

Rethinking Private Land Ownership

"If you think about it, nobody announced the birth of capitalism five hundred years ago, either. People just started doing it. That's probably how the next paradigm shift will happen, too – or is happening."

John Biewen, Scene on Radio, Season 7, Episode 12

Today, people are building organizations and communities that experiment with different ways of owning and caring for land. Some seek to make housing more affordable. Others focus on protecting ecosystems, returning land to Indigenous communities, or giving local residents a greater voice in how land is managed.

These organizations differ in their goals and methods, but they all invite us to consider a larger question: **What happens when land is owned, managed, or cared for differently than it usually is in the United States?** By studying them, you'll investigate how changing one feature of capitalism – private ownership of land – can shape communities, economies, and people's relationships with one another and with the natural world.

Part	Guiding Questions
Part 1 Review and Learn	How is private land ownership usually organized in the United States today? How does it connect to the features of capitalism?
Part 2 Study an Example	How are some organizations across the United States rethinking how land is owned, managed, or cared for?
Part 3 Research Your Own Community	How is an organization in your area rethinking how land is owned, managed, or cared for?

Part 1 Review and Learn

How is private land ownership usually organized in the United States today?
How does it connect to the features of capitalism?

Check out the following sources to recall what you've already learned about private land ownership in the United States.

- **Source 1:** Scene on Radio, Season 7, Episode 3,
 - [29:06-39:30](#) (or [Episode 3 transcript, pp. 23-31](#))
 - [47:39-49:45](#) (or [Episode 3 transcript, pp. 38-39](#))
- **Source 2:** [Features of Capitalism explainer](#)

Part 2 Study an Example

How are some organizations across the United States rethinking how land is owned, managed, or cared for?

Choose one or more of the following organizations to research.

Sogorea Te' Land Trust Located in the San Francisco Bay Area, Sogorea Te' Land Trust is an “urban Indigenous women-led land trust that facilitates the return of Indigenous land to Indigenous people.”	Champlain Housing Trust Located in northwestern Vermont, Champlain Housing Trust is a community land trust dedicated to community ownership for permanently affordable housing.	Door County Land Trust Located in northeastern Wisconsin, Door County Land Trust is a conservation land trust that seeks to “preserve, maintain and enhance” ecologically significant land under development pressure.
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Research Questions

1. What problem(s) is this organization trying to solve? Why do they believe changing how land is owned or managed will help?
2. How is land owned and governed?
 - a. Who owns the land?
 - b. Who can use it?
 - c. Who makes decisions?
 - d. How is this different from typical private ownership?
3. Which feature(s) of capitalism is this organization reimagining? Explain.
4. What does this organization seem to believe about land? Is land primarily a commodity, a home, a shared resource, a public good, or something else? What evidence supports your answer?
5. What evidence suggests this approach has been successful?
6. What challenges or criticisms has it faced?
7. If more communities or organizations adopted this approach, what aspects of our economy or society might change? What might stay the same?

Research Process

Step One: Launch Your Research

Explore the organization's website, sources about its model of land stewardship, and relevant segments of Scene on Radio, Season 7 to gather evidence about as many research questions as possible. As you work, record evidence, highlight unanswered questions, and note disagreements between sources.

Sogorea Te' Land Trust

- **Source 1:** Organization website: [Sogorea Te' Land Trust](#)
- **Source 2:** Scene on Radio, Season 7, [Episode 12, 39:15-52:39](#) (or [Episode 12 transcript, pp. 33-44](#))
- **Source 3:** ["PRESS RELEASE: Social Justice Organizations Return 43 Acres of Land to Black and Indigenous Stewardship in San Francisco Bay Area"](#) from Movement Generation (June 21, 2023)

Champlain Housing Trust

- **Source 1:** Organization website: [Champlain Housing Trust](#)
- **Source 2:** ["A Look at Community Land Trusts and How They Combat the Affordable Housing Crisis"](#) by Rebecca Schneid for *TIME* (February 2, 2025)
- **Source 3:** ["What Is a Community Land Trust?"](#) from the International Center for Community Land Trusts

Door County Land Trust

- **Source 1:** Organization website: [Door County Land Trust](#)
- **Source 2:** ["About land trusts"](#) from the Land Trust Alliance

Step Two: Identify Remaining Questions

Notice which research questions the Step One sources answer, as well as which research questions you need more information about.

- Which research questions do the sources not fully answer?
- Which sources disagree?
- What findings need corroboration (confirmation or support) from additional sources?

Consider what else you'd like to know. What new questions are on your mind?

Step Three: Continue Your Research

Continue your research by seeking out additional sources that support, complicate, or challenge what you've already learned.

Locate additional sources:

- Watch the video from [Common Sense Media](#) about creating strong Google search terms. Then, generate different search terms and operators that you can use to continue your research.
- Check out recent reporting on the organization. For example:
 - Go to Google News.
 - Search for the organization's name in quotation marks (for example, "Sogorea Te").
 - Use the date filter (such as Past month or Past year) to focus on recent coverage.
 - Look for articles from a variety of reputable news outlets rather than relying only on the organization's own website or press releases.

Evaluate those sources by asking:

- Is it reliable? Who is behind the information?
 - What person or organization sponsored the website or created the information?
 - Who is the author? What is the author's perspective?
 - What might the organization's and/or author's motivations be for presenting this information?
 - Based on this, how reliable is the information? Why might it be reliable? Why might it be less reliable?
 - What do other sources say? (Can I corroborate with information from another source I know to be reliable?)
- Is the information relevant?
 - Does the source have information to help answer my research question(s)?

Part 3 Research Your Own Community

How is an organization in your area rethinking how land is owned, managed, or cared for?

Brainstorm organizations or communities in your area that are rethinking how land is owned, managed, protected, or shared. Consider groups involved in housing, conservation, Indigenous stewardship, agriculture, parks, or community development.

Need ideas? Try searching for the following in your city, county, or state:

- conservation land trusts
- community land trusts
- Indigenous land stewardship organizations
- community gardens
- land conservancies
- municipal land banks
- housing cooperatives
- parks or open-space organizations

Choose one organization whose approach interests you. Investigate it using the same Research Questions and Research Process from Part 2.

You might also decide to conduct one or more interviews with people who work for or volunteer with this organization, or with experts who study organizations like this one. Check out our [Interview Toolkit](#) for tips on preparing for, conducting, and recording interviews.