



WESTERN CONSERVATION STRATEGY 2024-2029

November 2023 | Environment Program

The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation invests in creative thinkers and problem-solvers working to ensure people, communities, and the planet can flourish. Together with our partners, we are harnessing society’s collective capacity to solve our toughest problems — from the existential threat of climate change, to persistent and pervasive inequities, to attacks on democracy itself. A nonpartisan philanthropy, the Hewlett Foundation has made grants in the U.S. and globally for nearly six decades based on an approach that emphasizes long-term support, collaboration, and trust.

The Hewlett Foundation updates its grantmaking strategies every five years to be responsive to changing political, social, and ecological conditions. Led by Program Officer Andrea Keller Helsel, the team of Hewlett staff that informed this refreshed strategy included: Amy Arbreton, Kathleen Badejo, Crissy Canlas, Lori Grange, Larry Kramer, Beverly Mislant, Jonathan Pershing, Edit Ruano, Kristy Tsadick, and Jennifer Wei. We have made this strategy and related evaluations public to partners, funders, and civil society as part of the Foundation’s commitment to openness, learning, and transparency. A memo, very similar to this public document, was shared with the Hewlett Foundation’s board detailing this refreshed strategy in September 2023.

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Introduction

The well-being of communities across the North American West depends on, and is interconnected with, the health of the environment — which is why sustaining that environment has for decades been among the foundation’s foremost commitments. Examples of grantees’ recent successes include:

- Stopping the massive Pebble Mine to protect Alaska’s Bristol Bay, the world’s most productive subsistence and commercial wild salmon fishery.
- Securing the removal of four dams on the Klamath River in Northern California and Southern Oregon, reopening 400 miles of habitat to endangered salmon and launching the world’s largest river restoration effort.
- Protecting almost 350,000 acres of national public lands around New Mexico’s Chaco Culture National Historical Park from oil and gas leasing for 20 years.
- Successfully conserving Thaidene Nënë National Park Reserve and other Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas across the Boreal Forest in Canada.
- Restoring protections for the sacred lands at Bears Ears National Monument, designating the Baaj Nwaavjo I’tah Kukveni — Ancestral Footprints of the Grand Canyon, Avi Kwa Ame, and Castner Range National Monuments, and creating new state parks in California and Colorado.
- Launching first-ever policies in multiple Western states and at the federal level to conserve riparian and terrestrial connectivity for wildlife, including new Outstanding Waters designations for rivers in Colorado and New Mexico.
- Achieving full and permanent funding for the Land and Water Conservation Fund to conserve public lands and improve public access to the outdoors.

Yet despite such community-driven conservation victories, [research](#) paints a grim picture of the declining state of biodiversity in the United States. Species are going extinct faster than at any other time in human history as the effects of climate change accelerate threats to fish and wildlife. On top of which, more than 40% of ecosystems are at risk of collapse from a combination of economic development, habitat degradation, and the damming of rivers.

The good news is that [public support](#) for conservation remains strong and opportunities remain to conserve biodiversity.

While this has long been the goal of our Western Conservation grantmaking, the pathways we pursue have changed over the years based on experience and changing political, social, economic, and natural conditions. The discussion below sets forth how we propose to work over the next five years, which builds on pivots we made in our [2018 strategy](#).

Accomplishing these ambitious goals requires fostering and resourcing community self-determination and partnerships rooted in authentic relationship, respect, and reciprocity. We must think constantly about bridging divides. Because working together, empowered collaborators at local, state, and national levels can solve the interconnected challenges to healthy communities and ecosystems, resulting in positive, and durable, economic, ecological, and social justice outcomes.

To quote the philosophy of Hawaiian leader [Dr. Noa Emmett Auwae Aluli](#): “The health of the land is the health of our people is the health of our nation.”

“
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”

— Dr. Noa Emmett Auwae Aluli

I. Looking Back

A. The 2018-2023 Western Conservation Strategy

Since 2013, our long-term goal has been to preserve biodiversity and conserve the ecological integrity of half the North American West. That goal remained intact in the 2018 strategy, but our approach shifted from supporting short-term campaigns to conserve national public lands to a more patient, longer-term effort to achieve community-driven conservation protections at the federal, state, and local levels and under Tribal law.

