

Crossing boundaries to promote stewardship through international partnerships and exchange

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Introduction

As protected areas managers worldwide face new and increasingly complex challenges, there is a growing need to learn from the experience of counterparts working in other regions of the world. Focused exchanges and partnerships, built on the principle of mutual learning, can make an important contribution to fostering innovative conservation strategies, building effective partnerships and coalitions, and strengthening the capacity of participating institutions.

This paper reports on the work of Quebec-Labrador Foundation/Atlantic Center for the Environment (QLF) over the last two decades in conducting a multi-faceted international exchange program focusing on *land conservation and stewardship*. The program works with conservation practitioners and community leaders to develop new strategies for conservation of natural and cultural heritage. Working in partnership with local institutions, the program links the organization's domestic region of northeastern North America with four target regions: Central Europe, Latin America, the Caribbean and, most recently, the Middle East.

Background

QLF is a private, non-profit organization whose mission is to support the rural communities and environment of eastern Canada and New England (USA), and to create models for stewardship of natural resources and cultural heritage that can be applied worldwide. Established in 1963, the organization has decades of experience working in rural communities. In the early 1980s, QLF established an international program as a means of linking its community-based conservation projects with those in other regions of the world.

Building on this experience, and responding to the growing interest in stewardship expressed by its partners and past exchange participants, in 1993 QLF launched a multi-faceted international exchange program focusing on the theme of land conservation and stewardship. The broad goal of the program is to advance land conservation and stewardship in QLF's domestic and four target regions.

"Stewardship" means, simply, people taking care of places. More specifically, it can be defined as "efforts to create, nurture, and enable responsibility in landowners and resource users to manage and protect land and its natural and cultural heritage." Stewardship taps our basic human impulse to care for our home and its surroundings—be it a parcel of land, a neighborhood, or a historic monument, or the larger area of a watershed, mountain range, or stretch of coastline. It builds on our sense of obligation to other people: our family, our community, and future generations.

The stewardship approach provides a means of reaching beyond the boundaries of conventional protected areas. The stewardship concept draws on an array of tools to conserve natural and cultural values. These tools include education, voluntary management agreements, the use of deed restrictions (e.g., conservation easements and covenants), public-private partnerships in protected areas management, and

outright acquisition of property by private organizations (Mitchell and Brown 1998; Diehl and Barrett 1998; Endicott 1993).

QLF's international program on land conservation and stewardship relies on an array of methods for training, technical assistance, research, and exchange, which are designed to reinforce each other. These include: an annual fellowship program in northeastern North America, on-site workshops on stewardship topics, retreat meetings for fellowship alumni, partnership assignments with alumni, community problem-solving workshops, and study tours for local leaders. Each of these projects is founded on the principle of true exchange—one in which learning can take place on both sides.

Since the program's inception, several hundred conservation and community development practitioners from these regions have participated in fellowships, workshops, and peer exchanges. QLF's growing cadre of alumni includes protected areas managers as well as leaders of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), local and regional government agencies, and community organizations.

The program has evolved differently in each region, responding to the particular conditions affecting stewardship and the needs identified by our partners, and also reflecting geographic factors. Although distinct, QLF's projects in each target region build on each other through the gathering of information about common challenges and strategies. QLF's program in Central Europe, described briefly below, illustrates how the diverse program methods have worked together, and the value of international partnerships during a time of dramatic change in that region.

A joint program to promote landscape stewardship in Central Europe

In Central Europe, the sweeping political changes of the early 1990s set in motion a number of forces that are shaping the region's landscapes. These include: re-privatization of land; a rapid increase in development pressure for housing, transportation, and tourism; changes in agricultural patterns; accession into the European Union; and the devolution of power from central governments to local and regional governments (Brown and Mitchell 1997).

Protected area managers in the region face many new challenges including changes in land ownership patterns within protected areas, new public attitudes toward planning controls, and increasing public scrutiny of management measures. At the same time, new opportunities for the region's protected areas systems include the creation of new protected areas as part of the land redistribution process, the upgrading of designations, improved management through NGO-government partnerships and bilateral cooperation, and the emergence of private land conservation.

Now in its tenth year, QLF's program in Central Europe encompasses an array of training, technical assistance, professional exchange, and community-based planning projects. Its geographic focus is the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia, with occasional participation from other countries in the region, including Ukraine, Romania, and Slovenia.

QLF's principal partner in developing the program has been the Environmental Partnership for Central Europe Consortium (EPCE), which is operating in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia. In addition, QLF has worked with local-partner NGOs on projects such as landscape stewardship exchanges and other workshops. QLF's program in Central Europe has received support from private foundations, including the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, the German Marshall Fund of the United States, and the Trust for Mutual Understanding, and from public agencies, such as the U.S. Information Agency. A more detailed description of the joint program described here can be found in (Beckmann et al. 2000).

A core element of the program has been a fellowship on land conservation and stewardship, which has been offered annually for one or more target regions since 1993. Each fellowship brings 5-8 conservation practitioners from one of the target regions to the New England region of the USA, for an intensive month-long program

incorporating seminars, a study tour, individual placements with host organizations, and a group case-study project. The program can be characterized as a group learning process in which the Fellows learn from each other as well as from the North American counterparts with whom they meet and work. Since 1993, QLF has conducted five Central European fellowships, reaching 37 practitioners from the region.

