CULTURAL GEOGRAPHY AND LAND TRUSTS IN COLORADO AND UTAH

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ABSTRACT. The 889 local and regional land trusts in the United States conserve 2.7 million acres. However, the distribution of these groups is strikingly uneven from state to state. Colorado, historically a domain of secular commerce, has twenty-seven trusts protecting 42,000 acres; Utah, whose Mormon millennialism and social beliefs greatly hinder land-trust establishment, has only one trust protecting 220 acres. Although economic, political, and legal factors explain the uneven distribution of trusts in other settings, the underlying cultural geography of places must be comprehended before efforts are made to conserve them.

A MERICANS concerned with environmental conservation have become deeply frustrated by the failure of governmental landuse-planning programs to protect cherished places from urbanization. Citizens are increasingly establishing private, nonprofit conservation organizations known as land trusts to protect their homelands from incompatible forms of development (Emory 1985; Wright 1992). Land-trust members employ the "politics of the possible" to conserve the best of what remains of local landscapes rather than opposing all growth and change.

This article briefly describes the origin, diffusion, and methods of land trusts in the United States, and then examines land-trust activities in adjoining but culturally dissimilar Colorado and Utah. The origins of cultural attitudes regarding the highest and best use of land are analyzed to explain the disparity in the number of land trusts and their success in these two distinct states. The broad implications of these findings are discussed.

LAND TRUSTS

Local and regional land trusts use the same voluntary, negotiated, compensating techniques as do national organizations such as The Nature Conservancy, the Trust for Public Land, and the American Farmland Trust. Private-sector landscape-protection techniques include conservation easements, or tax-deductible gifts of development rights, purchase of development rights, land trades, cluster development designs, and direct purchases (Brenneman 1967; Hoose 1980; Montana Land Reliance and Land Trust Exchange 1982; Diehl and Barrett 1988; American Farmland Trust 1990; Daniels 1991). Land trusts receive tax-exempt status from the U.S. Internal Revenue Service and operate as charitable entities. This legal standing allows the value of gifts of land and conservation easements to be claimed by the grantor as deductions against income taxes, estate taxes, and capital-gains taxes (Small 1989). Land trusts purchase properties only as their budgets allow.

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The 889 local and regional land trusts in the United States have used these techniques to protect more than 2.7 million acres of private land from subdivision and development (Land Trust Alliance 1991; Barton 1992). Trusts hold conservation easement on 450,000 acres and own 440,000 acres. Another 1.8 million acres have been either acquired and transferred to other groups or secured by restrictive covenants. Land trusts are concerned with a great diversity of landscape elements, but about 70 percent of trusts focus on wildlife habitats, scenic open space, recreational areas, and agricultural land. Membership exceeds 775,000, an increase of 300,000 since 1984 (Land Trust Alliance 1991; Barton 1992). Despite the fiscal and technical rigors of establishing and operating land-conservation programs, trusts continue to grow in number (Brenneman and Bates 1984; Wright 1992).

**History and Diffusion of Land Trusts**

Approximately one-half of the land trusts in the United States have incorporated in the last decade, and new groups are forming at the rate of more than one a week. However, the land-trust concept has existed for more than a century. Land trusts began in Boston in 1891 with the formation of the Trustees of Public Reservations. By 1950, New England still contained most of the 53 trusts in the United States; fifteen years later, however, there were more than 126 groups in 26 states, mostly in the Northeast and Middle Atlantic regions. The first Earth Day, in 1970, further raised environmental awareness. Land trusts subsequently diffused widely; by 1975 they totaled 308 (Abbott 1982). In 1981 a national organization, the Land Trust Alliance (then known as the Land Trust Exchange), was formed to attend to the interest of trusts. The alliance greatly increased communication among groups, served as a catalyst for innovations in techniques, improved the training of members, and facilitated creation of new trusts (Montana Land Reliance and Land Trust Exchange 1982; Brenneman and Bates 1984; Diehl and Barrett 1988; Stokes, Watson, and others 1989).

Since 1981 the number of land trusts has nearly tripled, and the geographic coverage of their projects has greatly expanded. The 889 established local and regional land trusts operate in forty-eight states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands (Fig. 1). New England is home to 373 trusts, or 42 percent of the total. Massachusetts, with 117 trusts, and Connecticut, with 114, lead the way. Maine has more than 60 groups. The Middle Atlantic states, with 151 trusts, the Far West, with 116 (71 of them in California), and the Great Lakes states, with 98, are other regions in which the land-trust concept thrives. Far fewer trusts exist in the South, with 70 trusts, the Rocky Mountain states, with 43, the Plains states, with 24, and the Southwest, with 14.

