areas for a campaign to focus on is the long-term benefit of a robust planned giving program and bequests. The work of land trusts is ideally suited to discussions with potential donors about leaving a bequest to the organization. Again, this is a longer-term effort that requires ongoing attention, but the rewards in terms of funding for a land trust over time are significant. So, why not include a goal in your campaign for the number of people you wish to have made a pledge for a bequest or other planned gift? It will not be money in the door today, but it will set the table for the future.



FROM VOLUNTEER-DRIVEN TO STAFF-SUPPORTED: BUILDING PROFESSIONAL, ENTREPRENEURIAL DELIVERY

Most land conservation organizations start with one particularly compelling land securement or stewardship project. The community rallies around the story, and with emotional appeals and often Herculean effort, they raise funds to successfully protect an important local treasure. Emboldened by the success, the organization then moves on to the next project, and the next and so on. This project-by-project, year-by-year approach can be managed largely by volunteers. But while replicable, the model is not scalable. At some point it breaks down. Volunteers find there is too much to do, so they step down, resulting in a change in in leadership, Or they need to reduce their hours because of other priorities, putting pressure on the remaining volunteers.

This is the fork in the road, the point when a land trust either seizes opportunity for greater impact or stalls. To seize the opportunity, the organization needs to evolve to implement multi-year plans and strategies for its conservation programming and fundraising. It is at this point that investing in professional staff, eventually led by an executive director (ED) or chief executive officer (CEO),[23] becomes the critical difference between continuing to grow influence and impact or becoming a land trust that is content to hold its portfolio of properties and steward them.[24]

When it becomes time for a volunteer land trust to hire its first employee, seeking out someone with the needed professional and entrepreneurial

qualities is extremely important. Hiring the right ED will make all the difference in the trajectory of the organization. In this respect, take the time get all the information and advice you can get on a candidate (even if you have to pay for it!), and listen to that advice. I have learned over and over again that settling for "just good enough" is the wrong approach to hiring, resulting in many lost hours of productivity and other even larger problems that can set an organization back.

The ED's ability to be the chief relationship officer is critical to the success of fundraising and community and government relations efforts that will build the organization. This, coupled with the board members' ability to transition from a working board to a governance and relationship-building board — leaving management to the ED while holding them accountable — is a necessary ingredient.

Too often, those involved in land trusts do not pay enough attention to building their people relationships alongside building conservation competencies. It is useful to remember that while nature may be the land trust's client, it is donors, supporters and volunteers who are its customers. With the great intergenerational transfer of wealth currently occurring, delivering on promises and building strong relationships are the keys to growing a base of satisfied customers.

satisfaction = results minus expectations

Managing relationships, especially over time — a critical component of land trust success — is a lot of work. This is why it is rare that a volunteer land trust can mount an effective and sustained fundraising and promotional campaign over multiple years; the amount of time necessary to properly recruit and steward donors and supporters is a full-time job. Launching a strategic multi-year fundraising campaign for conservation (which from my experience is an extremely important ingredient for future success) requires those staff resources to facilitate and develop projects and programs. They need the time, energy and capability to support the building of long-term relationships and resource development.

It's also why there are no quick fixes when it comes to hiring the right person to lead your fundraising.

I can't count the number of times I have heard from board members and volunteers: "Let's just hire a brilliant development person, pay them much more than everyone else, and our problems will be solved!" On rare occasions, this approach might yield short-term gains, but in my experience, it is about as reliable as winning the lottery and cashing your million-dollar cheque.

Or there's the claim: "This person works on commission, and they will only keep a small percentage of the proceeds." I have never found such approaches to philanthropy helpful, because success in the land trust business depends on building long-term relationships. I was once introduced by a former board member to someone who promised me that he would raise $100,000 for a fee of 20 per cent.