To create durable policy outcomes, the 2018 strategy shift prioritized the diverse voices of people who live in and value fish and wildlife and the majestic landscapes of the U.S. West; supported deeper, locally led coalitions in priority landscapes; and sought to propel significant state action on conservation issues (where possible, leveraging that local leadership to inspire federal action). We focused our work around three substrategies:

- **Defend conservation protections.** When the 2018 strategy was being developed, politically motivated efforts to roll back protections for national public land and waters across the U.S. West were very real, despite historic levels of bipartisan support for conservation. We supported Tribes, conservation groups, and others in fighting efforts to repeal existing conservation protections.
- **Advance new conservation protections.** To stem the looming biodiversity crisis, we needed to do more than just hold onto existing protections on national public lands. We also supported efforts to develop new conservation measures to protect core landscapes, including land-use planning; balanced oil and gas development on national public lands; new conservation designations for parks, national monuments, and rivers; new state and federal policies around fish and wildlife connectivity; and incentives for private land stewardship of wildlife corridors.¹
- **Build the conditions for enduring conservation.** Recognizing that the shift in focus to community-led, inclusive conservation would require a different way of operating, we invested in bolstering the capacity of grantees to develop effective communications and to foster effective collaboration by supporting new forums for building trust and sharing information. We also invested in efforts to build more representative nonprofit organizations with the culture and skills to be welcoming to all.

B. Progress to Date

To assess the impact of our 2018-2023 grantmaking, Hewlett commissioned several independent evaluations, as well as landscape scans of current and future opportunities and threats to biodiversity. This research generated valuable insights for both the field and our strategy refresh. Critical findings include:

- **Hewlett's support for conservation outcomes has been successful in states across the U.S. West.** In the past five years, eight Western states approved new policies to improve land and river conservation and dedicated new funding for fish and wildlife connectivity or wildfires. The evaluation found that the process of securing state policy gains with diverse and inclusive coalitions serves as an important lesson for the field.

Unfortunately, many conservation funders have yet to pivot to supporting state coalitions — hindering collaboration and policy innovation and limiting capacity to scale the effort further. Hewlett will need to recruit new philanthropic support as critical biodiversity issues, like wetlands protection, shift to state oversight. Such funding is also needed to support the work of state wildlife agencies, which lack resources to manage at-risk species; and for effective deployment of the billions of dollars for conservation authorized by the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) and Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), which rely, in large part, on states, rural communities, Tribes, and nonprofits to utilize new federal dollars.

- **Freshwater conservation is critical for ecological and community resilience.** Aridification — the long-term drying out of ecosystems due to climate change — is wreaking havoc on Western landscapes. As the U.S. West becomes warmer and drier, it has a great deal less usable water and faces drought and flooding on a scale not seen before. This trend impacts biodiversity, and inequitably impacts communities. Because these human and natural systems are so deeply interconnected, conserving freshwater ecosystems must be a greater priority for the foundation moving forward.
- **Long-term support is key to durable conservation outcomes.** Sustained financial support is necessary to defend, maintain, and continue to improve conservation policy outcomes. The multidecade support from Hewlett and other philanthropic partners for grantees working in the Klamath River basin, for example, was instrumental to their success in securing the removal of four dams and launching the world’s largest river restoration effort. But additional long-term support is still needed to help heal the river ecosystem and communities in the basin.
- **Hewlett’s support for equity and inclusion has influenced the field.** As one of the largest U.S. conservation funders and a participant in several collaborative philanthropic efforts, our shift to supporting inclusive, community-led conservation efforts has influenced philanthropy, as well as grantee organizations. Grantees reported that our diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice (DEIJ) grantmaking, in particular, supported internal equity policies and practices, as well as new frameworks and strategies to guide engagement with Tribes and organizations serving communities of color. Our direct funding for a few smaller organizations serving communities of color has given an influential cohort of leaders new capacity to inform policy and take leadership roles in coalitions and on the boards of mainstream conservation groups — advancing equity in the larger movement and fueling new collaborations.
- **Communications capacity-building must be connected to priority outcomes.** While communications is recognized as critical to building public will for conservation outcomes, grantees have difficulty obtaining dedicated funding for communications skill-building, as well as for new tools. In addition to recruiting new philanthropic partners, evaluators highlighted the need to facilitate a cohort model for sharing best practices and align communications funding with community-driven policy or place-based conservation efforts.
- **Indigenous-led conservation is critical to achieving ecological integrity.** The Canadian and U.S. federal governments, the governments of several states, and practitioners of place-based conservation increasingly see Indigenous-led conservation as key to achieving climate and biodiversity goals. Environmental stewardship is fundamental to Indigenous identity and central to Tribal worldviews. Philanthropy can promote conservation by supporting the recognition and protection of Indigenous peoples’ rights to self-determination and sovereignty; strengthening Tribal governance systems; and securing and defending Indigenous rights to land, water, and healthy fish and wildlife populations.

