



Clockwise from top left: A camp held at American Chestnut Land Trust; kayakers at a Conservation Foundation of the Gulf Coast youth program; Gates Pass, Arizona, near Arizona Land and Water Trust; Shirley Heinze Land Trust (bottom two). All are accredited land trusts.

MIDDLE AND BOTTOM ROW: DJ GLISSON, II

Common Ground Initiative Asks: How Can Land Conservation Support Healthy, Thriving Communities?

By Christina Soto

It's a conservation group that is very different from what you might expect," says Zachary Brown, assistant superintendent of Hamilton County Department of Education and former principal of The Howard School in Chattanooga. "It sees people as part of the solution and uses land and its projects to both inspire and heal our community."

Brown is talking about the accredited Lookout Mountain Conservancy (LMC), which has partnered with The Howard School, an urban public high school with a graduation rate in the mid-60% range, on an Intern and Leadership Program that affords 20 high school students and six college students intensive learning opportunities in a team environment using Lookout Mountain as a classroom.

"We come to LMC bearing every burden the world has placed on us, with nothing but a tool and a dream," says Hayle Mack, a recent LMC intern. "Every project and task we do at LMC gives us some skill or trait that will be useful at some point in our lives," says Mack.

"One of the biggest projects we worked on was to get rid of an invasive species," she says. "I can't tell you how many times we wanted to give up, yet we kept going

for some reason. It was like finishing the project was our beacon of hope, and we wanted to preserve that light; wanting to offer a solution instead of giving up like most people have on us."

Lookout Mountain Conservancy took on community conservation when its CEO, Robyn Carlton, had an epiphany several years ago. "I thought to myself, 'What are we missing here?' The answer was people."

"With the outside world looking to tear us down...LMC is the stability we all need," says Mack. "It is more than a job. It is a chance to show the world that we are important. Everything we do matters."

This spring Mack graduated as valedictorian from The Howard School and is headed to college this fall.

Asking "How Can We Help?"

Mack's experience with Lookout Mountain Conservancy is one of many around the country that demonstrates the power of community conservation to change lives and communities.

A new initiative at the Land Trust Alliance is building on these community conservation efforts and exploring how the Alliance can continue supporting this important work in the future. "Common Ground:

Creating a Shared Vision for Conservation is a listening and learning initiative that seeks to create a dynamic exchange of information and ideas with land trusts, conservation advocates and individuals and organizations who are new to land conservation," says Wendy Jackson, executive vice president of the Alliance, who is leading Common Ground. "The initiative is a critically important first step in continuing the land trust community's collective momentum in making conservation efforts more inclusive, responsive and relevant to the needs of people and communities across the country. Through this initiative, the Alliance seeks to further prepare its members to address some of the most pressing challenges facing conservation while ensuring all people and communities share in its benefits."

The Alliance has been promoting community conservation for several years, and has been collecting stories from around the country. Now, with Common Ground, it seeks to "channel the voices and insights of a broad and diverse range of sectors and stakeholders that serve important complementary roles to the land trust community in building and maintaining healthy and thriving communities," says

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Kay Kornmeier and Karena Mahung, with Clarus Consulting Group and Indufor North America, respectively, presented on the Common Ground Initiative at the Land Trust Alliance's all-staff retreat this past June.

MARC ANDERSON

Karena Mahung, a consultant with Indufor North America who is Common Ground's technical lead and stakeholder engagement specialist. "There have been monumental shifts in movements that work in parallel to land conservation—equitable development, health, affordable housing, environmental education. Common Ground seeks to shed light on the shining stars and potential partners in other sectors, as well as approaches to more collaborative and equitable forms of conservation."

Common Ground is a natural extension of the work begun by Rob Aldrich, former community conservation manager. "Rob did a fantastic job educating our land trust members about community conservation when very few knew what it was, or if they did, it wasn't a priority," says Jackson. "Common Ground is about shaping the next generation of the Alliance's community conservation work, as outlined in our strategic plan. Our approach is not about seeking partners to support our work, rather we are seeking ways that the work of land trusts can better support communities and their issues. When

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– WENDY JACKSON

we do that, land conservation becomes more relevant, communities thrive and everyone wins."

"The focus is on putting the community's voice into long-range plans, so hearing from them is the emphasis—what's important to them; what do they value?" says Kay Kornmeier, project adviser with the Clarus Consulting Group. "One of the things we know is this idea that community conservation and land conservation are not two separate things. They are both conservation. That's an important message to spread."

"We recognize that now we need something much more broad-based, and now is the right time as the Alliance is prepping for our relevance campaign," says Jackson. "The more we can help folks make connections, the stronger all of our work will be."