At the time, we didn't have a policy regarding commission-based fundraising. The board member thought the fundraiser was remarkably busy because his computer was always beeping with so many messages! Well, of course his computer was beeping because every email he sent included a "read receipt" that let him know when the recipient had opened his message. We quickly ended that conversation. Then, with the assistance of the board chair, we made it clear that we would never pay commissions for fundraising.

KEEP THE ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN THE ENTERPRISE

As you move from all-volunteer to staff supported, you need to keep the entrepreneurial spirit alive, that same spirit that founded the organization in the first place. Therefore, the leader you have as a staff person needs to not only know the role but also have that spirit, and the volunteers need to expect that spirit and channel it for the good of the organization.

I found the executive director role in a non-profit to be a particularly challenging one. You need to manage up as well as down, and you need to manage across your relationships with other conservation organizations and partners. You are expected to be a top-notch fundraiser, an excellent people person and manager, and well-versed in financial management and conservation science. And you need to do this in a field where the bottom line is defined not by profit and loss, but by your impact for conservation, however you might measure it.

Here are a few of the things that I have learned from my experiences that are, in my view, important for the success of leaders, whether volunteers or executive directors, board chairs, or those in other leadership positions delivering their programs. There are more, but these eight are good starters. If you find them useful, please feel free to borrow!

The board–staff fulcrum

One of the key tasks of an ED or president of a non-profit (and for the board chair if there are no staff) is to be "keeper of the process": making sure that the board does its job, making sure staff do their job, and encouraging the right board–staff dialogue. If a board becomes too powerful, it meddles in the operations of the organization. If the staff side (or the staff leader) is too powerful, then the board becomes just a rubber stamp for the organization and does not address critical long-term issues. There should be a balance of power — here lies the greatest leverage of the organization's assets and the greatest creativity in problem solving. A board's job is to push and ask the tough questions. The staff's job is to operationalize the mission and vision of the organization and transparently report back to the board on progress.

> *"There are only two jobs for a board: push, and ask the tough questions" – Ted Boswell, former CEO of E.B. Eddy Forest Products, chair of NCC 1998–2000.*

Through the chair, a board engages with its chief executive officer (who often has the title of ED) on governance issues and management oversight. But, in non-profit charities, individual board members have additional roles and responsibilities. They are also ambassadors for the organization in communities of interest and influence, and they assist with revenue generation. Individually, board members need to subscribe to the mantra of "give, get, or get off." This type of thinking is of enormous help when undertaking campaigns to take organizations to the next level.

Staying true to mission and focusing on agreed outcomes and results

In a non-profit, distractions are everywhere, because all good works can be construed to be supportive of the mission. Most often, it is not necessary to motivate people — they are self-motivated to achieve the mission of the organization, sometimes with a religious fervour. The challenge is to focus and channel this energy so that it is additive to others' work in achieving results. The role of the ED or president is to think two, or even four, years out and set a road map with clear waypoints.

Integrity and humility

Integrity is even more important in a non-profit than in other organizations, as it is one of the few sales points we have. First and foremost, a non-profit is a relationship business, and the ED is the chief relationship officer. In the end, you have little but your reputation to rely on. I have been tempted by various "opportunities" over my career, including a get-rich-quick scheme that seemed to me not to add up. When the promoter of this scheme was later called before a federal inquiry, I was proud to have trusted my instincts and said "no" when it mattered.

While you, as a board member or staff person, are one of the most important assets of the land trust, always remember that being important doesn't mean that you are essential. Approach the role with humility, knowing that you are just one part of a community of people working for conservation success.

Funding

Nothing quiets board concerns like a positive cash flow. Treat every dollar as the gift that it is, and be frugal but thoughtful with funds. People give you their money to do good work; they don't have to and have many other options to invest or donate elsewhere. Always remember that. Where possible, obtain multi-year funding and remember that generally the solution to a non-profit's issues rests in obtaining more revenue, not cutting expenses. In terms of revenue generation, I have learned that if you don't ask, you don't even have the opportunity to get.

