



Land Conservation and Rural Stakeholders

Project Report-in-Brief

April 2006

Background

The vast majority of lands in the United States are open or working lands, such as farmland, forests, pasture and range lands. Over the last 30 years, urban sprawl, population increases, and economic development have resulted in land fragmentation and significant social changes in rural communities. Nationally, between 1997 and 2001, the average rate of crop, forest, and range land lost to development was 2.2 million acres per year. In many regions, ranches and farms are being replaced by residential areas. In others, large parcels of land are subdivided into smaller landholdings or "hobby farms." The lands lost are often highly productive, yet they are almost never returned to agricultural use. To support these smaller landholdings, infrastructure such as roads, water & sewage systems, etc. must be built or expanded. The loss of open and working lands leads to habitat degradation and a decline in natural and agricultural biodiversity.

Land fragmentation is not just a problem for ecosystems. It is also about rural communities and local heritage, with social as well as ecological consequences. Rural quality of life and land conservation are closely connected. Land conservationists know that they need to understand the views of rural communities to achieve their goals. Some land conservation programs are trying to account for this connection and are designed to save both land and farmers or ranchers by offering tax relief or monetary compensation to landowners in order to conserve open space.

Research Solutions

Weaving rural quality of life into land conservation is difficult because of the diversity of land conservation programs, the different types of land in need of conservation, and the increasingly complex array of rural stakeholders involved (farmers, ranchers, timber industry, commuters, retirees, etc.). Conservationists face the challenge of how to understand and integrate diverse groups of rural stakeholders with different cultural beliefs and values resulting from different economic situations, histories, and relationships to the land. Conservationists need information on the cultural beliefs and values that stakeholders use to understand land conservation.

The Department of Anthropology at the University of Maryland has been engaged in research on the cultural dynamics of natural resource use in the Chesapeake Bay region for many years. In August of 2005, the Department teamed up with the Houston Advanced Research Center (HARC), the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries Sciences at Texas A&M University, and the Maryland Center for Agro-Ecology, Inc. to identify stakeholders' cultural knowledge about land conservation in the **Land Conservation and Rural Stakeholders Research Project**.

Project-in-Brief



With support from the National Research Initiative of the Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service, USDA, the Land Conservation and Rural Stakeholders Research Project will last approximately two years and will be completed in July of 2007. The research is designed with theory and methods from cognitive and environmental anthropology. The project's goal is to identify and share cultural

knowledge about a range of land conservation programs, in a variety of landscape settings, in two regions: Maryland's Eastern Shore and the Big Thicket region of East Texas. The first phase of the project is designed to gather qualitative data through interviews, the second aims to collect quantitative data with a survey, and the last research phase consists of in-depth analysis. Each phase

serves as reinforcement for the others and confirms the validity of project findings along the way. The final phase is to disseminate the results of the research widely through conferences, workshops and a range of publications to a broad audience, including farmers, conservationists, proponents of working landscapes, and rural stakeholders. Stay tuned!



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Current Activities

Since August of 2005, the project team has been busy conducting informal interviews, identifying stakeholder groups, establishing data management protocols, and developing an organizational plan for the sampling, collection, and analysis of qualitative data.

On the Horizon

Over the next several months, members of the project team will be conducting interviews in selected counties of the two study areas with approximately 40-50 key informants in each location that represent a wide range of rural stakeholders, including local implementers of land conservation programs, county and community leaders, farmers, ranchers, development proponents, and rural residents. The key informant interviews will provide in-depth information about a wide range of topics, such as land conservation, development, rural livelihoods, rural heritage, nature, and community. The upcoming interviews will be digitally recorded, transcribed, and then coded for salient themes. Identified themes will be applied to the construction of the survey during the second phase of the project. The qualitative data collected during interviews will begin to provide project team members with insight into rural stakeholders' cultural knowledge about land conservation.

