

2023 ACLT National Survey of Land Trusts

Executive Summary

This report presents the results of a national census survey of land trusts operating in Canada and affiliated with the Alliance of Canadian Land Trusts (ACLT), the Ontario Land Trust Alliance (OLTA), the Land Trust Alliance of British Columbia (LTABC), and le Réseau de milieux naturels protégés (RMN). The survey's main purpose was to describe the Canadian land trust community. An online questionnaire containing 44 questions addressing eight domains was distributed to affiliated land trusts in the fall of 2023. Eighty-six questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The response rate was 73% and the sample was representative in terms of regional distribution.

Key Results

Habitats Conserved

Canadian land trusts conserved a wide variety of habitats, most commonly forest (88%), wetlands (81%) and lake or river shorelines (74%). Seven in 10 land trusts conserved land that is federally or provincially designated as hosting species at risk (SAR).

Characteristics of Properties Conserved

Eighty-six percent of land trusts reported owning fee-simple properties while 67% held conservation easements (including restrictive covenants and servitudes), 35% stewarded properties for others and 10% had properties under lease or license agreement.

The number of properties stewarded by land trusts varied widely (mean=34, median=11, maximum=378, minimum=1). The majority (91%) of land trusts had 100 or fewer properties in their portfolios. Just over half (53%) of all properties held or stewarded by the 86 land trusts were fee-simple while 37% were conservation easements and 11% were stewarded using other arrangements. There were differences across the three regional alliances, with fee-simple properties more prevalent among OLTA members, conservation easements more common among LTABC members, and stewardship agreements more common among RMN members.

Nearly three quarters (72%) of land trusts conserved between 1 and 1,000 hectares in total (mean=1,940 ha, median=376 ha, maximum=25,392 ha, minimum=0.5 ha). Nationally, nearly half (47%) of the area conserved by land trusts were fee-simple properties while 43% were conservation easements. The ratios differed significantly across the three regional alliances.

Collectively, the land trusts we surveyed were involved in protecting and stewarding 2,661 properties totalling 151,287 hectares. This included 1,401 properties covering 70,450 hectares held by 69 land trusts as fee-simple properties; 977 properties over 65,556 hectares of conservation easements managed by 56 land trusts; and 283 properties across 15,282 hectares stewarded by 25 land trusts for other landowners using a different arrangement than above.

Property Management

A majority of land trusts (84%) had a land management plan completed or in progress for one or more properties and 92% inspected each property in their portfolio annually. Volunteers were stewards of fee-simple properties at 64% of land trusts, followed by staff (58%) and board members (46%).

Governance and Staff

The majority of land trusts (63%) reported a governance structure made up of a board of directors and a paid executive director. Roughly nine out of 10 land trusts reported at least one employee or consultant/contractor in fiscal year 2022, with an average of 10 employees and/or consultants/contractors (median=7).

Volunteers, Members and Outreach

Volunteers appear to be an essential resource, contributing to land trusts in a variety of ways. Eighty-eight percent of land trusts reported having volunteers in fiscal year 2022, with an average of 77 (median=20). Volunteers played an important role in land stewardship at 83% of land trusts, while also being engaged in a variety of other activities, including communications, data science, fundraising and development, administration and finance. Most land trusts (89%) reported having a membership program in place. Eighty-five percent reported one or more engagement activities focused on Indigenous Peoples.

Funding

Most land trusts (93%) reported funding from individuals. Granting foundations (84%), provincial government (70%), federal government (69%), municipal/regional governments (55%) and small businesses (45%) were also significant sources of funding. Over half (53%) reported benefitting from the federal Ecological Gift Program since 2012.

Conclusion

The results of the survey provide valuable data about the Canadian land trust community as a whole while also revealing that land trusts are diverse in terms of the number and size of properties conserved, capacity and resources. The ACLT and regional alliances can use the data to describe and promote the impacts of their members to funders and the public. The survey also offers a new method for tracking changes to the eight domains measured by the questionnaire over time. To this effect, the survey will be repeated in 2025. And finally, the survey provides the ACLT and regional alliances with direction on how they can best support their members through existing and new initiatives.

Standards and Practices

Two thirds (65%) of land trusts reported having formally adopted the Centre for Land Conservation's Canadian Land Trust Standards and Practices. Respondents were generally supportive of standards and practices for the industry but lack of capacity and funding to meet standards was cited as a concern, particularly among smaller and volunteer-led organizations.

Canadian Protected and Conserved Areas Database (CPCAD)

Less than one third (31%) of land trusts reported having submitted their full or partial inventory of conserved lands to the Canadian Protected and Conserved Areas Database (CPCAD). A significant proportion of land trusts were unsure about the CPCAD's purpose and process. Concerns about publishing with CPCAD included unwanted visitation by the public and private property owners' privacy.

Preferences for Support from Alliances

Land trusts indicated that the ACLT and regional alliances can best support them by focusing on advocating for funding programs for land trusts, helping them build their capacity and grow, and supporting them with the Canadian Land Trust Standards & Practices.