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## **Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion at New England Land Trusts: Report No. 1 of Land Conservation and Inequality Series**

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# DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION AT NEW ENGLAND LAND TRUSTS

REPORT NO. 1 OF LAND CONSERVATION & INEQUALITY SERIES



BY JULIE C. KELLER, BLAKE HARRISON, AND COREY LANG

## OVERVIEW

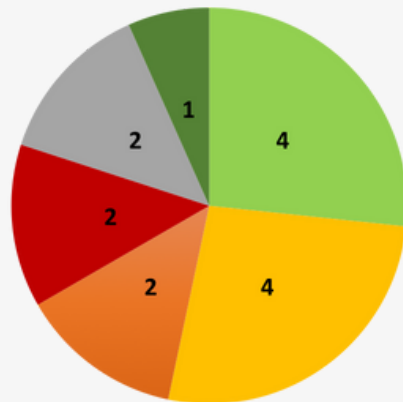
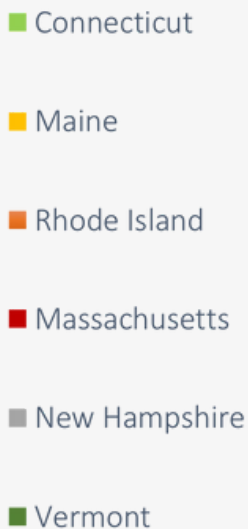
With over 1,200 organizations registered with the Land Trust Alliance (LTA 2021), land trusts are often viewed as successful models of market-based solutions to environmental and social problems. Yet, the role of these organizations in making open space and farmland accessible to groups from marginalized backgrounds remains unclear. This report (No. 1) discusses findings from interviews conducted in 2021 with key experts at 15 land trusts in New England. The goal of the research was to understand organizational engagement with diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) values, with a special emphasis on how land trusts facilitate access to land for underrepresented groups. Interviewees and organizations are referred to using pseudonyms throughout the report.

This report comes from a larger study investigating inequality and environmental justice in the context of farm and open space conservation. *Distributional Impacts of Farm and Open Space Conservation* is funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (NIFA Award No. 2018-67024-27695). Principal investigator is Corey Lang in the Department of Environmental & Natural Resource Economics at the University of Rhode Island, with co-investigator Amy Ando in the Department of Agricultural Economics at the University of Illinois-Urbana-Champaign, and co-investigator Julie C. Keller in the Department of Sociology & Anthropology at the University of Rhode Island.

## CONTEXT

Interviewing experts at land trusts in 2021 offered the opportunity to assess whether organizations had enacted DEI policies or taken steps toward action in the year after the 2020 protests for racial justice in the U.S. The continuation of the COVID-19 global pandemic also presented the opportunity to assess ongoing impacts of the pandemic on land trust operations.

### Land Trusts in Sample



## SAMPLE IN BRIEF

Data from this report come from in-depth interviews conducted in 2021 with 17 key experts at 15 New England land trusts. To identify organizations, we used the Land Trust Alliance's "Find A Land Trust" database, limiting our search criteria to land trusts in New England that conserved farmland, prioritizing those with the most acres conserved and full time staff in each state. We further limited our search to land trusts that were accredited and TerraFirma insured. This report uses pseudonyms for all interviewees and organizations. See endnotes for more detail on methods.

**Note: The findings in this report are not generalizable and thus should not be interpreted as representative of all land trusts in New England.**

Title of Interviewee	# in Sample
Executive Director	9
Director of Land Conservation	3
Board Member	1
Project Specialist	1
Senior Project Manager	1
Farm and Program Manager	1
Strategic Land Protection Director	1
<b>Total Interviewees</b>	<b>17</b>

## HOW LAND TRUSTS THINK ABOUT DIVERSITY

When asked to describe the mission statement of their organization, the most common elements across interviews were farm preservation, ecological conservation, and benefits to the community. While diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) were not included in the mission statements of land trusts, many interviewees were eager to share their thoughts on DEI issues. When asked about the role that diversity plays in their organization, interviewees' answers fit into the following themes: 1) Highlighting racial/ethnic diversity in their area; 2) Lack of racial/ethnic diversity in their geographic area; 3) Targeting economic diversity; and 4) Considering diversity beyond race and class.

