



Religious Lands Conservancy Project

Crystal Spring Center for Earth Learning
Massachusetts Land Trust Coalition

Saving Creation: Religious Lands Conservancy Conference Report

October, 2005

The Religious Lands Conservancy Conference, held in Framingham, Massachusetts, was attended by 70 participants, a mix of land conservation practitioners from Massachusetts and religious community representatives from the Northeast. A day of enthusiastic discussion led to greater understanding and a common sense of purpose.

The Threat of Lost Land, Bernie McHugh

Massachusetts has a Statewide Conservation Plan that identifies the areas most in need of protection. This plan shows that conserving half of the undeveloped land left in the state, 1.5 million acres, is critically important to the state's biological diversity. Suspecting a large amount of this undeveloped land is owned by religious organizations, Joel Lerner, former Director of the Division of Conservation Services for the Executive Office of Environmental Affairs of Massachusetts, challenged Bernie to find out.

A clear example of an area where conservation has worked to the benefit of all, is the Sudbury-Assabet-Concord (SuAsCo) rivers watershed. Recent heavy rainfall and resulting flooding could have been devastating if development had been allowed in this area. Because the watershed area has been protected as conservation land, the natural process of the river flooding continues without harm to human life or property, and an important area of exceptional wildlife habitat has been preserved in the midst of suburban sprawl.

The Mission of Conserving Land, Chris Loughlin

Speaking from the perspective of Catholic women's orders in America, the orders came to this country along with large scale immigrations from Europe. The traditions and perspective of service they brought were consistent with that time and culture. Congregations now are not operating under the same perspective, have become caught up in the complexity of the American culture without really considering where that leads.

The orders' missions, reflected in their names such as mercy and charity, were for healthcare, education, care of the poor—all focused on the human. Now there is a growing appreciation for the web of relationships that connects all beings and an awareness that care for the planet has the greatest priority. We have come to the realization that without this care no living thing will survive.

Reflections of a Spiritual Activist/Environmentalist, Jim Cashen

Jim used the preservation of his own family farm as an example of how to balance the rights of individuals (in this case his nine children) and responsibility to the world community. Jim set aside a small portion of the land for his children to use for house lots, and preserved the rest for use as a CSA (community-supported agricultural site). His children were all supportive of the need to preserve the bulk of the property.

Jim spoke of his involvement with the successful preservation of the Holy Cross Brothers land in Valatie, New York. This project, which took 25 years, finally succeeded because of a sympathetic provincial administration team and a very competent and active land trust. The resulting preservation generated funds to assist others in the area to preserve their farmland also.

How it's Done, Examples from Conservationists Peg Wheeler and Pat Loring

There are many ways to approach preserving a parcel of land. It need not be done all at the same time or in one act. It can be done piece by piece, over time, as the landowner chooses. Conserving land does not mean donating it—a landowner can be compensated for the value of the conserved land. And the landowner can retain ownership, even after the land is conserved.

For example, Duxbury's successful Society of St. Margaret Project was complex, involving:

- 3 simultaneous Conservation Restrictions for which the landowner received compensation (each Conservation Restriction allowed a different use for a specific part of the property)
- 2 parcels of land sold by the landowner
- multiple parties (landowner, town, land trusts) and multiple attorneys
- municipal political issues
- \$600,000 private fundraising drive.

Lessons Learned from this project include:

- Work to develop trust between the landowner and conservation folks—success is dependent on it
- Ensure that the right people—the decision makers—are at the table
- Take time for the process, avoid expediency (This project took 5 years: gaining trust for 1 year; defining the project for 3 years; completing the project for 1 year.)
- Maintain communication—meet, update and document regularly
- The landowner should hire the most expert professionals, those with experience in this field for services such as legal and surveying.
- Develop a process for solving problems when things get difficult
- Maintain respect and keep focused on common goals. Each party should get some things they want from the project.
- Work to complete the project with mutual respect and the sense of a job well done.