Delegating and empowering, and then doing it some more

A past board chairman of mine said it best: "Load 'em up." Give your staff as much responsibility as they can handle. And set high standards and expectations (and live them). If you do not delegate, you are unnecessarily continuing to do work that you should not do, and you rob junior staff of the challenges and skills they need to succeed today and tomorrow.

Hiring, firing and repotting

Proper hiring is the best investment you can make. Getting the right people on the bus in the right seats is what allows you to move forward effectively. This extends to board members and volunteers — treat such appointments as hiring decisions as well. Each failure in this regard wastes precious time and harms both the person and the organization.

You need people with both strong IQ and solid EQ: IQ gets you hired; EQ gets you promoted.[25] Or as I've also heard: "IQ gets you hired and (lack of) EQ gets you fired."

When someone is not working out in their assigned position, the first step is to consider how to "repot" that person.[26] They are likely strongly committed to the mission but are just in the wrong role.

Personal communication and building relationships

According to the Myers-Briggs test, I tend toward being an introvert. Most people working or volunteering for a land trust are.[27] Give me a choice, and almost every time I'll choose the activity that doesn't involve communicating with people. But I do it, because it is critically important to communicate — individually and collectively.

Walk around and visit people in their "habitat." Do it as much as you possibly can — it makes an incredible difference in what they do and improves immensely your understanding of the organization from a different perspective. Again, you are the chief relationship officer.

Taking time for yourself

In non-profits, there is a great tendency to work until you collapse. I once worked with a human resources director who wouldn't take a vacation. I had to direct her to take a vacation, as she was providing a terrible example for staff.

A leader must set the example. While I worked hard, I would make sure that I took vacations and time out (often a canoe trip) where I would be away from it all. It helps you reflect and think about the longer term. Two or three times a year I would take several days or as much as a week in a place where I would have few distractions, so that I could focus on my key job: thinking forward, anticipating what would face us three years from then and identifying key activities we should pursue.

Leadership can be lonely, so consider a coach or mentor(s). You are one of the organization's most important assets — take time to remain so.

A NOTE ON SUCCESSION

A problem that often arises in the evolution of a land trust (or for any organization), whether it be volunteer driven or staff supported, is "founder's syndrome." This is when either key board members, volunteers, or staff members stay in their positions for too long, without having spent the proper amount of time on planning for succession. Term limits for board members are an excellent way of trying to ensure turnover. Annual reviews of staff members that include succession discussions are also extremely useful.

I'm not saying that you shouldn't try and keep your good people. You should. But you can never start too early to have thoughtful discussions about succession. Having those discussions can also open up pathways for the future for the bright young minds you wish to hire, keep and foster! It helps frame the future and is useful in formulating strategy. While you want your people to be fabulous and to keep them as long as they are contributing, no one is essential. As a fellow board member of mine on a non-profit board once quipped: "The cemeteries are full of essential people!"

People who volunteer for a non-profit charity do so to participate in a rewarding venture that is doing good for people and society. They also don't want it to be painful or angst-inducing, which is why often the needed discussions about succession don't occur. You need to be constantly thinking about bringing new people to your organization, as either board members or key staff, and you need to have good ways to thank people for their service and even continue to have them involved as supporters and advisors after their volunteer or staff roles have ended. At the Nature Conservancy of Canada, we established the Ambassadors' Circle for those board and committee members whose terms had ended so that they remain involved. Today, that group is over 400 members strong.

The problem is that delaying succession conversations leads to even worse outcomes. It is far better to have them up front than wait until a problem develops: I am constantly amazed at how often people stay in their roles long past their due date. And it is critical that these conversations be thoughtfully held. I found that reassessing my situation every five years was a useful way to determine whether I was still up for the task at hand. Had I learned enough to help the organization get to the next level? Did I still have the energy and the interest? Did I have the team and board support needed for success?

Answering these questions truthfully — and actively seeking feedback to know whether you are indeed answering these questions with honesty — becomes a critical part of doing good for the organization.



