

STEPPING UP

Accredited land trusts are addressing major environmental concerns in their communities

By **LISA MCCARTHY**



↑ RiverLink partnered with Olivette Riverside Community & Farm to protect 16 acres of healthy forest, steep slope and riparian buffer near the French Broad River in northern Buncombe County, North Carolina.

Land trusts are leaders in tackling daunting, large-scale challenges such as climate change and water quality. Accreditation helps land trusts work more effectively by positioning them to be sound partners, raising their credibility in their communities and ensuring the highest standards when using conservation-based solutions.

“Maybe some land trusts think, ‘How can we offset climate change, we’re just a land trust and this is a global issue?’ At Scenic Hudson we have always felt that there were things we could do to help our region adapt to and mitigate the effects of climate change,” muses Seth McKee, executive director of The Scenic Hudson Land Trust in New York’s Hudson Valley.

Because the Hudson River is tidal, its riverfront lands are vulnerable to rising sea levels. Scenic Hudson, first accredited in 2008, began making climate change a priority in the mid-2000s. It implements adaptation strategies by identifying priority land parcels that leverage conservation land to create protective pathways and foster landscape connectivity. These connections safeguard the ability of tidal wetlands to shift to higher ground and wildlife to migrate upland and northward on safe pathways. Scenic Hudson’s strategies also include making recreational areas along the river adaptable to periodic flooding, conserving forest carbon and creating incentives

for farmers to use climate-resilient and regenerative practices.

“Accreditation has positively impacted how we are able to work on climate change issues. We strive to be credible and create models that are replicable, adaptable and sustainable over time. Being accredited holds a mirror up to us to help assure that the projects we choose are truly aligned with our priorities and strategic plan and to turn away ones that are not. Indirectly, accreditation supports the infrastructure to make these decisions,” states McKee.

Tackling Water Quality

Accreditation helps RiverLink, based in Asheville, North Carolina, address an important environmental concern in the community—water quality.

“Being an accredited land trust ensures we are holding ourselves to the highest standards of land stewardship and ultimate water quality protection, all with the goal of a thriving, healthy French Broad River watershed,” says Lisa Raleigh, executive director of RiverLink, which was first accredited in 2015.

The French Broad is one of the oldest rivers in the world, dating anywhere from 260-325 million years old, and is fed by over 4,000 miles of streams and lesser rivers. But years of industrial and agricultural pollutants, sewage contamination and sediment pollution led American writer Wilma Dykeman to describe the river as “too thick to drink, too thin to plow” in her 1955 book “The French Broad.”

Environmental education, watershed management and land conservation are all tools used by RiverLink to promote the environmental and economic vitality of the French Broad River and its watershed. A major priority is placing conservation easements on areas close to the waterways, especially in urban and semi-urban locations that are at high risk of impact from development.

“RiverLink’s conservation focus is on the land adjacent to rivers and streams. The soil and vegetation in these buffer lands are key to filtering harmful runoff from urban and suburban developments. We seek landowners willing to voluntarily protect these areas so that future generations will enjoy abundant, clean water and recreation opportunities,” explains Raleigh.

Supporting Partnerships

Landowners often want to work with RiverLink because they are viewed as a leader in river conservation, and accreditation is a major part of their credibility. McKee also credits accreditation with helping Scenic Hudson be a more effective partner. “We pride ourselves on our partnerships. The accreditation process is a helpful ‘stress test’ and ensures that our systems are up to snuff. This allows us the freedom to experiment with partnerships and new types of projects—we know our nuts and bolts are in order.”

Accreditation also plays a key role in funding partnerships. “So many donors and foundations know that we’re accredited—we always promote our accredited status as part of our commitment to the Hudson River Valley—and if we weren’t, there would be a lot of questions. There are some funders that only want to work with an accredited land trust,” says McKee.

Raleigh agrees. “Accreditation shows our commitment to the French Broad River watershed and our land program—our partners appreciate our dedication. Being accredited greatly supports our grant requests and donor appeals,” she says.

Climate change, water quality and other major environmental concerns may seem like impossible challenges, but accredited land trusts are exemplary models for taking local action to address global concerns. ☺

LISA MCCARTHY is the communications liaison for the Land Trust Accreditation Commission.

