

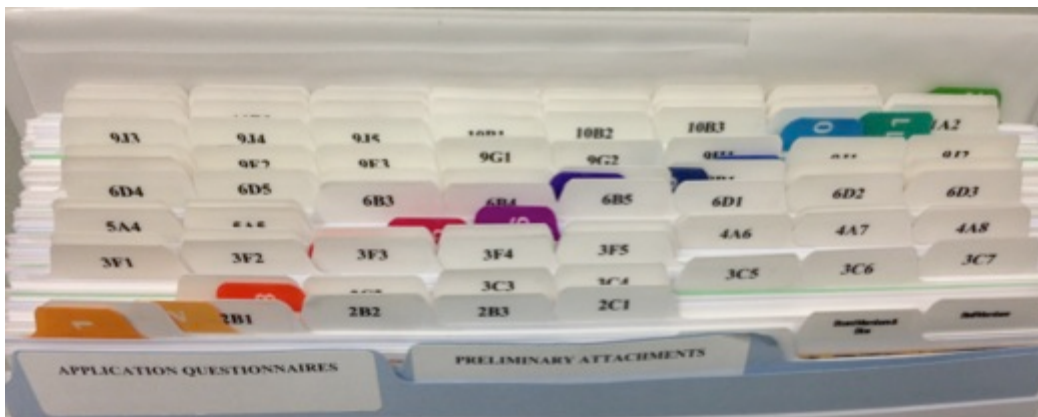


SHOULD YOUR LAND TRUST BOTHER WITH NATIONAL ACCREDITATION?

By Timothy S. Jacobson
~The Nonprofit Provocateur~

“Accreditation and strategic conservation planning moved us to put our house in order, look at our priorities carefully and think beyond past limitations. We kept asking ourselves ‘why didn’t we do this earlier?’”

—Jessica Pierce, Assistant Director, Placer Land Trust



Example of a real accreditation application binder with attachments

Accreditation is an expensive pain, right?

Seeking national land trust accreditation undoubtedly is a major pain in the you-know-what. And it costs a lot to pursue—both in dollars and in hours of valuable time. The process, starting with preparation for an organizational assessment, can take years for a typical group. Many thousands of dollars of staff time and out-of-pocket costs will be consumed, and the organization will, for a time, be distracted from carrying out some of its other core functions and programmatic activity.

The numbers tell an uncontestable story about the hurdles to accreditation. As of February 2014, there are only 254 accredited land trusts out of 1,700. That means that 85% of land

trusts have not yet achieved accreditation. Most recently, there were 16 renewals of accreditation and a paltry 17 newly accredited organizations.

Is it worth the trouble?

Why accreditation matters

According to the Land Trust Accreditation Commission, accreditation provides public recognition of land trusts that are engaged in the long-term protection of the land in the public interest. It increases public awareness of, and confidence in, land trusts and land conservation. The Commission further points out that land trusts use the accreditation application process as a way to fine-tune their policies and streamline their operations. The accreditation seal is a mark of distinction in land conservation. It recognizes organizations for meeting national standards for excellence, upholding the public trust and ensuring that conservation efforts are permanent. (See www.landtrustaccreditation.org/why-accreditation-matters)



In its online FAQ, the Commission points out that accredited land trusts are granted the ability to use the accreditation seal. The seal gives the land trust public recognition that it is carrying out the practices from Land Trust Standards and Practices that indicate it is operating in an ethical, legal and technically sound manner. This recognition gives the land trust enhanced credibility and respect from donors, partners, members and the public. In addition, the preparation and application process affords applicants the opportunity to review and implement policies that will help streamline their operations and lead to more effective land conservation. (See www.landtrustaccreditation.org/tips-and-tools/faqs)

When I was serving as executive director of a land trust, I found accreditation to be a very worthwhile process. It forced us to examine our operations in much greater detail than we might otherwise have done, it prompted us to strengthen our suite of written policies to improve continuity and consistency even with staff and board changes, and the achievement of accreditation provided a real boost to the organization.

Perhaps one of the most poignant examples of the benefits of land trust accreditation comes from the Thousand Islands Land Trust in New York State. Days after executive director Aaron Vogel submitted the accreditation application, he suddenly passed away, and Andrew Wood, then director of land conservation, assumed the position of executive director. The board and staff made the decision to move forward with the application despite the tragedy and the gap that suddenly developed on the staff.

Board president Susan Smith pointed out, "Upon his death, Aaron could have taken his institutional knowledge with him, but instead he left a legacy of strong written policies and records."