FOR THE SECTOR: WHY NOT CONFEDERATIONS OF CAMPAIGNS?

In 2006, NCC successfully completed its first national multi-year campaign for conservation, Saving Canada's Natural Masterpieces. That same year, we began to consider what the next campaign should be. We had reached our target for this first campaign: over $200 million in funding and donated lands. It had taken a lot of blood, sweat and tears, as they say, but we made it. So, we wanted to be careful about what our next campaign would look like, thinking that a modest increase to maybe a $250 million campaign target was doable. (At that time, I was certainly more risk-averse regarding campaigns than I am now.)

So, NCC Director of Development Lynn Gran and I, with the help of Jim Coutts, who was board chair at the time, gathered our team, our board, our supporters and others together and had a one-day "Food for Thought" session that year with about 60 participants. We asked them to share their thoughts and ideas about what should be next for NCC in terms of conservation priorities and fundraising.

The day went well, with good conversations about how to undertake a new, slightly enhanced campaign and how to engage governments in matching funding programs for the next several years to help us meet that goal. (By then, we had had some success in working with the federal government and several provincial governments on matching efforts.)

Then, near the end of the day, a key participant and campaign leader came to the podium and said, "You guys are thinking too small. $250 million to $300 million is not enough — not nearly enough! If you want

to get the attention of the Government of Canada in a matching program, the goal needs to be way more significant."

"It needs to be at least **$500 million!**"

I was stunned. After Lynn picked me up off the floor (like, how on earth would we be able to ramp up to deliver that many projects??), we continued that discussion. We put together a plan and proposal for what could be delivered and took it to the government. The result of those efforts and conversations was the Natural Areas Conservation Program beginning in 2007, with a matching government investment of $225 million. We were on our way to our $500 million campaign!

Lots of hard work followed to both structure the program and manage the delivery of conservation outcomes. But none of it would have happened without the encouragement of our supporters to think bigger and have the ambition to reach for the opportunity. The program evolved into the Government of Canada's Natural Heritage Conservation Program (NHCP) in 2019. In its two forms, it has provided matching funding to NCC, DUC and a host of land trust conservation projects across the country for almost two decades.

A bigger campaign communicates greater ambition and engages support at a higher level. While NCC is a single organization operating across Canada, its success was partly due to its division into regional operations organized along provincial lines. This structure allowed it to present a confederation of campaigns, where regions developed and implemented their campaigns (along common themes), which were rolled up and presented as one larger national campaign.

While NCC regions worked together on common themes and executed their programs according to shared standards and practices and their level of ambition, a campaign developed in this way also created friendly competition to achieve more, better, faster. It also reduced risk for each region — in any campaign there is a risk of missing your target, but also the opportunity to exceed it. Communicating success as a group allowed them to share both the risks and the achievements, as long as the goal remained more, better, faster.

So, why not consider the 60 largest local and regional land trusts mentioned at the beginning of this paper and imagine fundraising collaborations among them: one or more confederations of campaigns. This approach would enable larger campaigns and communicate a far greater and more compelling vision. Such a vision with a strong case for support will increase the ability to attract significant investment — far more than if each land trust pursued funding alone.

The potential is there. A review of some of the top 60 organizations in the sector shows many are already primed for growth, with new, younger leaders eager to expand conservation outcomes and embrace technology to identify priorities. The catalyst for bringing them together in a high-ambition collaboration lies in supporting this next generation of leaders.

An initiative might begin with a group of neighbouring land trusts — or even, say, 30 of the top 60 — to determine whether they might individually adopt campaigns that would at least double or triple the pace of conservation in their regions. With success, this cohort could then assist others in undertaking their own campaigns for conservation.

There are several routes to such a collaboration. One option would be to work with similar organizations in your community to build a

coordinated regional collaboration. Another might be to convene partnerships of three to five local and regional conservation organizations working in adjacent geographies to develop a collective vision and a strategy for accelerating overall conservation impact.