To date, **we are approximately 65% of the way toward the foundation’s long-term goal of protecting half of the North American West.** In the past five years, our grantees achieved new protections on approximately 10 million acres, which was our goal. The strategy’s goal in this respect was intentionally modest, as we focused more on the new work of building inclusive coalitions, which is slower to show progress but will, we believe, produce greater and more durable gains over time.

II. Looking Forward: Our Approach Over the Next Five Years

A. The Problems

Unchecked commercial and residential development of natural landscapes continues to degrade wildlife habitat, interfere with fish and wildlife migration, and fuel dangerous human-wildlife conflict. Over 40% of land in the contiguous U.S. has been converted to non-native landscapes as open space is developed and working lands are sold off and subdivided, with grasslands and wetlands being the most affected. [Scientists](#) studying Western wildlife [migrations](#) find that once as little as 3% of a landscape has been developed (as when a ranch is subdivided into multiple 40-acre ranchettes, or a natural gas field is developed), big game species begin to avoid foraging in the area.

Other challenges abound: The water crisis across the U.S. West; the lack of agency readiness for the pandemic-driven surge in outdoor recreation; the rush to develop renewable energy and energy transmission corridors and mining infrastructure; unabated oil and gas development; hotter and more frequent wildfires; and, of course, the increasing political polarization of conservation issues in the U.S. Congress and state legislatures, which hinders efforts to advance the kind of funding and policies that received bipartisan support in the past. The U.S. Supreme Court's increasingly activist approach, most recently rolling back protections for wetlands, is another new wild card. And all of this is happening against a backdrop of long-standing systemic racism, the U.S. history of genocide against Indigenous peoples, and the violent dispossession of land — history whose present consequences and manifestations are urgently relevant to the conservation agenda.

Taken together, this litany of challenges — some of which were present when we formulated our earlier strategy, some of which (like the pandemic-driven surge in recreation and newly activist U.S. Supreme Court) are new — make it harder to build trust among stakeholders and to advance conservation policies that are authentically community-driven. But we don't see any other path to real progress, and the biodiversity crisis is just too urgent and too important to the survival of our society to disengage. Moreover, despite these many challenges, real progress has been and can still be made.

B. Our Long-Term Goal

An independent scientific assessment of the foundation's goals in 2013 prompted a shift from conserving the ecological integrity of 30% of the North American West to 50%. That shift was consistent with a consensus in the scientific community that about half the planet needs some form of habitat conservation for biodiversity for ecological systems to function. We believed we could achieve this goal in the U.S. West by conserving critical habitat on national public lands, state parks, and Tribe managed areas—a conclusion the Foundation still supports, but to which we have added, based on the latest science, a concern for riparian and terrestrial connectivity between protected areas (which is also critical for ecological integrity).

The long-term goal for our grantmaking remains “to conserve biodiversity and protect the ecological integrity of half of the North American West.” By 2009, we had added “for wildlife and people;” now we add “for the long term.” The first addition, which reflects a rethinking still taking place in the conservation field generally, recognizes the interconnection between nature and people; it acknowledges the need to center communities in our thinking about ecological systems, instead of ignoring them or excluding them from the process. The recent addition of “for the long term” recognizes the importance of developing solutions for wildlife and people that are durable and can withstand the inevitable swings in partisan politics.

C. Priority Conservation Pathways

Our 2024-2029 strategy makes a significant shift in the framework we set out in 2018. Distinguishing between “defending” conservation gains and “advancing” new conservation solutions, while treating the need to build diverse coalitions as a separate substrategy, made sense when the Trump Administration was still new and the whole idea of building community-led, inclusive coalitions required shifting the common approach of our grantees, but our work has matured since then. Going forward it will be more helpful to organize our work around the nature of the substantive interventions we need to make, recognizing that we may need to do one or all of these things — defending, advancing, building the conditions for durable conservation — in different settings or contexts.