The overall success of land trusts masks some important underlying facts. First, a typical land trust operates under severe financial constraints. Some 54 percent have annual budgets of less than $10,000, and 73 percent have
Hawaii has two land trusts, and Alaska has one land trust. All-volunteer or part-time staffs. Thus many trusts can claim little acreage conserved: 41 percent of trusts have protected fewer than one hundred acres each, and another 37 percent have secured fewer than one thousand acres. Only thirty-six trusts have conserved more than ten thousand acres each; however, the total for these thirty-six groups is more than 2.2 million acres protected, or 82 percent of the United States land-trust total (Land Trust Alliance 1991).

Although acres conserved is a crude way to calibrate the success of trusts, acreage tallies provide at least a general measure of accomplishment. Among the more successful trusts in acres protected are the Society for the Protection of New Hampshire’s Forests, which has conserved 895,000 acres; the Save the Redwoods League, with 263,000 acres; the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy, with 140,000 acres; the Montana Land Reliance, with 100,000 acres; the Virginia Outdoors Foundation, with 60,000 acres; the Maine Coast Heritage Trust, with 50,000 acres; and the Maryland Environmental Trust, with 31,000 acres (Land Trust Alliance 1991). Most trusts have not fared as well. Connecticut’s Greenwich Land Trust, in existence for a quarter century, has protected only 300 acres. In Texas, the Dallas Nature Center has conserved a mere 386 acres, despite an annual operating budget of more than $100,000 for the last twelve years. Only 100 acres of prime farmland in the Central Valley of California have been spared from development by five local land trusts established to protect this nationally significant resource. The three land trusts in Georgia have conserved only 144 acres; the three groups in Indiana have saved a scant 136 acres. Land trusts have yet to protect a single
acre in Hawaii, North Dakota, Kansas, and Arizona, and no land trusts exist in Oklahoma and Arkansas.

Geographically, the diffusion and acceptance of trusts have been strikingly uneven. Although differences in budgets and staff training often explain disparities in the success of trusts operating within a state, the same factors do not fully account for the irregular distribution of trusts from state to state (Land Trust Alliance 1991). Few specific studies directly investigate how cultural geography influences the diffusion of these organizations (Wright forthcoming). The balance of this article examines that issue by comparing the distribution and success of land trusts in two adjacent Rocky Mountain states: Colorado, which has more land trusts than any other state between the Mississippi River and the Sierra Nevada, and Utah, which has only one trust.

LAND TRUSTS IN COLORADO

As of February 1993, the twenty-seven land trusts in Colorado had conserved 42,588 acres of private land in the Front Range urban corridor, around ski-resort communities, and in remote mountain settings. In addition, the open-space acquisition programs of several cities and counties, which function much like land trusts, had protected more than 75,000 acres from development.

The Front Range is the setting of diverse landscape-conservation efforts. The open-space programs of the city and county of Boulder have existed for more than twenty years. In both systems, land and conservation-easement acquisitions are fully integrated in comprehensive plans (Boulder County 1986; Porter 1987). Although the population of Boulder County grew from 130,000 in 1970 to 225,000 in 1990, tremendous expanses of undeveloped ranchland and foothills still exist. The young, recreation-oriented citizens of the city of Boulder have strongly supported the more than $60 million in tax levies needed to fund open-space acquisition efforts (Mantell, Harper, and Propst 1990; Crain 1992). A 34,000-acre greenbelt now surrounds the city and serves as a haven for mountain bikers, runners, and naturalists (Miller and Wright 1991).

In 1981, a statewide land trust, Colorado Open Lands (COL), assisted the city of Boulder during complex negotiations with the Flatiron Gravel Company over the reclamation of pits along Boulder Creek. After two years of negotiation, Flatiron donated the reclaimed $12-million property to COL, an action that brought the company a substantial income tax deduction (Walker 1992). COL then sold the 81 acres to the city for $375,000, to cover project expenses.

Boulder County's open-space program has conserved 16,000 acres of buffer zones between communities, along river and creek habitats, and within mountain watersheds (Holmgren 1992). The 2,556-acre Walker Ranch is the largest mountain park in the county open-space network. The ranch, listed
on the National Register of Historic Places, contains mule deer, black bears, wild turkeys, and coyotes, and provides winter range for an elk herd within a short drive from downtown. Boulder is also the headquarters of three other groups engaged in land-protection projects: the newly formed Boulder County Land Trust; the Boulder County Nature Association, which has protected 200 acres; and The Nature Conservancy, which has secured 75,000 acres statewide.

