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N.C. land trusts strive for populism

RALEIGH -- One knock on environmentalists is that they're sometimes elitist, valuing nature and land above people. Land trusts in North Carolina are working to change that perception.

The Conservation Trust for North Carolina, the umbrella group for the state's two dozen land trusts, is trying to get conservationists to work more closely with people, particularly minorities and those without means.

That's the aim of a workshop planned for Saturday in Raleigh that will put conservationists in the same room with representatives of groups such as Habitat for Humanity, the N.C. Housing Coalition and Stone Circles, a Mebane group that trains social activists.

The overall goal is to make the land conservation movement better reflect the demographics of the state, said Barry L. Williams, head of the Conservation and Diversity Project at the Conservation Trust for North Carolina. The strategy has a practical benefit for land trusts, which will need to work with minorities and low-income people if they want to remain effective, Williams said.

"There aren't many large tracts of land to protect anymore," he said. "We're going to have to start looking at smaller tracts of land and tracts in urban areas, because conservation can't be done as it's been done for decades."

Through Williams' project, the Conservation Trust provides internships for college students of color at land trusts in the state, organizes workshops for minority landowners and works to integrate conservation into housing projects for low- and moderate-income people. In Henderson, for example, the Black Family Land Trust owns a conservation easement on a wetland area in a 21-lot affordable housing subdivision and is working with the developer to turn it into an outdoor laboratory for a nearby elementary school.

The workshop, co-sponsored by the Triangle Land Conservancy, will be held at the McKimmon Center at N.C. State University, and walk-ups are welcome. For information, go to www.ctnc.org.