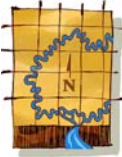


**Overview from a Small Organization (CCCSA):  
Participation through Partnerships?**



**Jack Sherman, Chair  
Crooked Creek Conservancy  
Society of Athabasca (CCCSA)**

**Backdrop**

The County of Athabasca is within the southern boreal forest ecoregion.

Land clearing— expanding cultivated acres— continues to be a part of agriculture.

- poplar trees long considered “weed” species

While travelling north from Edmonton to Athabasca on Highway 2 you might not realize that you are within the boreal. By some accounts it is said the boreal transition begins near Legal. Farm fields now cover the landscape. With the exception of the rugged Tawatinaw Valley, open country now extends nearly to the town of Athabasca. Thirty years ago, the unprofitability of farming with the high cost of tree disposal discouraged the practice of land clearing. More recently, in the last 20 years, demand for forest products has renewed interest in taking out the bush.

Industrial forestry (Alberta Pacific Forest Industries start-up 1991) created a demand for aspen/balsam poplar from private sources

- “bush” now becomes timber stands of commercial value
- accessibility of timber, not site conditions, determines logging feasibility
- logging contractors go door-to-door
- British Columbia sawmills come looking for softwood sawlogs— furthering demands
- timber thefts reported on both public and private land

1. Now instant cash becomes the motivation for landowners to liquidate their trees.
2. Now anything goes. There are no government rules or standards regarding logging on private land.
3. The gold rush begins..

## CCCSA Beginnings

CCCSA founders, concerned about rapid industrial development brought on by uncontrolled logging and its effect, began meeting in 1995

- We were informed individuals with constructive views on planning and environmental issues presenting submissions at hearings, etc.

little influence here

We often find, at the municipal level, both councillors and developers are personally offended when issues of policy or proposals are questioned at public hearings.

Founding of CCCSA (1996) coincided with

- the Environmental Law Centre discussions regarding conservation easement possibilities for Alberta (January 1996).

CCCSA took part in subsequent meetings / seminars on easements and ecogifts.

CCCSA founders sought ways to

- encourage individuals in becoming more active in support of the natural environment
- raise public awareness and concern for loss of forest cover, wetland, and riparian habitat
- provide advice and mutual self-help among individual landowners in protecting their property's natural values from future abuse

1. Examples: Giving donations towards the purchase of ecologically sensitive lands or giving of personal time for the maintenance of already protected areas, etc.

2. While nothing could be done to affect operations on public land (green zone), members felt that private landowners (mostly within the white zone) could protect significant wildlife habitat.

CCCSA became

- a registered charity (1998) able to issue charitable receipts for donations
- a qualified recipient agency under Ecogifts program (2000)

## CCCSA Public Involvement

### Taskforce participants

- Conservation Easement Legislation
- Environmental Law Centre Farmland Tax Assessment consultation
- Canadian Environmental Network Committee on Federal Environmental Policy

### Presentations to Government Initiatives

- Municipal land-use plan and development hearings
- Special Places nomination
- Canada's Endangered Species Act
- Alberta Private Member's Bill-Endangered Species and Habitats
- MLA Farm Property Assessment Review Committee
- Senate Subcommittee on Canada's Boreal Forest

### Sponsors / co-sponsors public meetings

- Critters and Creeks Riparian Protection
- Estate Gift Planning
- Conservation Easements
- Wildlife Habitat Conservation
- Impacts of Oil Sands Development
- Athabasca River Basin Conference

1. This was a takeoff of Cows and Fish, a collaboration with ACA and local Fish and Wildlife personnel.

## Educational and research activities

- Audubon Christmas bird counts, Alberta spring bird counts, and spring flowering-plant counts
- Alberta Breeding Bird Atlas data collection
- regional mammal, bird, butterfly, and dragonfly pamphlets
- biophysical report of boreal forest study area
- flora and fauna interpretive walks
- maintain several public gardens and Bissell Park Nature Reserve in Athabasca

Our activities are varied and reflect the broad interests of the various members.

## Other activities

- sponsor Karvonen Nature Film Festivals for schools and general public
- co-sponsor production of documentary film, *Circumpolar Bears*
- nominate Big Bend Wildland Provincial Park
- co-founder of Keepers of the Athabasca

## **CCCSA as a Self-Help Organization**

- members become informed by attending environmental and conservancy workshops, meetings, and conferences
- landowner members have achieved personal success in obtaining easements through shared information and experience of the easement process.