Or maybe we could think bigger. Perhaps the route is to undertake a campaign feasibility study for the 30 land trusts and determine the case and potential goals for such a campaign. This larger partnership group's mandate would consider the case and how to improve organizational capacity, fundraising capacity and government relations (both individually and sector-wide). A possible goal could be to double the pace of conservation over the next five years and achieve $2 billion in total cumulative conservation assets by 2032.[28]

By creating "confederations of campaigns," whereby campaigns developed by individual organizations adopt common themes and perhaps even objectives, one can create the kind of scale that collaboratively raises $200 million, $500 million or more. Scale is important in seeking and encouraging major investments. A confederation of campaigns might be challenging to establish, but the results can be transformative and will likely accomplish more than any individual conservation group could do alone. And it can provide economies of scale in development of materials and promotion, much as the United Way and the Terry Fox Foundation do in communities across the country.

Finally, collaborative campaign structures could also be a means to engage those who are working on innovative financing that can leverage greater impact or increase access to capital (e.g., working with foundations to go beyond grants and employ their assets in support of conservation).

Conservation fundraising campaigns to implement strategic science-based plans present opportunities to reach higher and to achieve the kind of objectives that bring about organizational change. The Nature Conservancy of Canada today annually raises more than 20 times what it did 25 years ago. Let's imagine a Canada where those top 60 land trusts do the same, and the other 100 begin the journey, and we'll begin to make a major dent in our collective conservation targets and in implementing an inclusive and fair agenda in conserving our landscapes in southern Canada.

"Conservation without resources is simply a conversation." – Jim Levitt, director, International Land Conservation Network (Lincoln Institute)



IN CONCLUSION: PREPARING FOR THE NEXT 30 YEARS

It takes more than ambition to increase the scale and speed of land conservation in Canada. It takes a shift to a strategic mindset, moving beyond a project-by-project model to a longer-term, programmatic approach to conservation and fundraising. If we are to make greater progress on the biodiversity conservation challenges facing Canada and the planet, and if we are to engage more people in that effort, we need to build stronger organizations that deliver more conservation faster where we live and care for the land.

The lesson I've learned over my career is that, as with most things, there is no quick fix. It is rare to find that proverbial "silver bullet." What appears in hindsight to have been a "slam dunk" is the product of sound thinking and tireless effort — Malcolm Gladwell's "10,000 hours" principle[29] in action.

Most often, conservation funding comes from hard work and persistence. While it's important to stay open to new ideas and perhaps the next "big thing" (because you never know!), it's important to primarily focus on innovating for your organization on tried-and-true strategies.

Given the daunting conservation task collectively in front of us, the call to action is for each and every land trust to develop and implement multi-year (typically five-year) fundraising "campaigns for conservation"[30] to communicate ambition and drive growth — campaigns that are grounded in science-based land conservation strategies and priorities, have a robust pipeline of potential conservation needs and projects, and recognize that building strong relationships with donors, supporters, partners and volunteers is critical to success.

The time is right to be ambitious in fundraising for conservation. Resources are the essential ingredient for implementation, and the downside of undertaking major conservation fundraising campaigns is low. There is also great potential in organizing to do collaborative fundraising campaigns that set the bar even higher. Make no mistake, it will require hard work and persistence, but the rewards in terms of more and better conservation outcomes and creating the enduring ability to grow from strength to strength are worth the effort.

While some conservation projects might happen quickly, I know of many that have taken as much as a decade or longer to come to fruition. We are playing the long game. Ultimately, I think that the shift from project-by-project to multi-year campaigns and diversified revenue is about moving from being an episodic organization to a durable one. Durable organizations build momentum, scale their impact and last for generations. The difference is not in passion or dedication; volunteer-driven, project-based land trusts are full of both. The difference lies in structure, systems and strategy. Multi-year campaigns, endowments and diversified revenue streams provide the framework that allows passion to flourish sustainably.