### HIGHLIGHTING RACIAL AND ETHNIC DIVERSITY

Some interviewees noted the racial and ethnic diversity of their area, describing existing partnerships or possibilities for engagement. Aly (LT #7) explained: "As far as diversity, overall, we live it. We're housed in an urban area where we have several different ethnic groups, religious groups. It is a really unique area...It's like our own little cultural metropolis." Even so, Aly noted that the diversity in their geographic area is not reflected in who uses land protected by the land trust. She says, "That's something I definitely want to work on." Similarly, Tyler (LT #15) noted that recent demographic changes were prompting new possibilities for community engagement: "The 2020 census data shows that although we are still...overwhelmingly white, there's been a substantial gain for people who have checked Hispanic, like 10% gain in our rural towns, which is a challenge and an opportunity for us to get to know our neighbors better and what they're interested in."

**“**

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**- TYLER (LT #15)**

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In 5 out of 15 land trusts, interviewees described engagement with tribal groups. This ranged from informal conversations (more common) to active partnerships (less common). Rachel (LT #9) described initial steps her organization had taken, but noted that tribal members were understandably cautious about developing a partnership due to previous negative experiences. One land trust in our sample helped to launch a state-wide effort to link conservation groups with tribal communities. Catherine (LT #1) explained one goal was "to increase access opportunities for plant picking, tree harvesting, or the different ceremonial uses that they have of minerals, trees, plants."

## HOW LAND TRUSTS THINK ABOUT DIVERSITY (CONTINUED)

### FRAMING DIVERSITY IN ECONOMIC TERMS

It was more common among land trusts in our sample to note the lack of racial and ethnic diversity in their area (7 out of 15). Rachel (LT #9) noted: "The challenges in our geographic area being in the northern [New England] is that it's not a tremendously diverse population to start with. So the opportunities are maybe not as easily accessible as they are in some more urban areas or in the southern half of New England." This approach prompted some organizations to frame diversity in alternative ways. At nearly half of the land trusts in our sample (7 out of 15), experts discussed diversity in economic terms. Brandon (LT #14) explained, "We kind of recognize that in a town that is 94.6% white, the issues we face are basically class based." Similarly, Wesley, an Executive Director (LT #6), described shifting strategies after initially focusing on racial diversity: "After a couple of months of working on DEI work, we were like, this is not going anywhere fast if we're just thinking about diversity along racial lines of black versus white."

### DIVERSITY BEYOND RACE AND CLASS

Engaging people of various ages to be active in the land trust was noted across many interviews. Just 3 interviewees framed diversity in terms of age in response to the Diversity Role question. However, programming for youth was mentioned across 8 different interviews. Jayne (LT #11) reflected: "We don't have a lot of diversity of ethnicity in our membership and our community. But we are working hard in our education programming to make sure that Environmental Education is not exclusively for the wealthy or for the white...And so the idea that we're introducing younger people to care about this and not have it be elitist, have it be about sort of a sense of pride, a sense of community, like, 'This is mine, too'. This is privately protected land, but it is open to the public." A few interviewees described efforts to increase accessibility to protected land for people with disabilities. Rachel (LT #9) explained: "We're working with an adaptive sports organization who provides outdoor possibilities for people who have a lot of physical challenges."

**"WE ARE ALWAYS OPEN TO CHANGING AND FUNDING PROGRAMS THAT WILL HELP MARGINALIZED PEOPLE, NEW FARMERS, AND YOUNG FARMERS. BECAUSE IF WE DON'T GET NEW FARMERS AND YOUNG FARMERS IN FROM WHATEVER GROUP THEY COME FROM, THEN WE'RE NOT GOING TO BE THE AG STATE THAT WE HAVE BEEN BECAUSE THESE FARMERS ARE AGING OUT. PERIOD." -NANCY (LT #3)**

## TALKING VERSUS ACTION

### EXAMPLES OF ACTION:

- Signage on protected land detailing Native American culture and history, or that of other groups from historically marginalized backgrounds
- Favorable lease agreements for farmers from underrepresented groups
- Strategies to recruit land trust staff and board members from underrepresented groups

We found that while 14 out of 15 land trusts had begun having conversations about DEI work, land trusts in our study generally struggled with making an organizational plan and committing to action, resulting in only 9 out of 15 land trusts taking action thus far. Patrick, a Director of Land Conservation (LT #8), explained that, "We don't currently have a diversity policy or DIJ (*Diversity, Inclusion, and Justice*) programs specifically. It's something that we are talking about on the board and staff level. Our preserves are open to everyone for no cost." Further, some land trusts viewed working directly on DEI issues as challenging due to several factors. Lori, an Executive Director (LT #15), explained that, "I do think that one of our biggest hurdles is that we have a lot of people at different levels on the equity journey... That's one of the reasons I think we need professional help, because we couldn't acknowledge that we are in different places."