## Conservation achievements

- four members have created easements
- two members are in the easement creation process
- two members acquired an easement property for conservation and donation
- two members purchase of property(s) for conservation purposes—  
132 acres, lake recreational
- one member donation of conservation property to CCCSA — Bissell Park Nature Reserve —  
3 acre riverfront, downtown Athabasca

Yet throughout our activities, CCCSA has not become an easement holder. We have debated at length this issue of taking on holder responsibilities but we remain uncommitted largely due to our limitations as a small volunteer land trust.

## Limitations of CCCSA--a small volunteer land trust

The volunteer organization relies on the abilities and self-motivation of its members

- individual members are self-directed, can choose to contribute or not
- hierarchy is non-existent as tasks cannot effectively be directed onto others
  1. the author of an idea most often assumes that work to completion
- group interaction is based on friendships among equals rather than division of labour

Difficulties in attracting new members when needed

- individuals with specific skills or profession, or youth, are hard to recruit as volunteers
- small communities and low population base— inadequate source of volunteers and financial supporters

1. Example: skills in creating or maintaining web sites, professional advice of lawyer, and particularly youth are essential.
2. Low population base: the County of Athabasca has a population of approximately 9,000 spread over a large area
3. Source of funding: Athabasca has no large contributor to our cause.

### CCCSA membership

- hasn't grown significantly since its founding
- many supporters avoid personal involvement if
  1. work, time, and responsibility are expected of them
  2. effort seems unrewarding
  3. activity is considered controversial

The future of a volunteer organization is solely dependent upon its volunteers

- CCCSA's active membership median age is 70 years
- other members of CCCSA have become inactive due to illness
- younger CCCSA members (30-50 years old) remain, at present, inactive

Under present conditions, the small volunteer land trust organization cannot be expected to endure.

### **By comparison,**

a non-volunteer organization has financial ability to fulfil its role and obligations.

The non-volunteer organization's administration can

- hire staff as required
  1. trained, motivated (career minded), accountable (can be fired), and rewarded through pay and job advancement opportunities
  2. replacement job-entry workers assure continuity
  3. personnel viewed as "neutral" by the community
- afford office space
  1. offers greater productivity and efficiency
  2. offers more public presence and sense of permanence in the community

## How Secure is the future of conservation easements?

The situation from a volunteer organization perspective is problematic.

- Recipient organizations must have both financial resources and paid employees to undertake the responsibility as easement holders in the long term.
- In conservation circles much has been said about the useful role easements can play and how potential donors might acquire an easement on their land.
- Yet little attention has been given to the hereafter when the donor is no longer in possession of the property.

What could happen then?

- Will recipient organizations be able to handle their responsibilities long into the future?
- How secure is the future for conservation easements?

Large, established organizations appear to be self-reliant and perhaps more positive about the future for private conservancy.

CCCSA has deliberated at length over this issue but remains essentially an environmental organization in lieu of taking on a more active role in private conservancy.

The future of private land conservancy depends on public support.

- The Alberta government has not promoted private conservancy as part of a wider effort to protect the environment nor has it shown the advantages of easements for the public good.
- Little progress has been made in the 12 years since easement legislation to ensure that donations of land and easements will last in perpetuity.

1. As it has done, for example, in promoting its Fire Smart program.

Without public and government awareness and concern for maintaining protected areas, Alberta's ongoing growth and development can only mean the burden of responsibility in carrying out the terms of the easement lies solely with the respective easement holders.

Such a responsibility is beyond the capacity of a volunteer land trust organization.

Leadership is required by the Province to ensure conditions are favourable for the survivability of easements, conservation lands, and donor confidence in the private conservancy movement.

### **What the Province Can Do**

The Province must provide leadership and commitment in promoting land conservancy

- by establishing an endowment fund with sufficient interest income flowing to qualified land trust organizations.

Dollars committed reflect the level of government commitment.

