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## Something Different: Forestry Training for Land Trusts

Mark G. Rickenbach

University of Wisconsin- Madison, mgrickenbach@wisc.edu



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## Something Different: Forestry Training for Land Trusts

### Abstract

Increasing public interest and awareness about the use of forests provide an opportunity for forestry Extension to reach new learners. Given their growing role in land conservation and protection, land trust members and staff have a growing impact on forests and their use. This article describes our experience in providing educational programming to these new learners and how they differ from our "traditional" learners. The article provides Extension faculty, forestry or otherwise, with three recommendations to consider when offering Extension programs to land trusts members and staff.

### Mark G. Rickenbach

Assistant Professor and Extension Specialist  
Forest Ecology and Management  
University of Wisconsin-Madison  
Madison, Wisconsin  
[mgrickenbach@wisc.edu](mailto:mgrickenbach@wisc.edu)

### Introduction

Improved management of forests, particularly on private land, has been a long-standing goal of forestry Extension programs across the country. In formulating programs, forestry Extension faculty have primarily focused educational programs toward individuals. Traditionally, this has meant an impressive array of educational programs and materials for landowners, loggers, and professional foresters.

In recent years, public interest, concern, and debate over forests and their use have broadened the type of learners interested in forests. With greater public interest and actions regarding the management of both public and private forests, new opportunities for Extension programming about forests and their use have emerged. In a few states (e.g., Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Wisconsin), Extension foresters have identified land trusts as one of these opportunities. This article describes these organizations as learners and reports on what we learned from our first programming effort with these groups in Wisconsin.

### Land Trusts

Land trusts are not-for-profit organizations that seek to protect open space across rural and urban landscapes. These organizations protect land in several ways, but all are premised on the active participation of a willing landowner. A landowner may choose to sell or donate property or specific rights associated with ownership. The latter is formalized in a legal arrangement called a conservation easement.

Conservation easements place permanent restrictions on the ways in which land can be used. Easements may prohibit subdivision, construction, conversion, or specific activities (e.g., hunting, timber harvesting, etc.). In the case of conservation easements, land trusts, for their part, ensure that current and future owners comply with the terms of the easement.

In Wisconsin, 45 land trusts, through direct ownership or conservation easement, protect approximately 30,000 acres. As interest in preserving land from sprawl continues, these numbers will likely continue to increase.

Most land trusts are organized and managed locally by volunteers and paid staff. These individuals vary in their knowledge regarding forests. In addition, most education directed at land trusts

focuses on the array of legal, organizational, financial, and monitoring topics that are essential to land protection activities. Given that land trusts control sizeable forest resources, basic knowledge among land trust members and staff about forests and their use could enhance the quality of decisions regarding lands under current protection as well as those considered in future purchases and easements.

To address this potential knowledge gap, UW-Madison Extension faculty and staff at the Gathering Waters Conservancy (an umbrella and educational organization for Wisconsin's land trusts) sponsored a workshop to increase the science-based knowledge about forest and wildlife ecology and organizational capacity among land trust members and staff. Attendance was free, but participants were selected through a competitive application process.

Twenty-five land trust members and staff representing 17 land trusts from across the state participated in this intense 2-day educational event. The event included a combination of lectures, facilitated discussions, a field trip, and unstructured time for peer-to-peer interaction. In addition, participants were provided with a substantial number of reference materials ranging from publications and directories to speakers' presentation notes.

### **Lesson Learned**

Our educational design emulated that of previous events for NIPF owners. When programming for NIPF owners, it is common to provide a wide array of topics to appeal to the wide-ranging objectives that NIPF owners have for their property. In our land trust workshop, we presented topics that covered the waterfront of forestry, wildlife, and land trusts.

Based on our simple evaluation of this first event for land trusts members and staff, we suggest that others seeking to serve these learners consider three lessons we learned.

Participants did not favor the "smorgasbord" approach to content. They would prefer more in-depth treatment of fewer topics in a specific land trust context. This treatment should allow for interactions with other learners and multiple expert opinions.

Educational and reference materials should be designed as organizational resources. Our evaluation suggests that organization-wide use occurred. Rethinking the design of materials would include two tasks:

1. The materials selected should include fewer that are event-specific and more that could stand alone. For example, an index could be added to aid in searching for relevant information.
2. Learners would need both an introduction to the materials as well as encouragement and some suggestions for disseminating within the organization.

While our traditional learners may view Extension as a neutral provider of education programs, these new learners are not necessarily so inclined. Few may have experience with Extension and will be more skeptical. We found that working with a trusted liaison (i.e., Gathering Waters) aided Extension's credibility.

### **Conclusion**

Land trusts are a relatively new audience for forestry Extension; however, expanding public interest in forests and their use will likely require a wider array of programming with "non-traditional" learner groups. These situations will require that Extension faculty rethink traditional approaches to forestry outreach.

At a minimum, programming efforts must reflect the context in which land trusts operate. This will include elements of education design and appropriate educational partners that are quite different (at least for us) from those for "traditional" learners.

Beyond forestry Extension, land trusts also present an opportunity for Extension faculty working in agricultural and urban settings in that their emphasis on protecting open space extends beyond the forest's edge.

For more on land trusts, visit the Land Trust Alliance Web site at: <http://www.lta.org/>.

For more on conservation easements, see the following review: London, J.J., & Langer, R.J. (2002). Conservation easements: Important tools to preserve land. *Wisconsin Lawyer* 75 (30) <<http://www.wisbar.org/wislawmag/2002/03/london.html>>.

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