



# Canaan Valley Institute

WORKING FOR THE SUSTAINABILITY OF THE MID-ATLANTIC HIGHLANDS SINCE 1995

FACTSHEET

Facts About:

## Prioritizing Sites for Conservation

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Canaan Valley Institute supports stakeholder-led conservation and land use planning efforts by providing assistance in community outreach, landscape assessment, and decision-support tools. One such tool is “spatial multi-criteria analysis,” which allows stakeholders to integrate spatial data with conservation goals and community preferences in order to prioritize among land use options at the parcel level. By combining this tool with skilled facilitation, CVI can help stakeholders develop targeted resource protection strategies.

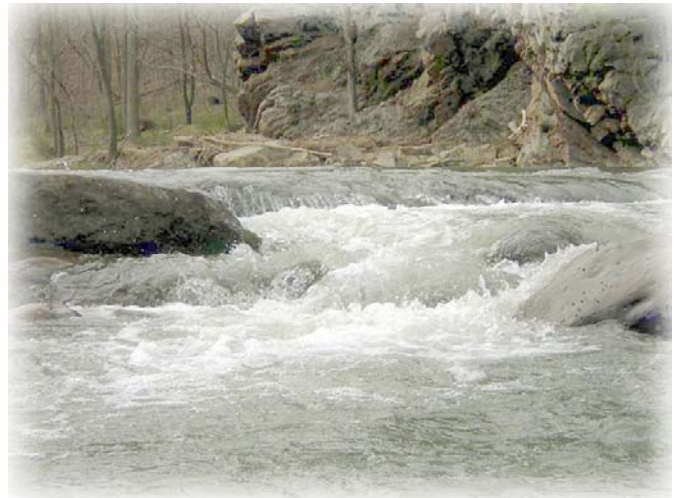
Land use prioritization is particularly important in guiding efforts to protect natural landscapes and agricultural lands. To be effective with limited funding, conservation groups must target high-priority lands by focusing on the integration of sound scientific criteria with support from local residents and landowners. Tools that help maximize consensus and minimize conflict among interest groups can lead to better decisions regarding land conservation. CVI offers support to help land conservation groups integrate social, ecological, and landscape factors—along with stakeholder preferences—into a land conservation prioritization process.

### Case Study: The Cacapon and Lost River Land Trust

The Cacapon and Lost River Land Trust (CLRLT) in eastern West Virginia is a typical local land conservation group interested in prioritizing areas in the Cacapon River Watershed for future easements. Historically, the CLRLT had a reactive approach toward land conservation, simply responding to landowners who approached them to offer the development rights on their land for purchase. The land trust realized that simply responding to these offers was resulting in the conservation of small, fragmented areas scattered around the watershed. They needed to become more proactive in order to better achieve their goal of protecting large contiguous landscape features. This meant they needed a method for identifying high-priority conservation lands in the watershed so they could be targeted by the CLRLT.

CVI helped the land trust craft a mission statement to articulate the resource values that it wanted to protect: agriculture, forests, water quality, and rural heritage. These four objectives comprise a holistic view of land stewardship that includes biological, social, and economic interests.

With input from local stakeholders and technical experts, the land trust defined 37 specific evaluation criteria to guide its land conservation prioritization process. These include protecting farms from development; protecting riparian areas and cultural and historical areas, and protecting large contiguous forest tracts.



The Cacapon River in eastern West Virginia

## more about: Conservation Planning

These evaluation criteria guided the acquisition of spatial data. The 37 criteria were weighted and combined with the spatial data layers to identify the highest-priority lands for conservation. The data was then integrated with a parcel database. Parcel characteristics that were used included size, adjacency to other protected areas, the existence of many high-priority multifunctional areas, and maintaining the contiguity of high-priority regions. By combining the landscape-level with the parcel-level modeling approaches, the land trust now has a very holistic planning tool, which they can use to locate and target lands with the highest conservation values.

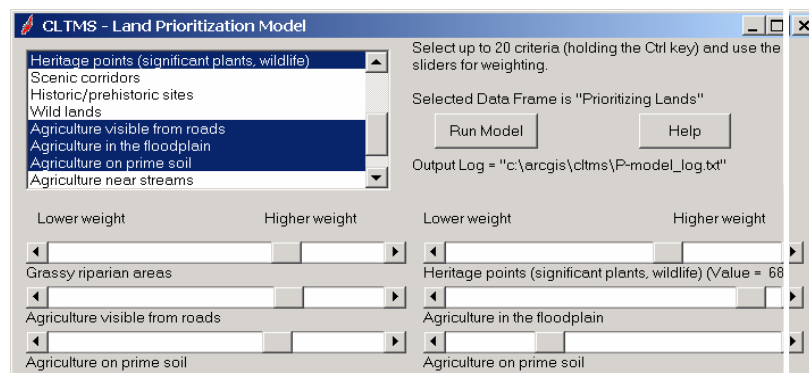
Canaan Valley Institute packaged this capability into a decision support system that is used by the land trust to be more proactive and to also integrate budget constraints into the decision-making process.

Since using this tool, the CLRLT has been able to increase the number of easements on private property. Director Nancy Ailes recently commented: "I use the decision support system daily to build maps, target landowners, identify high-priority corridors connecting conservation hubs to public lands, and to triage easement donations with the high-priority lands." An added advantage is a documentable decision-making process that has led to additional conservation funding opportunities.



Output from the decision support system for prioritizing land and parcels for conservation.

Screen shot from the decision support system showing selection of evaluation criteria using the landscape model.



Canaan Valley Institute was created to foster local decision-making in support of sustainable communities in the Mid-Atlantic Highlands, which includes portions of Maryland, Pennsylvania, and Virginia and all of West Virginia. The Institute is a nonprofit, non-advocacy organization committed to helping stakeholders in the region enhance their quality of life. CVI helps communities address problems that threaten the environmental, economic, and/or cultural resources of their watersheds. The Institute supports locally determined solutions to those problems, solutions that complement communities' values and their ways of making a living.

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