The Province must provide leadership, at the municipal government level, by

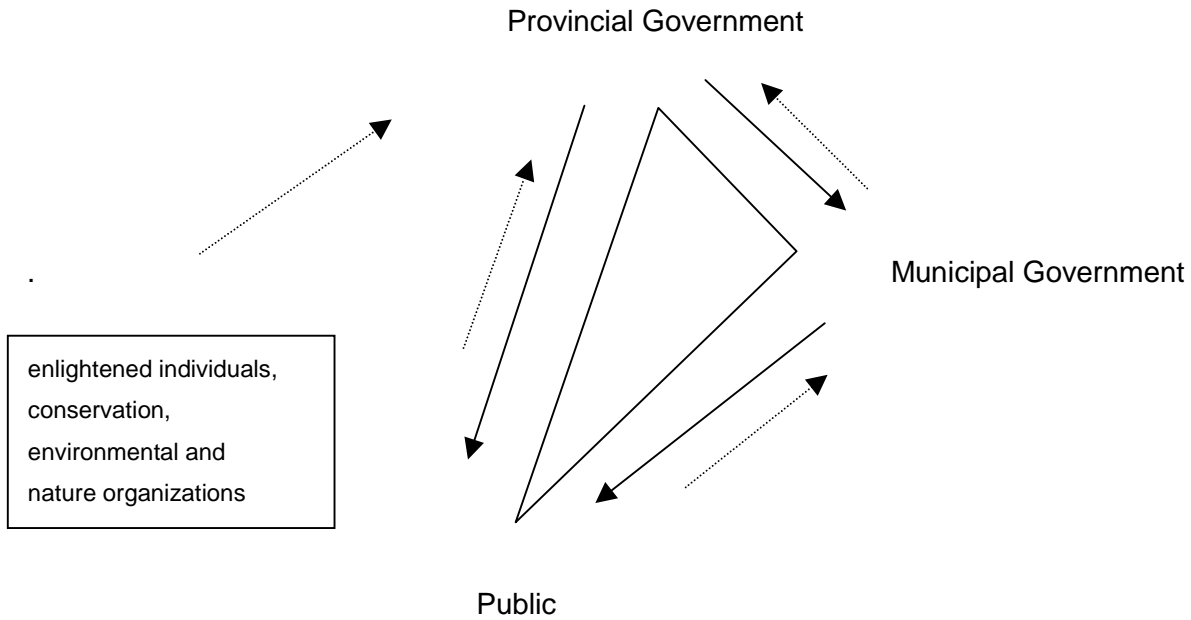
- establishing a conservation advisory team within Municipal Affairs to assist municipalities with a conservation approach regarding land planning / land use issues
- showing municipalities what they can do in their role as qualified conservation easement holders
- working with municipalities to promote public acceptance of private land conservancy objectives

If easements are not seen as being in the public interest, easements could be seen as “shutting down Alberta” in preventing future growth and development.

- creating property tax discounts on conservation easement properties (with penalty provisions) at no net loss to municipalities
  1. tax benefits would act as both incentive and deterrent to prevent abuse by property owners who happen to own property having easements
  2. reduce easement violations and incidences requiring enforcement

**Influence Starts at the Top**

the uphill battle working from the bottom up to influence or shape popular opinion



- Power and influence      policies, laws, guidelines
- ⋯ Feedback      opinion and values (based on beliefs)
  - expressed by public when called upon at hearings, taskforce, etc,
  - expressed by municipalities through their municipalities associations or through government representative(s)

Events geared toward the public will have minimum effect  
ALTA efforts could be more effectively spent advising government on conservation issues

The challenge is to convince government that it must change its way of doing things.

Only the Alberta Government can create a more caring land ethic by example to dispel old beliefs and attitudes such as

1. "I can do what I want with my land so long as it's legal."
2. "What harm is there in doing something that is accepted or legal?"
3. "Development is the way to achieve the land's highest and best use."
4. "Monetary value is the measure of its worth."

1. considered a landowner's right
2. Attitudes of self-interest such as clear cut logging to the property boundary, or watering livestock in creeks, can help destroy neighbouring properties.
3. Growth is good-- a municipal belief unquestionably held because it "increases the tax base."
4. If the open market is willing to pay the price, then that's what it's worth. Conversely, if you're not making money off it, it's not worth anything.

### **Participation through Partnerships?**

A small volunteer organization such as CCCSA can only hope to participate successfully in the land trust movement in Alberta when it has the full partnership, commitment, and support of the Provincial Government and the general public.

### **Summary**

1. Lack of adequate human and financial resources can prevent volunteer organizations from taking on responsibilities as easement holders.
2. Dangers originating beyond the property boundary are as likely to affect the conservation property as those which might occur within the property.
3. For conservation easements to endure, public and government acceptance and support is necessary.

2. Dangers include physical as well as public disapproval or apathy.