

Common Ground Implementation Framework

Submitted by the Common Ground Task Force



The Land Trust Alliance is committed to advancing land conservation in this country. The organization's staff, board and members believe that conservation is important and impactful – if not essential – to natural communities *and* to human communities. We know that the work of land trusts has done much to improve the lives of many across our country – and land trusts have done much in the last decade to recognize and prioritize the human aspects of conservation.

We can do more.

We are committed to exploring how land conservation can play a role in addressing so many problems that plague us, including global challenges, such as the loss of biodiversity and climate change, as well as America's burgeoning health crises of preventable illnesses from sedentary lifestyles. And we must work together to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to engage with the land and benefit from it – regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, age, physical abilities, religious beliefs, political beliefs, personality types, thinking styles and other dimensions of human diversity.

To that end, the Land Trust Alliance has increasingly focused on supporting its member land trusts in exploring the myriad ways that conservation can and should better the lives of *all* people. Everyone has a right to connect with land and benefit from it. The work necessary to embed our approach to community-centered conservation and instill the principles of diversity, equity and inclusion into every aspect of conservation is critical as the land trust community considers who its supporters, staff, volunteers and advocates will be in the future.

Our membership expects us to be out in front of this issue, to serve as an authentic model, and to help them as they work their way through difficult exercises of self-reflection. It is not just our membership that is looking for the Alliance to take a proactive and ambitious approach: The new groups and audiences that we seek to engage are also watching.

This Common Ground Implementation Framework sets forth a roadmap for bold actions by the Land Trust Alliance that are **inspired by our core values and beliefs, driven by intentional outcomes** and **committed to transformational change**.

We are immensely grateful for the effort that the staff and board of the Alliance have poured into this work and are incredibly excited by the progress made. We are going to make conservation stronger and more resilient by doing this work. Why? Because, as the Alliance's strategic plan states, "At the Alliance, we believe that when land trusts engage all people in their communities, especially those who have not traditionally been served by, engaged in or moved by land conservation, they make land conservation inclusive and relevant."

– Common Ground Task Force

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The Journey

A decade ago, the Alliance began elevating the concept of community conservation with the goals of introducing land trusts to inequities regarding access to land, open space and a healthy environment, making land trusts more reliant on and enriched by the communities they serve, and ultimately, ensuring the permanence of land conservation.

Recognizing the need to learn, to listen and to engage, the Alliance launched *Common Ground: Creating a Shared Vision for Conservation* in 2019. Common Ground was an intensive listening and learning initiative designed to create a dynamic exchange of information with a diverse array of individuals and organizations about how conserved land can help communities thrive. The Common Ground initiative included the engagement of 671 stakeholders from outside and within the conservation sector through in-depth interviews, group data collection, a retreat at West Creek ranch in Montana and an Alliance member survey. Common Ground engaged more than 120 stakeholders considered to be “new audiences” from 26 sectors, including healthcare, economic development, recreation, faith communities, veterans, academics, farmers and many other interest groups.

Common Ground represents a fundamental shift away from community engagement as an add-on, extra or siloed program. Through this initiative, the Alliance heard loud and clear the need for an intentional shift toward an approach to conservation in which community engagement and the application of the principles of diversity, equity and inclusion are incorporated into every aspect of land conservation. This requires both internal- and external-facing actions to build systems, structures and cultures necessary for deeper community engagement and a more diverse, equitable and inclusive organization and sector.

In 2020, building on 10 years of commitment to community conservation, the Alliance convened the Common Ground Task Force to translate the findings and recommendations of the listening and learning phase of Common Ground into clear strategic priorities for the organization. As a staff, board and broader organization, we are committed to moving from “community conservation” as a program that sits separate from – or alongside -- other Alliance and land trust activities to incorporating the principles of community-centered conservation into every aspect of our organization’s work.

The Awakening

In light of today's national awakening about systemic racism and multiple events – from the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor to the experience of racism by Chris Cooper, a birder and conservationist in Central Park to the elevation and relevance of the Black Lives Matter movement – the meaningful actions outlined in the multi-year implementation phase of Common Ground are more important now than ever. Today, the vast majority of our land trust members are looking to the Alliance to lead the land trust community in advancing a broad, bold and positive vision for inclusion and to catalyze authentic responses to the national reckoning. This Common Ground Implementation Framework is intended to help address those challenges, guide the activities of the Alliance, and empower the work and impact of land trusts in engaging diverse communities.



The Opportunity

This time in history presents an extraordinary opportunity for the Alliance to lead and to build upon the foundation established by the Common Ground Report presented to the Alliance's Board of Directors in February 2020. The report includes findings and recommendations for how the Alliance is uniquely positioned to foster and support community-centered conservation, both through its programmatic offerings to land trusts and through operational changes at the Alliance, including the following:

- Deepening the Alliance's understanding and application of diversity, equity and inclusion principles and capacity to model best practices;
- Building the organizational and technical capacity of the Alliance's land trust membership to practice authentic and impactful forms of community-centered conservation;
- Establishing new national partnerships that can be activated at the local level; and
- Shining a bright light on authentic community engagement by land trusts and amplifying community voices and priorities.

As a national membership organization that engages in capacity building, advocacy, collaborative leadership and convening, the Alliance can seize this opportunity and pursue these objectives by:

- Translating the insights and information from the Common Ground report into an ambitious and actionable Implementation Framework to serve as a roadmap for the Alliance and its membership to develop, strengthen, elevate and expand community-centered conservation;
- Creating new and innovative programmatic, operational and funding models to empower land trusts to build institutional strength and capacity to positively impact a more diverse array of communities through land conservation; and
- Executing the Implementation Framework through annual work plans that are inspired by the Alliance's core values and beliefs, driven by intentional outcomes and committed to transformational change.