Preservation as Spiritual Mission: Examples from Religious Communities Monica McGloin and Elizabeth Oleksak

Some primary challenges facing religious communities considering preservation:

- Using the activism of the '60s and '70s as an example, religious communities were energized and change was driven by younger members. Few new members entering the orders, so who will drive this new ethic/continue this work?

- Congregations are getting older, members are concerned with what will happen to them and are less likely to be active in any ministry.
- Members need education about what's happening to the planet and to other species, to be clear about why land preservation is so important.
- In the modern world, congregations have moved toward being inclusive of all members, but now decision-making may involve the entire community—not easy to get consensus.
- Orders need to do more planning, to take the time to consider what to do with property before the need becomes pressing and to involve outside consultants sooner.

For example, the Sisters of Providence are currently in negotiations to allow Nuestras Raices to create community gardens on their land. Some important aspects of this project:

- Nuestras Raices and its leader, Dan Ross, are known entities to the Sisters; there is a built-in level of trust.
- Land wasn't in use, had been ignored. Dan walked the land with the administrative team and showed how it could be used.
- Agreement must be obtained first from the Sisters of Providence Council, then from the entire body of members; only 5-6 members are under the age of 65.

What we've learned:

- The "charism" of the Sisters of Providence is being expanded to consider the health of the planet and all species, not just the human.
- This is a new focus for the Sisters, and will lead to a whole new set of relationships and community.
- Perhaps the future for the Sisters can be found in these new relationships and community.
- The earth calls us to a new vision. Crisis demands experimentation. It is providential that the Sisters own these lands and can make decisions for good land use.
- The Sisters see a responsibility to the future. Their legacy will be to protect this land, to tell the stories of their land and to honor the earth.

Conference Conclusions

There are many commonalities shared by religious and conservationists. Some are:

- A sense of mission; conservationists see land preservation as their mission.
- A concern for who will continue the work once the current generation is gone.
- A concern for the legacy they will leave.
- The importance of our relationship to the community, especially to the larger, global community. "The stream that runs through your property can be changed by your neighbor upstream and will affect all those downstream."

The tension between traditional mission and new vision that orders feel is similar for secular businesses and individuals. There is conflict between taking care of self and taking care of community; between focusing on old missions or taking resources from old missions to support new.

Religious orders and chapters who include earth awareness in their stated charter are most likely to act on this. But some communities have multiple boards to answer to, and different relationships to a church hierarchy. Recent trend to merge communities may also complicate dealings.

There is a long history of land conservation and a wealth of knowledge and activism in Massachusetts. Some things to keep in mind:

- Conservation doesn't require donation. Money can be found for a good project.
- Conserving a property doesn't have to happen all at once. It can be done in steps over time, and on one or more parts of the whole property. Beginning with a small project is a good way to build trust between the partners.

There is a need for more education on this issue within the religious communities. A small number of members are well-informed, but information may not reach the rest of the community.

There is a need to continue to redefine the notion of social equity, the traditional view of land as an asset you convert to further your mission. Land can be an asset that becomes the legacy you leave behind.

Next Steps

There are no formal findings to report. Participants' willingness to share their knowledge and experiences enriched all who attended. There is a need for this type of sharing and mutual education to continue, and a need to develop a shared language.

Some specific steps to be pursued:

- Expand the inventory of lands owned by religious groups. Seek information from conservation commissions and revenue records.
- Jonathan Twining's students at Eastern Nazarene College are available to do projects such as natural resources inventory of properties.
- We need other opportunities like this one for folks from both backgrounds to get together and build bridges. Propose a panel at the Mass Land Conservation Conference in March, to provide insight into internal workings and decision-making processes of religious communities.
- Religious Lands Conservancy (RLC) team can partner with land trust folks to visit congregations. There's a lot of cross-cultural work to be done.
- RLC is available to any religious community, to help spread this message and to keep this discussion alive within the community.

The Religious Lands Conservancy Project wishes to thank all those who made formal presentations at the conference, and all those whose active and enthusiastic participation made this conference so worthwhile.