

Summary Report

Using Behavioural Science to Understand Barriers to Land Conservation in Canada

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Using behavioural science to understand barriers to land conservation in Canada: summary report.

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Key Insights

- Land Trusts and Conservancies are constrained by a lack of staff and financial capacity, limiting their ability to expand their conservation networks and effectively manage their lands.
- Canadians have an interest in supporting these organizations financially.
- The Ecological Gifts Program (EGP) operates efficiently and effectively, but Land Trusts and Conservancies struggle to find donors.
- Analysis of past donors has revealed 3 primary types of Canadians who are most likely to donate to the EGP, which LTCs can use to tailor outreach.
- In addition to Protected Areas, Other Effective Area-Based Conservation Measures (OECMs) need to be better promoted and understood across Canada to meet conservation targets.
- Clear and open communication about OECMs will overcome confusion surrounding them and provide stakeholders with the foundational knowledge needed to identify OECMs across Canada.

Background

Canada is committed to protecting and conserving 30% of its lands and oceans by 2030¹. One way the Government of Canada is helping to achieve this goal is through the Ecological Gifts Program (EGP). The EGP provides people and organizations who own ecologically sensitive land (i.e., contribute significantly to the conservation of Canada's biodiversity) an avenue to donate their lands to eligible recipients, or restrict what can be done on their land (e.g., no destruction or development), and to receive tax benefits for doing so. Most often, the recipients of EGP donations are environmental charities called Land Trusts and Conservancies, who manage and protect the lands within their networks.

Importantly, there are two primary types of land conservation that count towards the 2030 goal: (1) Protected areas (PAs), and (2) Other Effective area-based Conservation Measures (OECMs). The primary objective of a PA (e.g., a National Park) is conservation, while an OECM is primarily managed for another purpose (e.g., woodlot, pasture) but still achieves conservation and biodiversity outcomes. For example, low-impact forestry operations, fisheries, and grazing land for cattle all achieve environmental goals, despite ongoing human activities. OECMs are a more novel conservation tool than PAs, and their recognition has become a global priority in the fight against climate change because they help to capture carbon and maintain biodiversity. Canada has not been able to protect as many OECMs as desired because of low awareness and issues with ensuring that the lands that could qualify are protected long-term.

Together, the EGP and OECMs will play a critical role in helping Canada reach its conservation targets. Through a partnership with Impact Canada's Program of Applied Research on Climate Action (PARCA) and Environment and Climate Change Canada's (ECCC) Canadian Wildlife Service (CWS), we are leveraging behavioural science to understand ways of increasing the amount of land donated through the EGP and increasing the amount of land that is registered as an OECM.

¹ Learn more about Canada's strategy for halting and reversing nature loss: <https://www.canada.ca/en/services/environment/wild-life-plants-species/biodiversity/2030-biodiversity-strategy-canada.html>.

Methodology

To better understand the challenges with OECM adoption in Canada, the research team used a mixed-methods approach which consisted of two main research activities that were completed simultaneously. First, they conducted 14 semi-structured interviews with teams of stakeholders from provincial and federal levels of government in the Summer of 2022, such as the Land Use Regional Planning branch of the Alberta Government and the Prairie Division of CWS. In addition, interviews were conducted with several non-government organizations (NGOs; e.g., Forest Stewardship Council, Nature Conservancy of Canada). Each interview had 12 questions and took approximately one hour to complete. The questions related to participants' familiarity with Canada's conservation goals, their knowledge and experience with OECMs (including the barriers faced), the usefulness of current supports, confusion about what lands should qualify, and incentives for participation. Two independent notetakers summarized responses to each question, and these summaries were then analyzed to determine which barriers were the most notable and persistent across stakeholders.