Jim Collins, in his excellent book Beyond Entrepreneurship 2.0,[31] describes how one of the greatest predictors of business success is persistence over time. It's why a five-year campaign is so helpful: it feeds persistent pursuit of more, better, faster and the excellence and success that accompany the effort. As Collins says, it is his observation that having luck in business is due to relentlessly pursuing your goals and excellence in execution.

Stephen Leacock agrees: *"I'm a great believer in luck, and I find the harder I work the more I have of it!"*

Appendix 1

A Scenario: Effect of top 60 land trusts doubling their rate of conservation every 5 years

Goal:

Southern Canada = 10% of Canada = 100 million hectares (approx)

5% currently protected to IUCN level = 5 million hectares

To increase to 30% = **25 million hectares**

> **At the current rate, the five-year collective growth rate would see a collective asset increase 2025–2030 of $580M.**
>
> **At $10,000/hectare, this would mean an additional 58,000 hectares conserved by 2030.**
>
> **If the 60 land trusts double their output 2025–2030, then by 2030 an additional 116,000 ha (58,000 ha × 2) will be conserved in southern Canada.**

A simple scenario: If 60 land trusts continue doubling over the following 20 years, the number of hectares conserved towards goals would be:

Year	Base Scenario		With Doubling		Cumulative achievement	
	$	hectares	$	hectares	$	hectares
2025	-	-	-	-	-	-
2030	$580,000,000	58,000	$580,000,000	58,000	$1,160,000,000	116,000
2035	$1,160,000,000	116,000	$1,160,000,000	116,000	$2,320,000,000	232,000
2040	$2,320,000,000	232,000	$2,320,000,000	232,000	$4,640,000,000	464,000
2045	$4,640,000,000	464,000	$4,640,000,000	464,000	$9,280,000,000	928,000
Total additional	**$8,700,000,000**	**870,000**	**$8,700,000,000**	**870,000**	**$17,400,000,000**	**1,740,000**

By 2045, if we can double their impact, land trusts can contribute 8 to10% of what is needed to reach our goals and the sector will have a stronger voice to influence policy.

List of top 60 organisations, based off 2023 CRA data on total assets

1. The Nature Trust of British Columbia
2. Southern Alberta Land Trust Society
3. Manitoba Habitat Conservancy (formerly Manitoba Habitat Heritage Corporation)
4. Bruce Trail Conservancy
5. Georgian Bay Land Trust
6. Nova Scotia Nature Trust
7. Escarpment Biosphere Conservancy
8. Oak Ridges Moraine Land Trust
9. The Land Conservancy of British Columbia
10. Muskoka Conservancy
11. Kawartha Land Trust
12. Western Sky Land Trust
13. Nature-Action Québec
14. Saskatchewan Wildlife Federation
15. Nature Trust of New Brunswick
16. Appalachian Corridor
17. rare Charitable Research Reserve
18. Island Nature Trust
19. Ontario Nature (Federation of Ontario Naturalists)
20. Edmonton & Area Land Trust
21. Alberta Fish and Game Association
22. Salt Spring Island Conservancy
23. Thames Talbot Land Trust
24. Legacy Land Trust Society
25. Couchiching Conservancy
26. Conservation Manitou
27. Long Point Basin Land Trust
28. Central Okanagan Land Trust
29. Thunder Bay Field Naturalists
30. Foothills Land Trust
31. Action Chelsea for the Respect of the Environment (ACRE)
32. Fraser Valley Conservancy
33. Thousand Islands Watershed Land Trust
34. Galiano Conservancy Association
35. Ontario Farmland Trust
36. The Kensington Conservancy
37. Protection des oiseaux du Québec / Bird Protection Quebec (The Province of Quebec Society for the Protection of Birds Inc.)
38. Rideau Waterway Land Trust
39. Fiducie de conservation des écosystèmes de Lanaudière
40. Kingsburg Coastal Conservancy
41. Comox Valley Land Trust
42. Denman Conservancy Association
43. Mississippi Madawaska Land Trust
44. Northumberland Land Trust
45. Centre de la nature Mont Saint-Hilaire
46. Magnetawan Watershed Land Trust
47. Lake of Bays Heritage Foundation
48. Hastings Prince Edward Land Trust
49. Fiducie foncière du Mont Pinacle
50. Savary Island Land Trust
51. Haliburton Highlands Land Trust
52. Meduxnekeag River Association
53. Nanaimo and Area Land Trust
54. Association de conservation du Mont Écho (ACMÉ) / Mont Echo Conservation Association (MECA)
55. Land Conservancy for Kingston, Frontenac, Lennox and Addington
56. Southern Interior Land Trust (formerly Okanagan Region Wildlife Heritage Fund Society)
57. Habitat Acquisition Trust
58. Hamilton Naturalists' Club
59. Société de conservation des milieux humides du Québec
60. Ruiter Valley Land Trust