## ADDITIONAL DEI PRACTICES

The following list includes additional examples of DEI engagement and efforts we noted among the New England land trusts in our sample:

- Some land trusts benefited from a state-level land trust network that offered DEI webinars and other training opportunities to facilitate DEI strategizing.
  - In the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, one land trust donated over 20,000 pounds of vegetables grown on agricultural preserves to local food pantries.
  - Several land trusts made internships available to young people that focused on particular DEI issues related to conservation.
  - One land trust created educational programming to inform other land trusts and surrounding communities of tribal rights to the land.
  - One land trust was negotiating the purchase of land for community gardens on a bus line, with plans to develop an affordable leasing arrangement with immigrant and refugee gardeners.
  - One land trust launched a "take a rest" program, installing benches with donor support to expand access to trails for people of all abilities
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## BARRIERS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR DEI ACTION AT LAND TRUSTS

Interviewees described various barriers to action on DEI issues, most of which were related to having a small staff and limited resources. Some described disagreement in their organizations about a working definition of diversity, which thwarted DEI efforts. Others described hesitancy among board members about engaging in DEI work.

We gained additional insights on land trust engagement with DEI work by asking interviewees about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their organizations. The pandemic brought considerable challenges to the day-to-day operations of land trusts. Land trusts struggled with managing increased property usage, reimagining programming, and pivoting to a virtual platform. To overcome these obstacles, land trusts relied on both increased donor funding and government PPP loans (Paycheck Protection Program), with 9 out of 15 Land Trusts receiving PPP loans to avoid laying off employees. Yet the pandemic also offered opportunities for reflection and taking action on DEI goals. All 15 land trusts noted a sharp increase in the use of protected land for recreation. Some interviewees observed more diversity among hikers, for instance, as people were willing to travel farther to access open spaces. Tyler (LT #15) reflected, "People feel comfortable outdoors in a way that they didn't two years ago, and they want to be there, which raised other questions about how land is used, and managed by whom? Are they welcomed?" This demographic shift led some land trusts to think strategically about how to encourage further participation from new users of the land.

## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR LAND TRUSTS

Gathering insights from across interviews, this report recommends the following:

- Integrate DEI work into strategic plans to ensure that conversation turns into action. This is in line with recent DEI requirements for certain funding opportunities.
  - Develop and implement plans for diversifying land trust staff, board, and membership.
  - Apply for funding opportunities to implement DEI training for staff and board members.
  - Strengthen ties to regional conservation networks to share successful DEI strategies.
  - Given the increased diversity of people using protected land during the COVID-19 pandemic, create a plan for action to keep the momentum going.
  - Create internships that are DEI focused with deliverables that assist the organization with making progress on DEI goals.
  - Re-envision conservation goals to include protecting land for community gardens and providing food for under-sourced communities.
  - Develop strategies for linking farmers from historically marginalized backgrounds to affordable land.
  - Make an assessment plan to measure progress toward DEI goals
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## ENDNOTES & REFERENCES

1. We applied additional filters to yield a manageable number of land trusts: TerraFirma Insured, Members of the Land Trust Alliance, and Land Trust Alliance Accredited. Recruitment consisted of sending emails to key staff at selected land trusts, aiming for representation across New England. Our response rate was 31 percent. Our final sample consisted of 15 land trusts with a minimum of no full time staff (in the case of one organization) and a maximum of 46. The land trusts in our sample conserved a minimum of 730 acres to a maximum of 145,845 acres. All interviews took place virtually on Zoom between July and December 2021, and were between 24 to 64 minutes long. Data analysis consisted of automatic transcription using Otter.ai, followed by manual coding using Dedoose to identify themes in the data.
2. Land Trust Alliance, 2021. <https://www.findalandtrust.org>

## SUGGESTED RESOURCES

- Land Trust Alliance Learning Center Webinar: Having the Tough DEIJ Conversation. Instructors: Aparna Rajagopal-Durbin, Ava Holliday. Recorded 10/20/2021. <https://tlc.lta.org/topclass/topclass.do?expand-OfferingDetails-Offeringid=1579698>
- Restoring Tribal Access to Land: A Menu of Options to Reestablish Cultural Access Rights, by Ellen A. Fred, Conservation Partners. 07/16/2021: <https://www.conservationpartners.com/restoring-tribal-access-to-land-a-menu-of-options-to-reestablish-cultural-access-rights/>

### **SUGGESTED CITATION FOR THIS REPORT**

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