The Alliance has undertaken efforts to better understand the conservation landscape. This research identifies that people are becoming more and more disconnected from the land—many children today have no idea where their food or water comes from, but at the same time research shows that time in nature is critical to childhood development and human health. Jackson says, "Regardless of whether you are concerned about education, physical or mental health, veterans' health, clean water, climate, jobs, working lands, hunting/fishing, hunger, natural disasters, children, at risk youth or biodiversity—land conservation is a proven and valuable tool."

"For the land conservation movement to successfully address these issues, an expansion of how we view the purpose and practices of conservation will be needed. This expansion includes focusing the

movement around conservation strategies rooted in the principles of collaboration, justice, equity, diversity and inclusion,” says Jackson.

Listening and Learning

The Common Ground Initiative begins with conversations across the country. The Alliance seeks to gain insight into the ways land trusts can transform their approaches to saving the places people need and love.

Consultants Kornmeier, Mahung and Taylor Cooper, also with Clarus, are gathering input from stakeholders. “The process taking place in 2019 involves engaging people in one-on-one interviews, in focus groups and through online surveys,” says Kornmeier. “We’re approaching land trusts, existing partners and potential partners in areas that are aligned with conservation benefits: health, housing, parks and recreation, social justice, education, resource protection, economic development, job creation, art, agriculture/food, energy, women’s issues—the list goes on.”

She adds, “Demographically, we are seeking to learn from those who represent what America looks like today. And we are asking those contacts, ‘Who else do we need to be talking to? Whose voices can we hear from to better understand how their needs and interests can be supported by the work of land trusts?’”

Jackson notes that Common Ground is guided by a national advisory council with strong geographic, cultural and sectoral diversity and experience, “including leaders who can guide the conversation and ensure we make meaningful connections to important voices, and who can help review the feedback to help us plan for the future.”

Goals and Results

Common Ground’s goal is to empower land trusts and conservation advocates to integrate and elevate community voices to co-author solutions and initiatives that meet community needs and ensure equitable access to the many benefits that land conservation provides. “We want to make the voice of the community an integral

part of the way land trusts go about doing the business of conservation,” says Jackson. “Developing relationships with local folks and organizations that advance mutual goals will be the norm.”

Many land trusts already are finding ways to support community groups—such as farmers or ranchers, blue collar workers concerned about jobs, veterans or health advocates. And they are embracing projects that put people at the center, such as community gardens, trails in the urban core or natural disaster mitigation. Common Ground seeks to answer the question: How do we scale these efforts to ensure that all land trusts share in their community’s health and well-being while going about the work of conserving lands?

When the first phase of Common Ground wraps up in 2019, the team will compile the research into a report to the Alliance board of directors that will, in

turn, be used to craft a multiyear implementation plan to guide the Alliance’s efforts. The Alliance will share the information with all those who gave of their time, including its land trust members and the community leaders and stakeholders who shared their voices.

“We are excited about the positive feedback we are receiving about Common Ground and the interest people have in knowing what the outcomes will be,” says Jackson. “For now, we are hearing from many voices, which makes defining a specific outcome challenging at this time. What we do know is that the end result will be shared with our stakeholders, and what we learn could expand on the work we’ve already begun or take us in entirely new directions. This year it’s our job to listen and learn.” 🌱

CHRISTINA SOTO IS EDITOR OF SAVING LAND.

Common Ground Guiding Principles

Some of Common Ground’s guiding principles were adapted from the Center for Whole Communities’ “Whole Measures: Transforming Our Vision of Success” and are evolving as the project moves forward. They include:

- **Diversity.** Diversity is the representation of all our varied identities and differences, collectively and as individuals. We seek to proactively engage, understand and draw on a variety of perspectives. We believe that the solution to the challenges we face as a movement can be found by affirming our similarities, as well as by finding value in our differences.
- **Equity.** Seeks to ensure fair treatment, equality of opportunity and fairness in access to information and resources for all. We believe this is only possible in an environment built on respect and dignity.
- **Inclusion.** Builds a culture of belonging by actively inviting the contribution and participation of all people. We believe every person’s voice adds value, and we strive to create balance in the face of power differences. We believe that no one person can or should be called upon to represent an entire community.
- **Dialogue.** Active listening and learning provide a means to new ways of thinking and working together; exchanges should be rooted in openness, listening for understanding, speaking honestly and suspending judgment.
- **Relationships are primary.** Our tools and processes must help us see and better understand the relationships between the parts and the whole; the process should first and foremost foster healthy and respectful relationships.