Based on what we learned from our evaluations, field scans, and experience, we have identified four key interventions, which we are calling priority conservation “pathways”: (a) freshwater conservation, (b) landscape-scale connectivity, (c) wildlife protection, and (d) climate responsive strategies. The kinds of activities that need to happen and that we might support under each pathway are described below.

1. Freshwater Conservation

Access to clean water is a [human right](#). More than a commodity, water is an invaluable spiritual, cultural, and ecological resource. Yet logging, pollution, drilling, dams, and water diversions have harmed freshwater systems across the U.S. West. As a biodiversity funder, we are especially concerned that freshwater species are at risk of extinction; 28 species of salmon and steelhead alone are currently listed under the Endangered Species Act. Lower-income communities, and communities of color especially, [lack access](#) to clean drinking water for sanitation and to coastlines and rivers for recreation. Meanwhile, climate change is driving mega-droughts and catastrophic flooding, which heighten the risk to communities and ecosystems and undermine water security throughout the West: Each of the major Western river basins is suffering these threats.

Freshwater ecosystems depend, most of all, on adequate flows of water. Too often, human demand for water and past land use practices left rivers and wetlands hot, dry, and disconnected. Scientists also understand that to maintain a healthy, functioning river requires managing the entire basin as a single, interdependent system: actively managing forest headwaters, undamming the river channel, restoring floodplains and wetlands, and recharging the connected aquifer. We can support grantee efforts to secure plans, policies, and public funding for floodplain restoration, for example, which have an outsized impact on biodiversity, as functional floodplains improve fish spawning and rearing habitat. Floodplains also reduce flood risk to communities (by slowing floods and giving rivers room to roam); improve public access to recreation; filter pollutants; recharge groundwater aquifers; and bolster habitat.

Unfortunately, the U.S. Supreme Court recently eviscerated Clean Water Act protections on one million acres of wetlands, making flood-prone ecosystems increasingly vulnerable to pollution, droughts, and flooding, not to mention putting communities already confronting pervasive inequities at even greater risk. Already, the U.S. is [losing](#) 60,000 acres of wetlands a year. We must, as a result, support work to secure protections for intermittent streams and wetlands under state law, even as grantees pursue opportunities to restore federal jurisdiction. Tribes need support, too, to establish their own programs for protection of water quality under the Clean Water Act; this would bolster sovereignty and ecosystem and community protections.

Nor is this all. The IIJA and IRA make potentially transformative funding available for freshwater conservation strategies and water infrastructure — as much as \$125 billion. But rural communities, states, and Tribes need help to take advantage of these funds and to ensure equitable implementation. With federal agencies already short-staffed, communities need technical assistance and public funding to match federal grants. Equally important, these communities need resources to develop projects themselves, so any proposals reflect local values and are truly community-driven and owned. Otherwise, we’ll see a handful of new public-funded projects but no political will to maintain or scale them.

In addition, support for strategic communications will help to inspire continued public investment and policy change. A 2022 evaluation of grantee efforts to build communications capacity and advance narrative change around conservation issues found that focusing Hewlett’s resources on elevating success stories in only a few priority regions or policies would be more effective than trying to spread those resources across geographies, partners, and contexts.²

2. Landscape-Scale Connectivity

For years, scientists have sought to draw attention to the fact that terrestrial and riparian ecosystems need to be connected at the landscape scale to function properly. Landscape connectivity provides room for wildlife migration and seasonal movements, but it is also critical to help wildlife adapt to mounting pressures. Intact river corridors and riparian zones have the benefit of not only maintaining aquatic systems, but also providing secure wildlife habitat and migration areas within otherwise developed landscapes. Currently, scattered areas of protected public land across the U.S. West provide important quality habitat, but these “islands” are surrounded by fragmented public and private lands, thus leaving supposedly protected wildlife, ecosystems, and the communities that depend on them increasingly vulnerable.