To help this growing cadre of Fellows to build and maintain a network after they return home, QLF and EPCE have convened four alumni retreat workshops in Central Europe. In addition, they have held three “Tools for Stewardship” workshops in the Czech Republic and Poland, which have reached an expanded group of practitioners, local leaders, landowners, and resource users. Further reinforcing the fellowships and workshops has been a series of technical assistance assignments in areas related to land stewardship, such as recent assignments with emerging land trusts in the Czech Republic.

Another key element of the program is the landscape stewardship exchange, a week-long community problem-solving exercise. Through the exchange, an international team spends a week in a rural community or micro-region to learn about and advise on a problem identified by people in the community. The model relies on a combination of community organizing at the local level and the outside perspective provided by the international team to stimulate public participation and a dialogue among diverse stakeholders.

To date, QLF and local partners have conducted seven exchanges in Central Europe in sites in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Poland. Typically, these exchanges have been held in communities in or near protected areas and have addressed themes related to rural development and landscape conservation. All but one of the exchanges have been held in border regions and have included a focus on trans-boundary cooperation. Sites and focus topics have included:

- Palava Protected Landscape Area, Czech Republic (1994): Enlargement of the Palava Biosphere Reserve;
- White Carpathian Mountains, Czech Republic and Slovakia (1995): Revitalization of rural communities in the Bile/Biele Karpaty Protected Landscape Area;
- Kvacany Valley, Slovakia (1995): Alternatives to large-scale development for recreation near the High Tatra National Park;
- Jizera Mountains/Frydlant, Czech Republic (1997): Balancing tourism and recreation with nature conservation in a fragile mountainous landscape;
- Morava River Floodplains, Czech Republic and Slovakia (1999): Development options to reduce flood risks in the lower Morava River basin, a tributary of the Danube;
- Zawoja/Babia Góra National Park, Poland (1999): Building cooperation between Babia Góra National Park and surrounding communities in Poland and Slovakia; and
- Czech Karst Protected Landscape Area, Czech Republic (2000): Sustainable development and growth management in the Czech Karst Protected Landscape Area.

Newer elements of the program have included a series of workshops and traveling seminars for local leaders (e.g., mayors, rural development professionals, protected area managers, and conservationists) from rural communities where the landscape stewardship exchanges have taken place.

Discussion

The accomplishments of fellowship alumni after they return home, follow-up activities in landscape stewardship exchange host areas, and examples of ongoing cooperation through contacts made during the program are among the indicators of its impact. Based on the observations and reports gathered to date, examples of how QLF's international Program on Land Conservation and Stewardship is contributing to advancing stewardship in its target regions include:

- **Strengthening the capacity of local institutions and contributing to leadership development.** In each of the target regions, past Fellows are playing leadership roles with NGOs and public agencies concerned with conservation, including park agencies, and National Trusts.
- **Supporting a transfer of innovations among conservation professionals from these regions.** One important area has been the transfer of tools for private land conservation, which program participants have adapted to the context of their home countries. In another kind of example, Czech and Slovak alumni have adapted for use in their countries a technique called "community visioning"—a methodology developed in northern New England.
- **Helping to create new legal and institutional mechanisms for encouraging stewardship practices in diverse settings.** Returning home with new ideas, many of our past Fellows are influencing the legal and institutional context for conservation to meet the needs and realities of their conditions—for example, introducing new legislation for private reserves, establishing a national fund for land conservation, and building coalitions to address problems.
- **Encouraging citizen participation in environmental problem-solving.** International problem-solving exercises and case-study projects have proven to be a powerful vehicle for bringing together diverse stakeholders in a productive and ongoing dialogue about their community's future.
- **Fostering dialogue and cooperation among concerned individuals and institutions.** An important contribution of the exchange programs is in the area of citizen diplomacy, both within and between regions. By bringing together people from diverse geographic and ethnic backgrounds to work together on areas of shared interest, these programs have helped to foster mutual understanding. More broadly, the fellowships, workshops, and exchanges have spawned regional networks and inter-regional cooperation among peers working on similar problems in diverse settings around the world.

Two decades of experience with international exchange programs has revealed a number of strategies that work well. These include: building strong partnerships with cooperating organizations, making a long-term commitment to working in a given region, developing a thematic focus, linking projects activities so that they build on and reinforce each other, and remaining adaptive over time. Also important to the program's effectiveness have been an emphasis on process rather than the technical aspects of solving conservation problems, and a reliance on cross-sectoral, interdisciplinary approaches.

Conclusion

Since it was launched in 1993, QLF's international exchange program on land conservation and stewardship, which links five different target regions, has reached several hundred practitioners. The program has demonstrated the value of international exchange and partnerships in fostering a productive exchange among practitioners and contributing to improved stewardship practice on all sides. More opportunities to exchange ideas and learn from the successes and failures of national and international counterparts are needed to strengthen this growing movement.

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