Jefferson County and the city of Golden lie south of Boulder, on the outskirts of Denver. Rapid suburbanization and a 318 percent population increase between 1950 and 1970 served as the impetus for creating the Jefferson County Nature Association and a county open-space board (Whitney 1983). Today, the county has protected more than 22,000 acres of ecologically and scenically important land by direct purchase and conservation easements (Wodell 1993). The land trust has served in a support role. About 5,000 acres of the county system consist of remnants of the old ranching landscape, with the rest in mountain reserves. The Clear Creek Land Conservancy, also based in Golden, has used conservation easements to protect 490 acres of key watershed terrain (Land Trust Alliance 1991).

Also south of Boulder, in Clear Creek County, COL fashioned one of the more creative conservation projects in the western United States. By the early 1980s, the 3,200-acre Evans Ranch stood as the largest and most biologically significant undeveloped property left along the Front Range. The heirs found the ranch ringed by suburbanization and themselves burdened by debt. COL quickly negotiated a one-year option to buy the $4.5-million property. Then, the Stewards of the Valley plan was devised. This plan split the ranch into five 640-acre units; each tract contained a carefully located 35-acre building area, with the rest to remain perpetually in open space secured by conservation easements. The five units sold for a total of $7.5 million. COL exercised the $4.5-million purchase option, the heirs were freed from debt, and the land trust received $3 million to use on other projects (Walker 1992). Statewide, this land trust has conserved more than 30,000 acres using similar creative means (Land Trust Alliance 1991).

Elsewhere along the Front Range, an enlarging contingent of land trusts is engaged in landscape conservation (Swartz 1987; Land Trust Alliance 1991; Miller and Wright 1991). The Estes Valley Land Trust, which protects 750 acres, focuses on areas in the eastern portal of Rocky Mountain National Park. In Fort Collins, the Poudre River Trust works cooperatively with land-use planners to protect and enhance riverine and foothill recreation resources (City of Fort Collins 1988). Denver Urban Gardens is creating beautiful, food-producing “pocket parks” in the inner city. The South Suburban Park Foundation focuses on conserving and enhancing open-space recreational features along the southern boundary of Denver.

Farther south, the Douglas County Land Conservancy, with 181 acres protected, attempts to counter the trend toward conversion of ranches to
planned residential communities, such as the 26,000-acre Mission Viejo. In 1985, COL successfully negotiated the donation of the nearby 4,000-acre Pine Cliff Ranch (Denver Post 1985). In Colorado Springs, the Palmer Foundation has used conservation easements to protect more than 2,000 acres in the Pikes Peak region. In Pueblo, the Southern Colorado Heritage Conservancy is striving to save historic sites and structures such as the barn of Charles Goodnight, pictograph and petroglyph areas, stagecoach stations, and outcrops containing dinosaur tracks.

The land-trust approach has a more uneven record in Colorado west of the Front Range (Land Trust Alliance 1991). The Yampa Valley Land Conservancy in northwestern Colorado has yet to gain much traction with the Yampa River recreational corridor. The Eagle County Land Conservancy has protected only 60 acres of big-game habitat near the skiing mecca of Vail. The Southwest Land Alliance has conserved 2,000 acres of ranchland at the base of the San Juan Mountains near Pagosa Springs, but in recent years its activities have been hampered by funding problems. At Grand Junction, the Mesa County Land Conservancy has enjoyed better success, including a 4,000-acre conservation easement on the Big Creek Ranch and 400 acres of easements on peach and apple orchards (Wright 1982). In Aspen, despite a wealthy, recreation-oriented populace and sophisticated landuse regulations, the ranching landscape is rapidly being converted to recreational homesites (Pitkin County 1987). Extremely high land values and the transience of the local population have caused substantial problems for the three land trusts there (Aspen Times 1989). The Aspen Valley Land Trust, founded in 1966, has protected only 700 acres; the Aspen Center for Environmental Studies has secured only 475 acres of wetlands; and the Roaring Fork Land Conservancy has yet to tally any acreage.

LAND TRUSTS IN UTAH

Utah has one landscape-conservation group, the Summit Land Trust, located in the heavily non-Mormon Park City. The mission of this group is to preserve lands of significant scenic, agricultural, historical, or ecological importance. The trust has completed a twenty-six-mile-long recreational trail on an abandoned railroad right-of-way between Park City and Coalville (Fisher 1992). In late 1992, the group accepted its first conservation easement, on 220 acres of ranchland.