To address this challenge, our 2018 strategy emphasized increasing habitat connectivity across landscapes. Our grantees’ public education campaigns encouraged state and federal policymakers to roll out innovative wildlife migration conservation strategies, as well as plan for and build critical new wildlife overpasses and underpasses for connectivity. We were helped in this by Secretarial Order 3362, issued in 2018, which allocated new federal funding to states to better understand and plan for migration of big game species — an early catalyst of research, conservation actions, and federal-state cooperation on migration.

The Biden Administration has taken things further, and its America the Beautiful Initiative addresses the importance of taking a large landscape approach and securing ecological connectivity. Several federal agencies have begun to prioritize ecological connectivity in natural resource management and planning. We need grantees to make sure, however, that regional and district-level decision makers within these agencies implement and institutionalize these national goals and policies, and we need them to encourage coordination across agencies. Federal agencies also need help to reform land-use plans (including policies guiding mining and energy development) to prioritize conservation of critical wildlife corridors and habitat.

Meanwhile, the availability of unprecedented federal funds is creating still other opportunities to accelerate connectivity. Congress authorized a Wildlife Crossings Pilot Program at Department of Transportation, which designated \$350 million over five years for the planning, design, and construction of wildlife overpasses and underpasses. This pilot program needs to be scaled, which may require aiding rural communities, states, and Tribes in accessing new federal funding for connectivity projects. Done right, such projects can create jobs, protect wildlife, improve road safety, and sustain the outdoor traditions of these communities.

In [2023 alone](#), more than one dozen states introduced 30 bills intended to reconnect fragmented wildlife habitats via wildlife corridors and crossings; a total of eight bills were enacted across seven states, including approval of state funding toward the match necessary to unlock federal grant dollars and to facilitate coordination between transportation and wildlife agencies to plan new connectivity infrastructure projects.

States are also advancing landscape-scale connectivity in other ways. The State of Wyoming’s community-driven conservation process has designated new wildlife corridors across the state. In 2022, it launched the nation’s first public-private partnership with USDA (supported by philanthropy, including Hewlett) to support the ability of private landowners to fund innovative habitat leases and stewardship activities such as fence modification that sustain wildlife migration; USDA has since broadened the program to include Idaho and Montana.

Wildlife also needs seasonally sensitive migration routes and refuge areas to support critical life-cycle needs. To that end, our grantees must persuade federal and state authorities to conserve “climate strongholds” — areas of importance for connectivity that are resilient to climate change and offer refuge to plants and wildlife. This might be done through new designations of parks and national monuments, federal or state wildlife management areas or other land-use planning.

Another important objective we might pursue is incentivizing land restoration, in addition to conservation of intact ecosystems, through policy change. Given a century of fire suppression and dam-building, habitat and stream degradation, and the spread of invasive species, active restoration can be done in many places across the West. This could, in turn, generate much-needed wildlife habitat, landscape connectivity, and wildfire resilience, while at the same time supporting local employment in rural communities. Restoration can also help build public will for further action by helping nonprofits gain credibility in local communities, thus opening the door for additional collaborative work or policymaking.

Already, the BLM has announced [\\$161 million in IRA-funded restoration projects](#) across the U.S. West. The agency will need to coordinate closely with states, counties, and affected communities to ensure that restoration efforts reflect needs on the ground and utilize a cooperative approach to monitoring and management that empowers nonprofit and community partners in tracking progress toward restoration goals.

Lastly, new partnerships and policies are needed to incentivize voluntary stewardship of wildlife corridors across private and working lands. These lands often host the best water resources and some of the best winter range for migrating species, but the risk of land conversion and subdivision threatens the rural way of life as well as habitat connectivity. According to the USDA, [nearly 2 million acres of farm and ranch lands were lost in 2022](#); Wyoming saw the biggest loss in acreage among any single state. New partnerships and policies are needed to incentivize stewardship of private and working lands within corridors benefiting family livelihoods as well as ecosystem integrity.

3. State and Tribal Wildlife Conservation

State fish and wildlife agencies, which are largely overseen by political appointees, bear much of the responsibility for managing America's fish and wildlife. How they manage these responsibilities can thus play a major role in either stemming the biodiversity crisis or exacerbating it (as in making politically motivated species management decisions at the behest of their governors or legislatures). Ensuring the former and avoiding the latter is an important priority.

