

How is open land chosen?

Why this land? How did you choose this area for conservation?

In the local land conservation business, these are questions that are often asked. How, out of every parcel of land in Eagle County, does the Eagle Valley Land Trust select certain parcels for conservation and not others?

There are two paths by which a conservation project can come to our attention. The first path is being in the right place at the right time. A landowner approaches the land trust with an area of land they are interested in protecting forever with a conservation easement, and an assessment is made about the conservation values that exist on that land. "Conservation values" are not some esoteric, indefinable term. They have specific legal meaning and definitions as delineated by the IRS. These federally recognized conservation values fall into four categories:

- Recreation.
- Habitat.
- Open space.
- Historic preservation.

The Land Trust evaluates any project a landowner brings to us using these four criteria. If a potential project is lacking in these conservation values or it is too small to make a meaningful impact, then we decline the project. If we find significant conservation values do exist and determine they are compelling to protect and preserve for our community, we will begin working with the landowner to conserve their land forever.

But what if we could evaluate and understand the existence of conservation values on a parcel of land before we ever visit the land or before we are contacted by a landowner? What if we could proactively identify and objectively rank all local land based on the four recognized conservation values? How can we determine the most important local lands for permanent conservation? This brings us to the second path.

CONSERVATION POTENTIAL PROGRAM

At Eagle Valley Land Trust, we have developed a robust evaluation tool called the Conservation Potential Program. This geo-database of conservation values turns disparate projects into a comprehensive strategic vision for the natural environment in our community. Using a wealth of data regarding each of the four recognized conservation values, we can identify where important concentrations of these

conservation values exist in Eagle County. But this data, by its nature, does not relate to property boundary lines. As anyone who

has had the heart-pounding experience of finding a black bear in their backyard knows, nature does not care about the arbitrary lines we draw on maps to indicate land ownership.

So the Land Trust's Conservation Potential Program fills the gap by taking raw conservation value data and relating it to the privately owned land parcels in Eagle County using Geographic Information Systems (GIS) software. For example, there are 88

wildlife data sets available from Colorado Parks and Wildlife tracking 20 different species in Eagle County. Using GIS software, we can identify what habitats and species are present on each and every parcel of privately owned land in Eagle County. With a little more work we can then rank land parcels from the highest wildlife presence to the lowest. We can then take a similar approach to the other conservation values to provide a comprehensive, objective analysis of the lands most important for conservation in our community.

The end result is a list of all land parcels in Eagle County with the various conservation values associated to each parcel. Eagle Valley Land Trust can then take this list and reach out to those folks who own the lands most important for permanent conservation protections. This allows us to tell landowners about financial incentives and potential state and federal tax benefits. Conversely, we can use the results of our program to make initial determinations of the conservation values when landowners approach us about conserving their land.

Eagle Valley Land Trust's Conservation Potential Program does not replace site visits or any other due diligence necessary for our community conservation projects. It is another tool at our disposal that allows us to be more effective in our efforts to save local land. In the past, we worried that an important conservation project was possibly being missed. But now, we can rest easy knowing that lands with high conservation values are being identified by the Conservation Potential Program and are not falling through the cracks.



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