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Landowner Contact Do's and Don'ts

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Abstract

Within North America it is broadly acknowledged that the number and size of significant natural areas is declining dramatically. As funding for land protection and acquisition diminishes, and governments download responsibility for environmental protection onto local municipalities and non-profits, there is an increasing recognition of the need for alternative, cost efficient means of protecting our natural landscapes. One model that is seeing increasingly widespread usage is the private stewardship approach to conservation, which utilizes landowner contact as the primary conservation methodology. Landowner contact programs (LOCPs) are seeing growing use throughout Canada. These programs vary across the country, however, and utilize a variety of approaches and practices, some of which are successful and some of which are not. Through a survey of 22 LOCPs from across the country, 12 do's and don'ts for LOCPs have been identified for consideration in the development of such programs.

1.0 Introduction

Within North America, it is widely acknowledged that the size and number of our natural areas is dramatically decreasing. In the face of declining government dollars for land acquisition and protection, the downloading of responsibility for environmental protection to municipalities and the non-profit sector, and increasingly intensive land use practices, the stewardship and conservation community in Canada is seeing a growing need for new and innovative approaches for sustaining our natural landscapes.

Private stewardship offers one approach to land conservation that is not only cost-effective, but has the added attraction of educating people as to the importance of natural area protection. At the core of this strategy lays the idea of landowner contact, where landowners are contacted personally and asked to steward their land in a responsible and ecologically sensitive manner. Over the past decade and a half, conservation and stewardship organisations from across the country have experimented with a range of strategies for landowner contact, with varying degrees of success (Hilts, 2000).

The landowner contact approach to conservation centres on the idea of voluntary landowner involvement in the conservation process. While programs will vary across agencies, emphasis tends to be placed on the provision of information to landowners with regard to the ecological characteristics of their property, and education as to how the natural features of the land can be protected and/or enhanced (Hilts, 2000). Where appropriate (or where funding is available) incentives such as conservation agreement plaques or certificates, provision of native species to the landowner, or aid in small habitat restoration projects will also be utilised.

Unsurprisingly, the widespread usage of landowner contact programs throughout the country has led to considerable variation in how such programs are developed, implemented and concluded. Some of the techniques and practices that have been used have contributed to the overall success of LOCPs, while others have detracted from their ability to achieve desired results. Based on the practices of various LOCPs from across Canada, this research attempts to integrate different agency successes and failures to provide 12 'do's and don'ts' for consideration when developing and implementing a LOCP.

2.0 Methodology

In order to incorporate a diversity of experiences and contexts, the definition of landowner contact programs used within this research was extremely broad, and in many instances was defined by the responding agency. Generally speaking, however, landowner contact programs were determined to be any program that approached stewardship and conservation by dealing directly with individual landowners.

The process used for determining the top six 'do's and don'ts' was relatively simple. Using an initial list of contacts, and moving on with referrals, three questions regarding positive and negative experiences with LOCPs were posed to 22 agency representatives from British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Ontario, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island. Responses were then tallied, and the top six for each category were identified and selected. All responses were given over the telephone, and all contacted representatives responded to the survey in full.

2.0 Results

Results of the survey are presented in descending order. (-) indicates a tied response.

2.1 Top Six Do's for LOCPs

1. Try to disseminate information about your organisation and the services that it provides. Many conservation agreements come from people who call an organisation based on information that they have heard in their community. This can be accomplished through advertising, speaking with community leaders, etc.
2. Continuity and longevity. Keep your program running for as long as possible, even if it is only through a newsletter or a yearly nature walk. Recognising the commitment that people have made to conservation is important in encouraging long-term behaviour.
3. Be aware of other groups that are working in the region within which you are active, and where you fit in. Partnerships are extremely valuable in regards to the implementation of efficient stewardship activities, and local buy-in can be key to a good program. This also lets you offer a much broader range of services to a landowner than would be possible if operating alone.
4. Always use personal visits to landowners, you will achieve far more than with letters and phone calls. The interview is where the landowner can put a face to an organisation, and where an organisation is the most likely to achieve their goals. If you can include a site inventory in this visit, landowners are more likely to be interested in your services.
5. Use maps that show your target area in some detail. People enjoy seeing where their property is located in relation to an ecologically significant area, and knowing that it is important.

6. Prior to initiating landowner contact, run a workshop or nature walk of some sort in order to pique interest. You can then follow up with interested landowners.
-If using public meetings as a way of developing interest in your program, be sure to connect with community leaders, local environmental groups etc., to develop support for your cause.