The value of accreditation is that it pushes one's own organization forward, but it also provides a benchmark to judge one's progress explained Smith. "Standards exemplify your strive for excellence, and practice is the way to get there," she said. (See www.landtrustaccreditation.org/storage/casestudies/Profile_ThousandIslandsLandTrust.pdf)

What should your land trust consider in making the decision of whether to apply?

The Accreditation Commission advises that each land trust should consider when it would be most appropriate for their organization to apply for accreditation and balance accreditation with their other programmatic activities. In many cases this may mean incorporating accreditation into a long-term strategic plan and/or planning to apply after more immediate organizational or program needs are met. To get started, land trust leaders should read the Applicant Handbook, and then review the list of indicator practices, the Requirements Manual and information about eligibility and requirements, which can all be found on the Commission's website. (See www.landtrustaccreditation.org/the-process)

What types of organizations are eligible to apply?



Land trust accreditation is available to all U.S.-based 501(c)(3) nonprofit and quasi-governmental organizations that actively acquire or steward conservation land or conservation easements, that have been incorporated for at least two years, and that have completed at least two direct land or easement acquisition projects. (In a direct land or easement acquisition project the land trust is included in the chain of title on a fee parcel or is the grantee of a conservation easement.)

Two completed projects provide the Commission with real data to verify. The two-year eligibility requirement clarifies for applicants, funders and the public that it takes time for new groups to create the systems needed to carry out the indicator practices and that there is no expectation that new organizations will earn accreditation right away.

The accreditation program is designed to be achievable by any land trust committed to putting the policies and systems in place to ensure the ethical, legal and technically sound operation of the organization and ensure the long-term protection of land, including small, all-volunteer land trusts with few holdings.

What does the application process involve?

Generally, most groups pass through at least three phases on the journey to accreditation, per the *Applicant Handbook* published by the Land Trust Accreditation Commission. Here are the phases, as outlined by the *Handbook*:

Phase I: Conducting an Assessment and Follow-Up

A first step in implementing Land Trust Standards and Practices and eventually applying for accreditation is conducting an assessment against the full set of standards. The assessment must be complete by the time your land trust registers for accreditation. It helps to be frank and honest in the assessment. Implementing an action plan that charts a course to the improvements identified by the assessment is essential.

Phase II: Testing Yourself with the Checklists

When the improvements identified in the assessment are complete and/or your land trust thinks it can demonstrate compliance with the accreditation indicator practices, it should test this assumption with a careful review of the Master Attachment Checklist and Project Documentation Checklist. You should read each indicator practice and the lists of required documentation you will be asked to submit. Identify if each document exists, where it is, and if it is of sufficient detail to demonstrate compliance with the practice. Most groups who go through this the first time find gaps. The next step is to develop and implement a plan to fill the gaps.

Phase III: Putting Your Application Team Together and Registering to Apply

When an organization believes it can demonstrate that it is meeting the practices, the final step in preparation is to register to apply. An accreditation team can then begin to start pulling all the materials together.

Conclusion

National land trust accreditation is a daunting process—no doubt about it. But recognize that a wide range of land trusts, from small, all-volunteer groups to much bigger, staffed organizations, have successfully achieved accreditation. You can, too, as long as your land trust is committed to putting policies and systems in place to ensure the ethical, legal and technically sound operation of the organization to ensure the long-term protection of land. Accreditation is a worthy goal to investigate and pursue. You owe it to yourself and to the natural resources you protect to strive to make your organization the best it can be.



The author accepts an accreditation certificate on behalf of the conservancy he led for seven years

If you need a hand at any stage of the process, contact me at Visjonær Consulting. I'm an LTA-trained AYO consultant experienced with the full range of the accreditation process. I've been there before as a land trust executive director, I know what it takes, and I know the joy of successfully completing the process. I'm available to help you evaluate your policies, procedures and practices. I can conduct a guided organizational assessment, and/or I can work with you on the application process. Call today for a free consultation!

Check out the author's website at www.visjonaer.com, Facebook page at www.facebook.com/Visjonaer and find him on Twitter at www.twitter.com/TimoJacobson

How has your land trust wrestled with the decision of whether to apply for accreditation? What benefits have you seen? Share your stories!



Tim Jacobson, CEO of Visjonær Consulting, has served as a board member and executive of a variety of nonprofit and for-profit organizations over the past two decades. He's author of the book *Explosive Marketing for Nonprofits: Trajectory for Success*, to be released in 2014, the executive producer of a documentary film, *Mysteries of the Driftless*, broadcast on PBS, and author of Amazon best-selling thriller *The Kurchatov Penetration*. He has been featured dozens of times by TV and radio stations, magazines and newspapers for his organizational consulting, filmmaking, writing, conservation and legal work and for his exploration of international justice and peace issues.

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