



Land Trusts: Preserving Wisconsin's Natural Resources

What is a Land Trust?

Land trusts are private, community-based, non-profit organizations established to protect land and water resources for the public benefit. These organizations permanently protect important resources in their communities from harm. Most often, the resources under protection have natural, recreational, scenic, historic or productive value. Land trusts which have been incorporated as non-profits operate like a charity – any donation made to them is tax deductible, including monetary donations and donations of land or equipment. They are independent, non-governmental organizations whose mission is determined by their volunteers and members.

Conserving the Land

One of the most important roles of a land trust is to work with landowners concerned about protecting their land and leaving a lasting legacy for future generations. Land trusts provide advice on protection strategies that best meet the landowner's conservation and financial needs. They also have long term responsibility for managing and overseeing land they have helped to conserve.

Many land trusts work cooperatively with government agencies by acquiring or managing land, researching conservation needs and priorities, or assisting in the development of open space plans. However, because they are private organizations, land trusts can be more flexible than public agencies - and can act more quickly - in conserving important lands.

Nearly 6 million acres have been protected by 1,260 land trusts nationwide. Wetlands, farms, wildlife habitat, forests, urban gardens and parks, watersheds, trails and river corridors are among the areas safeguarded by land trust organizations.

Variety of Scales

Land trusts can be local, regional or statewide in focus. Their missions range from the protection of a lake shoreline to conserving watersheds to keeping farmland in active production. Some land trusts do not own land but monitor development restrictions they hold on privately owned property.

Land trusts rely on membership dues, individual donations, and foundation and government grants to accomplish their work. The majority of their income is spent on direct land protection activities, including easement monitoring, land acquisition, and land management activities.

Individuals who become involved in land trusts come from a variety of backgrounds: real estate, ecology, education, farming, communications, fundraising and management. Land trusts are formed by groups of these individuals who have become concerned about the loss or degradation of natural resources in their community. It is this combination of skills in addition to an abiding interest in protecting natural resources that makes land trusts the fastest growing conservation movement in the United States.



Wisconsin's Land Trusts

The land trust movement in Wisconsin has grown out of a long tradition of respect for the land and a commitment to preserve natural areas from unplanned development. Today there are over 50 local and regional land trusts operating in all parts of the state. Nearly 125,000 acres of land have been protected by these groups. Wisconsin's land trusts focus on preserving areas with significant ecological, scenic, recreational, agricultural, social or historic value--all part of our natural heritage.

These groups range from all-volunteer organizations to those with several staff members. The oldest, The Ridges Sanctuary in Door County, was established in 1937 and has protected 1200 acres of property. In 2001, several new land trusts began operations, including the Northwoods Land Trust in Iron, Vilas and Oneida Counties. Half of the land trusts active in the state have been formed since 1992.

There are a number of land trusts whose mission has a regional perspective, working to conserve important natural resources of a multi-county area. Others work in one or several counties, or in part of a county. Many land trusts work collaboratively, both with other land trusts and with other conservation groups. For example, the Blufflands Alliance along the Mississippi River involves two Wisconsin land trusts as well as land trusts from Minnesota, Iowa and Illinois, working cooperatively to protect the Mississippi River corridor. In the Lake Michigan Basin, eight land trusts have joined with The Nature Conservancy, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and many other partners to develop *Landscapes of Opportunity: A Regional Conservation Plan for Wisconsin's Lake Michigan Basin*.

The bulk of the conservation work accomplished by these land trusts is done by their thousands of volunteers, who negotiate conservation easements and land acquisitions with landowners, manage conserved lands, participate in public education and outreach about land trusts and private land conservation and build membership for their organizations.

Collectively, land trusts around the state have over 20,000 members working on land conservation, and a total operating budget of \$4 million dollars.

To find a land trust in your community, please refer to Gathering Waters Conservancy's Land Trust Map and Directory on our website at www.gatheringwaters.org. For more information about land trusts and the conservation options they offer, contact us at (608) 251-9131.



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