2.2 Top Six Don't for LOCPs

1. Don't over extend yourself. Be sure that your organisation has a clear focus and direction.
2. Don't send immature, inexperienced, or short-term staff into the field to talk to landowners. Generally speaking, the response to them will be poor.
3. Don't emphasise the stronger conservation tools in the initial stages of contact with a landowner, it repels, rather than attracts people. Introduce the conservation process in gradual stages.
4. Don't use mass mail-outs, they are unproductive and provide poor rates of return. If you do have to use them, make sure that you target a specific area of local interest, otherwise you will likely be ignored.
5. Don't cold call people without having sent an introductory letter first.
6. Don't expend too much time, money, or effort on gathering landowner contact information and details of all the properties that are in the area of interest. Identify the most sensitive parcels and concentrate on them. Be sure to keep you financial and infrastructure constraints in mind and develop a target area that matches them.

3.0 Discussion and Conclusions

While several of the points given can be viewed in isolation from the others, certain links can be made between what initially appears to be a disparate selection. Clearly there is an emphasis on the benefits that name recognition can bring to an organisation. Among respondents, there seemed to be a general feeling that many conservation agreements come from those instances where landowners contact the agency in question, rather than the other way around. The more widely an agency is able to spread information regarding the services that they offer, the more likely they are to receive calls from interested landowners. Partnering with other agencies, as suggested, may also help in the dissemination of information, and will also increase the number and variety of services that an agency can offer to a landowner.

Face-to-face contact with a landowner is integral to any LOCP. Running workshops or nature walks, holding public meetings, showing people where their property lies in relation to an ecologically significant area, or offering to conduct site inventories, were all identified as useful means of sparking landowner interest in conservation.

An examination of 'don'ts' results, although not as obviously interconnected as are many of the 'do's', seems to suggest that agencies need to be aware of their limits and constraints prior to embarking on a LOCP. Over-extension of time and/or resources on a single aspect of a project will limit the ability of that organisation to achieve their goals. Instead, an agency is likely to be better served by identifying a target area, developing a clear goal, and tailoring their approach so as to match their capabilities.

Ultimately, however, it needs to be acknowledged that programs will vary widely depending on their goals and the contexts within which they are operating. Not all of the points brought up in this study will be uniformly relevant, and of course, there will always be unique situations to which an agency will have to respond. It is hoped, however, that this research will at least provide a useful starting place for those who are interested in beginning their own LOCP.

References

Hilts, S. (2000). *Canadian Stewardship Programs for Habitat Conservation*. Unpublished paper.

Outline of Presentation

Purpose of Survey

- To determine the top 6 do's and don'ts for landowner contact programs

Methodology

- Three question survey administered to 22 LOCP representatives in British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Ontario, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island.

Results

- Top 6 do's; create name recognition for your agency, program continuity and longevity, partnerships, personal visits, maps, workshops and nature walks, and community contacts (tie for sixth place).
- Top 6 don'ts; agency over-extension, inexperienced staff, emphasis of stronger conservation tools, mass mail-outs, cold calls, and disproportionate effort on gathering landowner contact information.

Author Biographies

Jessica Brooks

Jessica Brooks holds an honours degree in International Development and Political Science from Dalhousie University. She is currently completing the first year of a MSc in Rural Planning and Development at the University of Guelph. In the past, she has worked in Kenya researching the links between degradation of local environments and traditional healing techniques, and has been involved in the management and coordination of various local projects. She is currently working with the Centre for Land and Water Stewardship at the University of Guelph, where she developed a survey for the Leading Edge Youth Forum, identifying the barriers and challenges faced by young conservation professionals in the early stages of their careers. Her graduate research is being conducted in conjunction with the Ontario Forestry Association, and looks at the ability of various conservation tools to promote long-term environmental values in private woodlot owners.

Dr. Stewart Hilts

Dr. Hilts teaches at the University of Guelph where he is the Chair of the Dept. of Land Resource Science in the Ontario Agricultural College. He is cross-appointed to the School of Environmental Design and Rural Development, and teaches in the Faculty of Environmental Sciences. He also serves as Director of the Centre for Land and Water Stewardship. For many years he has conducted research on private stewardship programs for rural landowners spearheading the development of landowner contact programs in Canada, and contributing to the development of community-based Land Trusts.

Dr. Hilts chaired the first national conference on 'Conservation and Stewardship in Canada' in 2000, and is serving as Co-Chair of this summer's national event to be held in Victoria, B.C. July 3-6. He has worked extensively with non-government conservation groups in Ontario, and currently serves as Chair of the Ontario Land Trust Alliance. He has written numerous publications, including Islands of Green: Natural Heritage Protection in Ontario; Creative Conservation: A Handbook for Ontario Land Trusts; Caring for Your Land: A Stewardship Handbook for Landowners, and The Woodlot Management Handbook.