LAND TRUST ACCREDITATION COMMISSION

An independent program of the Land Trust Alliance

landtrustaccreditation.org

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Accreditation involves a rigorous evaluation that ensures applicants are operating at the highest conservation standards. It is an investment that helps strengthen your organization. Land trusts that have achieved accreditation have been verified to have demonstrated fiscal accountability, strong organizational leadership, sound transactions and lasting stewardship of the lands they conserve.

FIRST TIME ACCREDITATION AWARDED

- Downeast Salmon Federation (ME)
- Falmouth Land Trust (ME)
- GreenTrust Alliance (MD)
- Harford Land Trust (MD)
- Berkshire Natural Resources Council (MA)
- Platte Land Trust (MO)
- Pound Ridge Land Conservancy (NY)
- The Buck Hill Conservation Foundation (PA)
- Forterra NW (WA)

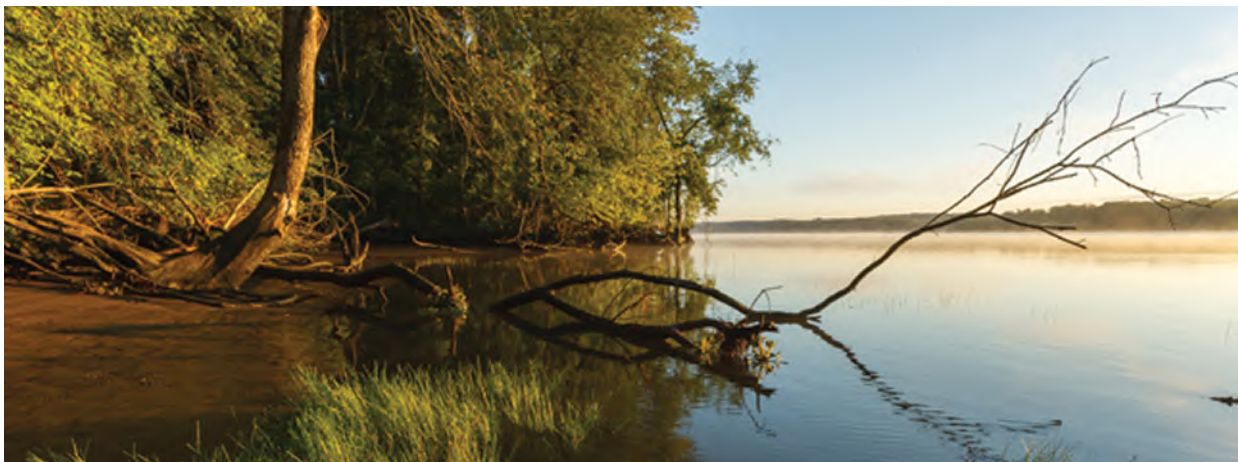
RENEWED ACCREDITATION AWARDED

- Great Land Trust (AK) ♦
- Mojave Desert Land Trust (CA)
- Transition Habitat Conservancy (CA)
- Salisbury Association (CT)
- Tampa Bay Conservancy (FL)
- Loon Echo Land Trust (ME)
- Vinalhaven Land Trust (ME) ♦
- Prickly Pear Land Trust (MT) ♦
- The Trust for Public Land (national)

- Lakes Region Conservation Trust (NH)
- Piscataquog Land Conservancy (NH)
- Great Swamp Watershed Association (NJ)
- Taos Land Trust (NM) ♦
- Columbia Land Conservancy (NY) ♦
- Genesee Valley Conservancy (NY) ♦
- Winnakee Land Trust (NY) ♦
- Woodstock Land Conservancy (NY)
- Chestnut Hill Conservancy (PA) ♦
- Delaware Highlands Conservancy (PA) ♦
- Hollow Oak Land Trust (PA)
- Kiawah Island Natural Habitat Conservancy (SC)
- Pee Dee Land Trust (SC) ♦
- Houston Audubon (TX)
- Summit Land Conservancy (UT) ♦
- North Olympic Land Trust (WA) ♦
- Driftless Area Land Conservancy (WI)
- Northeast Wisconsin Land Trust (WI)

List as of February 2023

♦ Denotes second renewal



Stream in
New Baltimore,
New York.