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The Power and Potential of Peer Learning

Launching the International Land Conservation Network's Second Large Landscape Peer Learning Exchange

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I am by nature curious. I enjoy learning about new places and seeing the world through others' eyes. I am also passionate about improving outcomes for people and nature. I recognize that those improvements will only come as a result of work that addresses issues of governance, law, finance, policy, science, culture, and communications in the context of a specific place or region. It's a complex mix, and it can be overwhelming.

As I have worked to build my knowledge and skillset to address this complexity, I have often lamented the absence of a support system that could provide insight, guidance, and camaraderie. Yes, there were myriad books. And dozens of courses I could take. But where were the unvarnished conversations happening, where everything wasn't distilled down to bullet lists and templates? Where could I seek guidance wrestling with uncomfortable, complex issues when none of the "principles for success" or "best practices" seemed to apply?

When I first met Bill Labich, Coordinator of the Regional Conservation Partnership Network in New England (NE United States), I had my answer. Bill was wrestling with similar challenges, and although our geographies and backgrounds were different, we immediately saw the immense value of our conversations. Whenever we had the opportunity to connect, we could truly "look under the hood" of our respective conservation partnership efforts; share our challenges, successes, and emerging ideas; and know that we were being heard and understood by someone who truly understood the context and complexity of the work.

Later, I would meet Leigh Whelpton, Coordinator of the Conservation Finance Network; Sharon Farrell, Coordinator of the California Landscape Stewardship Network; Lisa Brush, CEO and Founder of the Stewardship Network; and others. These peers deepened my understanding; brought new tools, resources, and ideas; and provided a lifeline whenever I needed help problem-solving around a particular issue or challenge.

Importantly, none of these connections would have happened without the conservation networks that I have been a part of, including the Network for Landscape Conservation, the Land Trust Alliance, and the International Landscape Conservation Network (ILCN). These networks provide a forum for conversation, learning, interaction, inspiration, and problem-solving. And while the informal networking that occurs as a result of participating in these networks can lead to the peer relationships that I (and so many others) have developed, I am convinced the potential of peer learning hasn't fully been realized.

In an effort to more fully realize that potential, I've been working with ILCN leaders and staff since 2018 on the Large Landscape Peer Learning Initiative (LLPLI), an explicit effort to link teams working in diverse landscapes around the world. The objectives of the LLPLI are relatively straight-forward and include:

- Expand existing regional and national large landscape conservation networks into the international arena. With each new cohort, continue to build international partnerships in additional countries;
- Share knowledge and build relationships among landscape conservation leaders in specific landscapes through a series of study tours;
- Identify challenges, best practices, and promising approaches for large landscape conservation as they relate to history/culture, law and policy, governance, finance, communications, and management;
- Write "Case Statements" for each large landscape conservation initiative – a compelling message to potential public and private funders/supporters that speaks to the situation in each landscape, the complications or challenges it faces, and one or more solutions to those challenges; and
- Provide each team of landscape leaders with specific recommendations for addressing a critical challenge facing their landscape.

In reality, the experience of LLPLI participants is deeper and richer than these objectives suggest. The following reflections were shared by participants in the inaugural cohort:

"Growing trust breeds meaningful sharing of visions, resources, tools, and vocabularies and fosters a tangible sense of mutual support needed to meet big challenges."

"Individuals' creativity and motivation are refreshed by the reminders of the importance of our work, fresh intellectual inputs, and recognition of value of personal learned insights to others."

"My understanding of the world and my place in it has deepened and expanded. I have an enhanced appreciation of how our landscape conservation efforts are connected. It feels like I am now working on behalf of a much larger community, and I feel emboldened even though doubts remain about one step or another."

To me, these reflections go beyond the practical and pragmatic elements of learning and exchange to the transformational elements of reimagining the way we connect as stewards of the places we care about and depend upon. In short, they begin to represent the true value and benefit of peer learning.

On February 25, 2021, we launched a new cohort of participants in the LLPLI representing teams from the United States, Canada, Romania, and China. During our opening conversation, we invited team members to share their hopes for our time together. Among other ideas, they shared the following:

"Find and get inspired by colleagues who are working in diverse landscapes and get to know their personal stories."

"Learn about the experiences and get to know the difficulties others are facing. Learn about how others are working toward solutions."

“To be inspired about how to bring diverse perspectives – business, conservation, and society – together to find new ideas and innovations at the landscape scale.”

“To explore how local populations have maintained the cultural integrity of their landscapes – because this gives strength to a joint vision at landscape scale.”

“To learn about very diverse landscapes in very different settings and under different policy conditions, so that we can make an outsized impact in solving difficult challenges and make a big contribution to addressing the global biodiversity crisis.”

These hopes demonstrate the power and impact a more deliberate and focused approach to peer learning can have in building understanding, transferring knowledge, solving challenging issues, and transforming communities and landscapes. I see great potential in the LLPLI to demonstrate the potential of peer learning, and I hope it can serve as a model for others who see peer learning as an incredibly valuable way to address some of our most complex and urgent conservation challenges.

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