Second, the research team developed a survey for Land Trusts and Conservancies (LTCs) to gain a better understanding of organizational barriers, experiences with the EGP, and general knowledge about OECMs. These organizations are the primary recipients of Ecological Gifts and thus have valuable insight into the barriers and drivers of land donations in Canada. The online survey took respondents about 15 minutes to complete and was divided into three sections: Organizational information, OECM questions, and EGP questions. The survey fielded during Fall 2022 and was sent to 157 LTCs across Canada. Using a staggered approach to distribution, organizations in the Prairies received the survey first, followed by Atlantic Canada, British Columbia, Ontario, and Quebec. Each region had two weeks to complete the survey and recipients were sent a reminder email 48 hours before the deadline. In total, 97 LTCs completed the survey, with representation from across Canada.

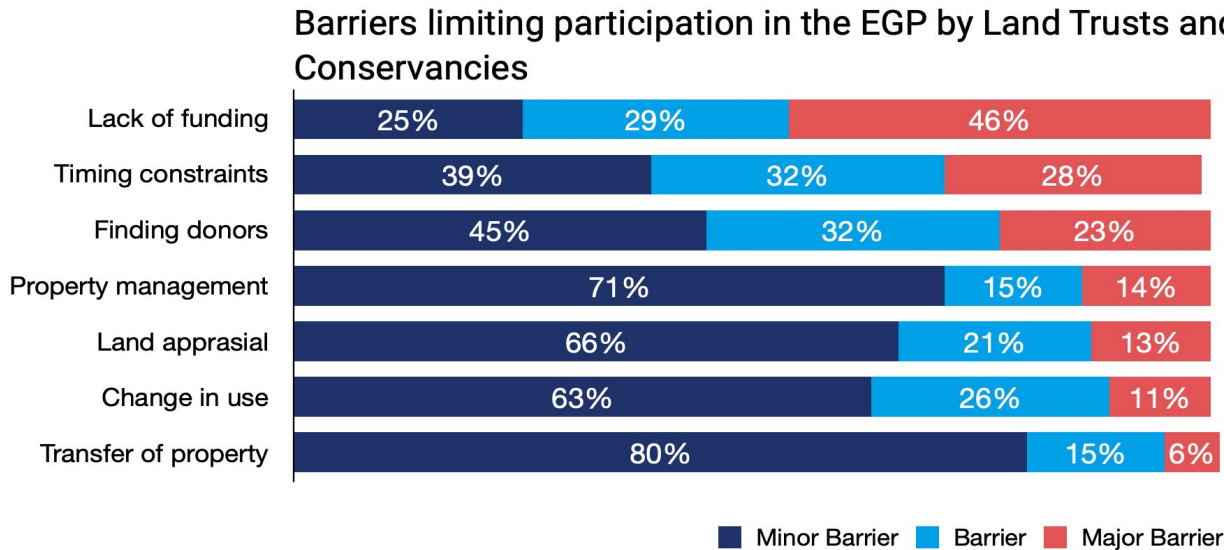
Given the complementary nature of these two methodological approaches, findings from the stakeholder interviews and survey are presented here together. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize survey results.

Findings

A lack of capacity among LTCs hinders their ability to expand and manage their lands effectively

LTCs manage a diverse set of landscapes (e.g., forests, grasslands, marshes), and their conservation networks differ greatly in size (i.e., a few hectares to thousands). Despite these variabilities, 95% of surveyed LTCs report having good relationships with each other and with other stakeholders (e.g., 79% report an excellent or good relationship with the federal government). Unfortunately, however, most LTCs are constrained by a lack of staff and financial capacity, limiting their ability to expand their conservation networks and effectively manage their lands. For instance, more than half of LTCs (53%) report having twenty or fewer volunteers, and over three quarters (76%) report having five or fewer paid staff. Only a quarter believe they have sufficient funding (24%) and staff (26%) to manage their current workloads. Importantly, these staff and funding challenges persist despite the location and size of LTCs (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. The percentage of Land Trusts and Conservancies who selected major, average, or minor barrier across different considerations and actions when deciding to participate in the Ecological Gifts Program.