Only two local governments in Utah have land-conservation programs. Salt Lake City owns 17,000 acres in Wasatch Range watersheds. However, most of this land was acquired during the 1800s to ensure urban water supplies. The city is now trying to acquire more land from the U.S. Forest Service and private landowners as part of the City Creek Park project, next to Temple Square in downtown Salt Lake City (Wright forthcoming). Park City has negotiated the retention of 190 acres of open space as part of a planned unit development.
National organizations are active in the state. The Nature Conservancy safeguards 40,000 acres of mostly desert reserves (Livermore 1992). The Trust for Public Land protects a 500-acre parcel near the Alta and Snowbird ski resorts. The Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation has established wildlife reserves in the northern Wasatch Mountains and in the Book Cliffs region south of the Uinta Mountains. No other land trust or local-government landscape-conservation efforts exist in Utah.

DISCUSSION

Colorado and Utah present a striking contrast in land-trust activity, despite their similarities in economic base, ethnicity, and growth rates (Wahlquist 1981; Wiley and Gottlieb 1982; Erickson and Smith 1985; Nash 1985; Nash and Etulain 1989). Both states are characterized by sprawling corridors of "instant cities," intense land-development pressure, rapid gains in their dominantly Anglo-American, urban populations, widespread industrialization led by energy, aerospace, defense, and mining corporations, massive transbasin water-transfer systems, and renowned ski areas, national parks, and scenery. The same basic real estate and conservation-easement laws, federal tax codes, and land-trust administrative guidelines apply in both cases (Barrett and Livermore 1983). Access to training and technical assistance in forming and operating land trusts is equally available to residents of each state through national organizations such as the Land Trust Alliance, the Trust for Public Land, and the American Farmland Trust. The widespread distribution of trusts in Colorado and their near-absence in Utah are best explained by analyzing differences between the two states in cultural attitudes about the role of human beings in changing the face of the earth and by examining the historical origins of these beliefs.

Colorado is a region of entrepreneurial growth, born of economic booms and built on images of eternally expanding prosperity in a beautiful mountain setting. The first gold strikes along the Front Range occurred in 1859; only a year later Denver was incorporated as the hub of the "Kansas Gold Fields." More growth came with the plating of planned agricultural colonies such as Greeley and Longmont (Brown 1948, 444-461). Although Colorado was bypassed by the first transcontinental railroad, linking lines soon invigorated Denver as a regional entrepôt drawing the business of high-country mining towns, tourists visiting "America's Switzerland," and farmers and ranchers settling the Great Plains. Between 1870 and 1890, the population of Denver exploded from 4,759 to 106,713, which made it the fastest-growing city in the United States for that period (Wiley and Gottlieb 1982, 121).

The instant city of Denver, which claimed a massive commerce-shed and established itself as a powerful center of mercantile culture (Barth 1988), set the pattern for the next one hundred years (Wyckoff 1987). The period since has largely been an exercise in filling the grid, as the economic and demographic dominance of the Front Range urban corridor expanded. The region's
long-standing tradition of industrialization and real estate brokerage remains unbroken. Moreover, in Colorado, interests in land have always been exchanged free of a shared religious or secular belief in a correct way of using the landscape. As environmental consciousness has grown in the state, the businesslike approach of land trusts has been widely accepted as a new, responsible way of conducting commerce.

The economic engine that first industrialized Colorado now empowers an expanding conservation sector. Land-trust personnel enter the real estate marketplace and attempt to create landscape-conservation deals. The uneven success of trusts results from the youth of most groups and from the fact that development often brings greater financial rewards to landowners than does conservation. Even so, there are no insurmountable ideological barriers to communication; land is perceived as a tradable commodity by both developers and conservationists.

Utah has fundamentally different origins. The state is the heart of the Mormon culture region, and its landscape evolved from several unique circumstances, involving the actions of a cohesive refugee population, “unified under charismatic leadership, hardened by persecution, selected by the harsh experiences of expulsion and migration, sustained by the continuous addition of new converts, and powered by a strong faith in themselves as God’s elected people” (Meinig 1972, 164). However, although the settlement process was accomplished under the formal direction of the church hierarchy, it was the by-product of two very different visions. Church founder Joseph Smith’s plat for the City of Zion laid the foundation for a pastoral valley landscape of utopian four-square farming villages (Meinig 1965), consistent with his belief that his followers were to be stewards of the earth obligated to a divine landlord (Nelson 1953; Stegner 1970). After Smith’s murder on the westward trek, Brigham Young assumed control of the actual process of settling a harsh, arid land. In the view of some, Young was less an ecclesiastical visionary than a real estate and resource-development genius (Arrington 1985).