Endnotes

1 E.O. Wilson, The Creation: An Appeal to Save Life on Earth (W. W. Norton, 2006).

2 I will be using the term “local and regional land trusts” to refer to organizations primarily concerned with acquiring properties and easements for conservation purposes and conducting science and stewardship work with respect to those properties, whether that is their sole purpose or part of a larger suite of activities.

3 In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the FON had established a committee of its board that included Dr. J. Bruce Falls, David Fowle and Aird Lewis to look into the need for a national organization dedicated to acquiring and protecting important natural areas. Based on its review of the success of The Nature Conservancy (TNC) in the U.S. and the National Trust in Britain, and with the support of TNC, it concluded with its proposal to establish the Nature Conservancy of Canada.

4 1919 — Hamilton Naturalists’ Club

1931 — Federation of Ontario Naturalists (now Ontario Nature)

1938 — Ducks Unlimited Canada

1961 — Nature Conservancy of Canada

1971 — Nature Trust of British Columbia

1972 — Nature New Brunswick (New Brunswick Federation of Naturalists)

1979 — Island Nature Trust

1983 — Thickson’s Woods Land Trust

1985 — Lake of Bays Heritage Foundation

1987 — Nature Trust of New Brunswick

1989 — Galiano Conservancy Association

1991 — Mount Pinnacle Land Trust.

Source: Susannah Bunce (2016), “Land Trusts and the Protection and Stewardship of Land in Canada: Exploring Non-Governmental Land Trust Practices and the Role of Urban Community Land Trusts,” Canadian Journal of Urban Research 25(2). https://doi.org/10.36939/cjur/vol25no2/art43.

5 My tenure as executive director of the Federation of Ontario Naturalists (FON), now Ontario Nature, was from 1991 to 1997. I subsequently served as president and CEO of the Nature Conservancy of Canada (NCC) from 1997 to 2020. Over those 30 years, I engaged with numerous local and regional land trusts across the country.

6 Statistics Canada, “Table 34. Interest rates and exchange rates,” in Canadian Economic Observer: Historical Statistical Supplement 2005/06, Statistics Canada, July 13, 2006, https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-210-x/00005/t/4169769-eng.htm.

7 Peter F. Drucker, Managing the Nonprofit Organization: Principles and Practices (Harper Business, 2006); Peter F. Drucker, The Effective Executive: The Definitive Guide to Getting the Right Things Done (Harper Business, 2006).

8 Roger Fisher, William Ury, and Bruce Patton, Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In, (Penguin Books, 2011).

9 The list is extensive. For fear of leaving anyone out, I have opted not to list them here. You know who you are, and a big thank you!

10 Regional and local land trusts can be considered to be a subset of “land conservation organizations,” which also include forestry and agriculture stewardship organizations.