Inspired by Core Values and Beliefs

At the Alliance, we believe that when land trusts engage all people in their communities, especially those who have not traditionally served by, engaged in or moved by land conservation, they make land conservation inclusive and relevant – and that’s the essence of community-centered conservation. This Implementation Framework and its objectives and strategies are inspired by the Alliance’s core values, including those of community and inclusion, as stated in the Alliance’s 2018-2022 Strategic Plan:

- **Community-** The Alliance believes that effective conservation engages the entire community in constructive partnerships that deliver tangible results from which all benefit. For our land trust membership, community-based conservation must be woven into the fabric of being as it is now for the Alliance.
- **Inclusion-** The Alliance welcomes all people into the conservation community, regardless of their race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age or socioeconomic status. Likewise, it strives to bring the positive messages and benefits of land conservation to people who live in all geographies — rural, urban and suburban.

In addition to being inspired by the Alliance’s core values, this Implementation Framework is grounded in the following core beliefs and intentions that will maximize the impact of Common Ground:

- **We whole-heartedly believe** Common Ground is a dynamic, authentic, and synergistic approach to community-centered conservation that is adaptable and scalable; and when coupled with the Relevance Campaign will enable the Alliance and its members to reach new, overlooked and diverse parts of our communities equitably, respectfully, and authentically.
- **We are unambiguously committed** to Common Ground being customizable to meet member land trusts where they are on the spectrum of growth and learning. We are committed to lifting up the Alliance’s core values to consciously overlay community-centered conservation with diversity, equity and inclusion, so everyone feels nature is for them and has a stake in protecting it.
- **We will intentionally overcome** financial, institutional and systemic challenges and unproductive, outdated models of conservation work to deploy approaches that fit a changing world, which will result in a stronger, more resilient conservation community.
- **We clearly envision** that the “conservation table” has more seats around it and can be more inclusive to meet the needs of our diverse communities and ensure conservation in perpetuity.

Driven by Intentional Outcomes

A New Paradigm Shift to Intentional Outcomes

This Implementation Framework is built around five focal areas designed to ensure intentional and impactful outcomes:

Focus Area 1: Implementing Operational Changes at the Alliance

- Ensure that diversity, equity and inclusion is embedded into the Alliance's organizational culture, policies, processes and stated core values
- Create a more diverse Alliance senior leadership team, staff, board and advisory groups
- Empower land trusts by being a model of and providing resources on diversity, equity and inclusion, leadership, training, programs and inclusive operational development

Focus Area 2: Improving Programmatic Offerings and Tools for Land Trusts

- Design and disseminate educational resources on the history of public and private land conservation in America, including the roles of systemic racism and other forms of discrimination, to inform land trusts and guide a more equitable future for land conservation
- Develop educational materials and programs to help land trust staff and board members understand diversity, equity and inclusion
- Help each land trust understand the demographic composition of the geographic areas it serves and assess its current engagement with local communities

Focus Area 3: Bringing an Equity Lens to the Alliance's Grantmaking

- Develop an equity lens and overarching equity policy for Alliance grantmaking
- Adapt existing grant programs to align with the equity in grantmaking policy
- Interview and engage with funders and land trust members to develop specific strategies to advance equity in Alliance grantmaking

Focus Area 4: Cultivating New and Non-Traditional Partnerships

- Identify and cultivate new cross-sector partnerships and nurture existing ones
- Earn credibility and trust with prospective partners
- Develop a toolbox and platform to assist land trust members in identifying, cultivating and prioritizing local partnerships

Focus Area 5: Improving Alliance Communications with New Audiences

- Develop messages to reach new and diverse audiences that are focused on the connection between conservation and healthy, thriving communities
- Create a feedback mechanism so that the Alliance can listen more effectively and then update our messaging to current and potential audiences
- Apply our messaging across all the Land Trust Alliance's communications, programs and activities going forward

Committed to Transformational Change

The Implementation Framework

This Implementation Framework establishes the foundation for full implementation planning and the advancement of the Alliance's key community-centered conservation priorities and activities for 2021-2023 and beyond. Such planning will ensure that Common Ground principles are embedded throughout the entire organization in annual program planning. Such planning allows staff to be intentional and specific about planned activities, the roles of particular departments and expected outcomes given anticipated resources for the following calendar year.

The success of this Implementation Framework is dependent on the Alliance establishing operational and internal systems and driving toward the transformational change that is envisioned. These foundational steps include:

- **Creation of a Designated Implementation Team:** The Common Ground Implementation Team will be comprised of Alliance staff from various departments. The team will be responsible embedding the Common Ground Framework into annual program plans and budgets, as well as guiding the execution of key organizational activities.
- **Creation of a Shared Vision Among All Team Members:** The Common Ground Implementation Team will communicate the strategic priorities of this Common Ground Implementation Framework to Alliance staff, with a goal of establishing a shared vision and understanding about community-centered conservation both internally and externally.
- **Execution of Strategic Priorities and Activities:** The Common Ground Implementation Team will remain focused on continual incremental action, rather than static planning. In short, it – along with the Executive Management Team – will ensure that the Alliance walks the talk.
- **Establishment of Communication Protocols:** The Common Ground Implementation Team will not only value the input of other Alliance staff, members and partners, but also ensure that open, active and transparent participation is an expectation, fueling fresh new ideas aligned with the Implementation Framework.
- **Progress Monitoring:** The Common Ground Implementation Team will hold regular progress meetings, with reports to the Executive Management Team and designated board leadership, allowing for an ongoing assessment of progress and any necessary course adjustments.