The EGP is an effective government program, but many LTCs struggle to find donors

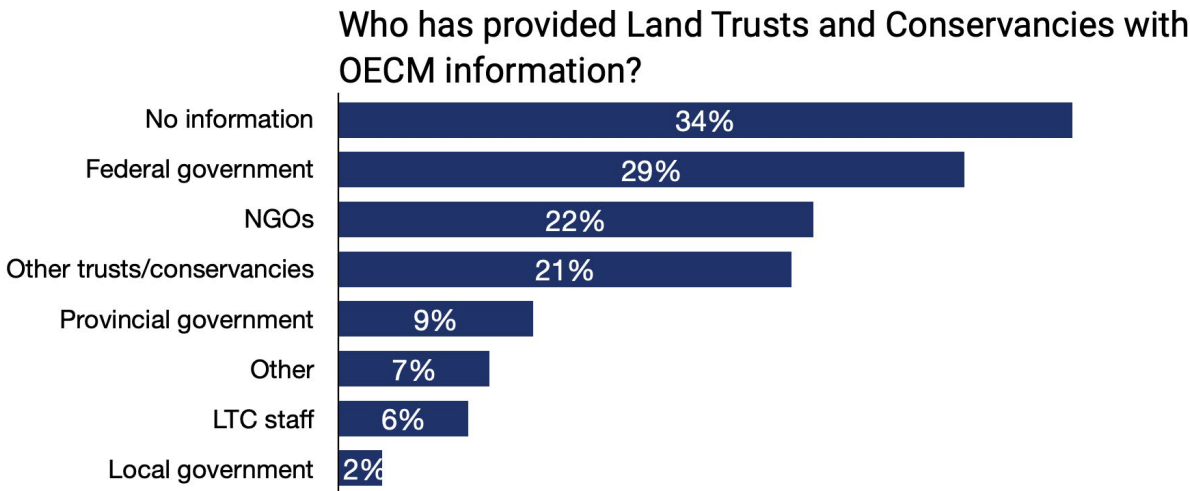
Overall, LTCs report positive experiences with the EGP. Many LTCs (72%) feel confident in managing the EGP process from start to finish, and they report that most (75%) of their submitted EGP applications are successful. In addition, many LTCs (76%) feel confident in communicating the benefits of the EGP to potential donors, and they find that the current EGP resources (e.g., handbook, website, workshops, etc.) are helpful. However, some barriers noted by these LTCs were awareness and knowledge of the program (e.g., 40% of LTCs report relevant landowners are unaware of the EGP), the length of time it takes to complete an application, and disagreements with land appraisers on the fair market valuation of the land being donated (see Figure 1). Further, while they believe donors can see the benefits of the EGP, LTCs indicated that finding donors is more of a challenge than is the application process. Finally, many Ecological Gifts could count towards Canada’s 2030 conservation goal, yet they are not included in Canada’s Protected and Conserved Areas Database. The good news is that more than half of LTCs would be interested in having their Ecological Gifts included in this database, but would need government help with the land screening process.

OECMs are a conservation tool that is poorly understood by LTCs

The survey revealed critical issues with OECM awareness and knowledge across Canada. OECMs are not well understood by LTCs, with only about a third (36%) of them saying that they have a clear understanding of the distinction between a PA and an OECM. A similar share (34%) report that they have received no information about OECMs from any source (see Figure 2). Notably, the Federal Government is the most common source of information, with 29% of LTCs reporting that they have received information about OECMs from this source. More than half (54%) of the LTCs were not aware of, or using, the [supporting guidelines](#) that were developed to make the land screening process easier. These findings are consistent with our initial stakeholder interviews with provincial governments and NGOs in Canada, which found a lack of participation, awareness, and understanding of OECMs among stake-

holders. Barriers to adoption that were frequently identified by participants include a lack of experience with the process of registering OECMs, confusion and misinformation about the inclusion criteria for OECMs (e.g., allowable activities on the land after registration), and a lack of incentives for participation. While some provincial governments and NGOs have a better understanding of OECMs than others, most stakeholders report operating independently from one another. Overall, these results suggest that OECM work in Canada is fragmented and advancing slowly.

Figure 2. The percentage of Land Trusts and Conservancies (LTCs) who have received information about OECMs across different information sources.