11 Calculated from the 2025 reporting in the Canadian Protected and Conserved Areas Database (CPCAD), Government of Canada, last modified March 25, 2026, https://www.canada.ca/en/environment-climate-change/services/national-wildlife-areas/protected-conserved-areas-database.html.

12 See footnote 4.

13 I have italicized “land trusts” here as, while both NCC and DUC have significant securement programming, they also have other initiatives beyond what would be considered land trust work.

14 All data referenced in the remainder of this section are from Canada Revenue Agency 2023. These top 60 by assets have been determined from a review of land and stewardship organizations. The selected groups are all charities; no conservation authorities or other such organizations are included in this list. In instances where a charity carries on other business besides the acquisition and stewardship of conservation lands, I made case-by-case decisions on whether to include it. Because of their national scale, NCC and DUC are not on this list of 60. My apologies if I missed an organization in this analysis.

15 The original program in 2007 was called the Natural Areas Conservation Program. The program was updated and renamed in 2019 as the Natural Heritage Conservation Program, with a number of improvements, although its basic concept of providing matching funding to conserve significant natural properties remained unchanged.

16 In Canada, this intergenerational transfer of wealth is estimated to be more than $1.3 trillion cited in https://ia.ca/wealth-transfer, iFinancial Group, "Household Balance Sheet Update and Rebased Forecast 2024", from Investor Economics, https://www.investoreconomics.com/reports/household-balance-sheet-report-2024/ By 2030, millennials are expected to hold five times as much wealth as they did in 2020 (Coldwell Banker Global Luxury and WealthEngine, A Look at Wealth 2019: Millennial Millionaires, Coldwell Banker Global Luxury, 2019).

17 "private sector" here refers to individuals as well as corporations and foundations, basically non-governmental sources

18 An estimate based on the results of the 2023 ACLT National Survey of Land Trusts (Alliance of Canadian Land Trusts, 2024)

19 In 2021, 41 per cent of Canadian homeowners were baby boomers (Statistics Canada, "To Buy or to Rent: The Housing Market Continues to Be Reshaped by Several Factors as Canadians Search for an Affordable Place to Call Home," The Daily, September 21, 2022).

20 Jim Collins, Beyond Entrepreneurship 2.0 (Portfolio, 2020).

21 As told by Mike Andrews, former chief operating officer of The Nature Conservancy.

22 Walt Kelly, The Pogo Papers (Simon & Schuster, 1953).

23 For ease of reference, both will be referred to as ED in this paper

24 When a land trust becomes static but claims a defined geography, it can lead to an unintended consequence: an assumption that a geography's conservation needs are served, when in fact there isn't an organization in that region able to respond to potential land donations or other conservation requests.

25 Daniel Goleman, Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ (Bantam Books, 1995)

26 Repotting was advocated by Peter Drucker in Managing the Nonprofit Organization: Principles and Practices (Harper Business, 2006). Rather than letting go a staff member who is not performing, Drucker advocates considering repotting them into another role that is a better match for their skills and energy. I have found repotting to be a helpful concept in organizing staff.

27 This makes some sense. Folks that get involved in conservation usually like plants and animals way more than people. We once did a Myers-Briggs exercise with NCC staff at a staff gathering, where they were asked questions that usually indicate a preference for being an extrovert or introvert. When the room was divided into those that answered the questions one way versus another, about 90 per cent of the staff were on the side of the room reserved for those who tended towards being introverts!

28 Not including NCC and DUC

29 Malcolm Gladwell, Outliers: The Story of Success (Little, Brown and Company, 2008).

30 The term "campaign for conservation" is used here to generically describe these initiatives. Individual campaigns need to have titles that authentically describe and promote the objectives of the effort. For instance, campaign titles used by the Nature Conservancy of Canada have included "Saving Canada's Natural Masterpieces," "A Force for Nature" and "LandMark."

31 See Jim Collins on why persistence is the key to "luck" in Beyond Entrepreneurship 2.0 (Portfolio, 2020).