In Utah, the conflicting plans of Smith and Young have both been expressed on the landscape. The early years of settlement were strongly influenced by the Smith model, and the vernacular Mormon landscape spread throughout the valleys of Utah (Meinig 1965; Kay and Brown 1985). However, in Salt Lake City and the Wasatch Front, Young’s urban image of Zion emerged (Arrington 1958). Young hoped to usher in the Millennium by creating a limitless, eternal city for God and to pursue this mission free from heretical, growth-limiting doubt (Arrington, Fox, and May 1976; Flores 1983). This principle still fundamentally guides life in Utah.

Today, 85 percent of the residents of Utah live in urban centers, and less than 2 percent of the gross state product comes from agriculture (Matheson 1986). The leading employers in the state are the copper and steel industries, the aerospace giant Morton-Thiokol, the Defense Department, governmental agencies, manufacturing plants, and retailers. The Mormon Church is the
third-leading individual employer. As Utah grows more industrialized, the subdivision and development of the rural landscape proceed essentially uncontradicted (Utah County 1990). In fact, the primary stated purpose of Utah's land-subdivision law is to "assure the protection of both urban and non-urban development" (Utah code annotated 1992), with no mention of open-space conservation.

As in Colorado, growth has long been the prime directive in Utah. However, in the latter, development is also seen as a way to prove that the people are living righteously (Jackson 1978). Belief in the inherent ethical goodness of large families and in unlimited economic expansion and a millennial mandate to build a radiant city for God have combined to produce the most challenging setting for conservationists in the American West. In Utah, to speak of limits is tantamount to apostasy.

Although Utah society has modernized since the days of Young, the pronouncements of the prophet and the tenets of Mormon religious instruction still carry extraordinary spiritual and secular power. Nearly 80 percent of the 1.7 million residents in Utah are Mormon, with even higher percentages in rural areas (Church of Jesus Christ 1991). Long-term residents of the state, both Mormon and non-Mormon, acknowledge that nothing of importance happens in Utah without the explicit or implicit approval of the Church. Furthermore, the urbanized Wasatch Front has ultimately proved a more dominant representation of the Mormon landscape than the few remaining rural farming valleys that now exist as artifacts of spatial Americana. Since the settlement era, the people of Utah have generally perceived growth and the development of open space not as a problem but instead as the by-product of a successful way of life. Therefore, Utah residents today find little reason to form or support land trusts. Conceivably land trusts might succeed in Utah, but they would need to be tailored to fit a unique set of cultural contours. A regional land trust might be formed that stressed the historical and faith-promoting value of protecting the traditional Mormon landscape in areas such as Sanpete County and the trace of the Mormon trail (Peterson and Bennion 1987; Kimball 1988).

**Concluding Remarks**

Cultural values rooted in the settlement period largely explain the current disparity in the number and achievements of land trusts in Colorado and Utah. A case could be made that the religion-based environmental perception so dominant in Utah would not carry tremendous weight in more heterogeneous states. Likewise, the explanation for the number of trusts in Colorado may not be helpful to persons trying to analyze patterns in other business-oriented states that lack spectacular natural environments and intense growth pressures.

Both critiques are well founded. Differences in historically based cultural beliefs do not explain land-trust distributions in all cases. Numerous other
factors are also important. Economic conditions often determine the fund-raising opportunities of land trusts and the willingness of landowners to consider conservation options. A relatively transient populace may harbor low concern for conservation or provide a source of new ideas about environmental protection. Racial composition can influence land-tenure patterns and the goals of landowners. Secular political attitudes, unattached to theological values, always strongly influence how the message of conservationists is received. In some states, legal barriers may prevent widespread use of conservation easements, so vital to land-trust efforts. Any of these factors may work individually or in combination to assist or impede the spread of land trusts. Nonetheless, as this study illustrates, modernity is not always a powerful solvent of fundamental cultural identities.

The rise in the number and activities of land trusts is a significant trend in landscape transformation and the maintenance of environmental quality. Local and regional land trusts have conserved some 2.7 million acres in the United States and are now being widely discussed as a mechanism for saving key portions of ecologically sound landscapes. However, the uneven diffusion and success of these groups suggest that, before they can assume a more widespread and meaningful role, far greater attention must be paid to the various factors that influence their acceptance by the public. The contrasting examples of Utah and Colorado highlight the need to comprehend the underlying cultural geography of places before trying to conserve them.

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