Discussion

At time of publication, approximately 14% of Canada’s lands and oceans are currently protected, and the EGP is an important contributor to the success of the government’s “30% by 2030” goal. The LTCs that participated in this research generally report positive experiences with the program, and feel confident in managing the land donation process from start to finish. Nevertheless, there are several opportunities to improve components of the EGP to help increase the amount of protected land two-fold by 2030. First, LTCs believe the process can take too long and there are sometimes disagreements over the value of land. These timing and communication barriers can be improved by developing behavioural science-informed strategies to help LTCs plan more effectively, and by simplifying messaging while proactively addressing concerns about the land appraisal process. For example, the EGP and Impact Canada co-developed a communication product for land appraisers that was shared with them at EGP workshops in Ontario. This document increased operational transparency² by explaining the purpose of the land appraisal process, normalized receiving feedback on appraisal applications with supporting statistics, and helped “chunk” the process into clear steps to improve planning for organizations. The product was very well received by appraisers who attended these workshops and will hopefully result in a more efficient appraisal process in the future.

² Operational transparency refers to the open communication of “behind-the-scenes” work that an organization undertakes through its operating processes (Buell and Norton, 2011)

Second, another challenge is helping EGP recipients find donors to expand their conservation networks. Although the number of donors is limited to those who own qualifying land, there are opportunities to improve awareness of the program, and to identify key attributes of past donors to better reach and more effectively engage potential new donors. For instance, the research team partnered with an analytics firm to develop donor profiles of Canadians who have, historically, been most likely to participate in the EGP. This resulted in the identification of 4 primary segments of EGP donors, differentiated by demographics, behaviours, and values. This information has been organized into a communication guide for the EGP which can be used to tailor outreach and communication efforts in the future.

Third, and perhaps most critically, financial resources are an important constraint for LTCs. These organizations need the financial capacity to acquire lands through the EGP once potential donors have been identified and recruited, and to hire necessary staff as their conservation networks expand. Otherwise, it will become increasingly difficult for them to manage their lands effectively and ensure that their lands are protected in the long term. One way to improve capacity is through greater public support and recognition of LTCs in Canada. In a recent survey of Canadians, PARCA asked individuals if they were aware of LTCs, and about their interest in donating to charities whose primary purpose is conservation. Interestingly, 71% of Canadians report having no or limited knowledge of LTCs, but 53% somewhat or strongly agree that a donation to one would be very appealing when these organizations were defined. Thus, there is an opportunity to promote these organizations and the work that they do, and to provide the public with actionable steps they can take to improve the capacity of LTCs (i.e., donating or volunteering).

Across Canada, there is low awareness of OECMs, and key stakeholders are missing the foundational knowledge needed for them to contribute to the success of OECM recognition in Canada. This is evident from the above survey of LTCs and stakeholder interviews, which asked about experiences with OECMs among a variety of federal, provincial, and private sector actors. This lack of knowledge makes it difficult for LTCs to promote the concept to others, who may lack sufficient familiarity with the concept and related processes. While conservation organizations and provincial government officials express interest in learning more about OECMs, some view the major barriers to identifying and formally recognizing OECMs as structural (e.g., political, legislative challenges). Nonetheless, behavioural science can help accelerate the recognition of OECMs by conducting research to identify key incentives for participation; bridging knowledge, awareness, and other gaps among stakeholders; and improving communication and clarity across partners and other stakeholders about why OECMs are important, how they contribute to Canada's conservation goals, how they are recognized, and what the implications are of this recognition for the future management of those lands.

Further Information

To learn more or connect about Impact Canada activities, please contact us at iiu-iii@pco-bcp.gc.ca

Related Resources

- Overview of the Ecological Gifts Program: <https://www.canada.ca/en/environment-climate-change/services/environmental-funding/ecological-gifts-program.html>
- How Canada is protecting and conserving our natural habitats: <https://www.conservation-2020canada.ca/>
- The Alliance of Canadian Land Trusts: <https://aclt-acoc.ca/>