It is not, however, the only priority. Under the Depression-era Pittman-Robertson Act, the bulk of state funding for habitat restoration and fish and wildlife management comes from excise taxes levied on the manufacturers of firearms and ammunition. This, in turn, often leads agencies to prioritize, and inadvertently cultivate a public bias toward, the conservation of game species. A more expansive vision of wildlife management will require resources for activities ranging from habitat restoration and land acquisition to research and monitoring. We want to support our grantees in advocating for the protection of at-risk species — as opposed to only those species that have become listed as threatened or endangered — because once a species is listed, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service gets involved, and collaboration becomes harder. The opportunities for conservation and pro-active management are greater before that happens, as industry, private landowners, and other stakeholders have more incentive to engage, and state wildlife agencies can do more to facilitate collaboration. We should thus work to prevent species from being listed in the first place, which means more work on at-risk species and with state wildlife managers.

The Foundation also needs to support grantees as they work on making wildlife boards and commissions more representative, responsive, and reflective of the communities they serve, including gender, racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity.

Tribal wildlife agencies are instrumental in restoring habitat and conserving at-risk species. Approximately 100 million acres are held in trust by the federal government for Tribes, and the benefit of Tribal stewardship often reaches beyond reservation lands. First, because protected species often move across political boundaries to benefit a broader ecosystem.³ Second, because Tribes also participate in many multiagency, multistate species management efforts with state and federal wildlife management partners. But Tribal wildlife agencies have struggled to secure adequate funding, as many federal funding programs are not available to them, while philanthropic support has historically been [limited](#). Given Tribes' record of effective stewardship, this is a missed opportunity.

Another growing challenge for wildlife managers comes from increased outdoor recreation; [the outdoor participant base grew 6.9%](#) since March 2020. According to one study, [40%](#) of the most important elk habitat in Colorado has been affected by recreational trail use, displacing and so threatening the elk population. Bighorn sheep in the Grand Tetons, one of their last refuges, are likewise struggling to [survive](#) alongside growing winter recreation.

A blanket ban on recreation isn't the solution: Recreation is important for human physical, emotional, and spiritual health, and many of our grantees have worked hard to make the outdoors a welcoming place for all. Recreation too, is important for rural economies and inspires new conservation advocates. Instead, we should incentivize wildlife managers, transportation departments, and recreation planners to collaborate and change the way recreation is planned and managed. Working together, they can find ways to continue to attract visitors and amenity-driven growth, while sustaining wildlife habitat, the character of rural communities, and long-term economic vitality.

4. Climate Responsive Solutions

As a foundation working to address both the biodiversity and climate crises, Hewlett understands that mitigating the worst effects of climate change requires rapidly transitioning to a clean energy economy. Our national public lands have a huge role to play in this, as healthy ecosystems absorb carbon and boost communities' resilience to climate impacts.

Some progress has already been made. Congress included several commonsense reforms to U.S. onshore oil and gas development in the IRA, including an increase in the royalty rate paid by energy companies. By one estimate, this reform alone will reduce emissions by two million metric tons by 2030 (roughly equivalent to the annual emissions of 434,000 passenger vehicles).

We see the best opportunities for progress over the next five years in incremental improvements to the management of oil and gas development onshore, such as reform of bonding policy to shift the costs of cleaning abandoned oil and gas wells from taxpayers to producers. Longer term, we need national policies governing extractive uses of our national public lands that further protect critical wildlife habitat and community values, and conserve places that communities themselves prioritize as too special to develop, such as the halting of new oil and gas leases near [Chaco Culture National Historical Park](#) and the [Thompson Divide](#).

But the clean energy transition poses its own threats to biodiversity. No less than fossil fuel development, large-scale renewable energy infrastructure can degrade and fragment critical habitat if not done thoughtfully. According to [one analysis](#), to meet the nation's ambition of net-zero carbon emissions through renewable energy sources will require bringing online "two new 400-megawatt solar power facilities, each taking up at least 2,000 acres of land, each week for the next 30 years." That's an enormous development footprint — and it doesn't include transmission, wind, and other infrastructure needed for the shift to a clean energy economy.

In just the last 2 ½ years, the BLM has approved 35 solar, wind, geothermal, and transmission projects on national public lands, and it is currently processing 74 new project proposals for utility-scale renewable energy. The agency is also [updating its plan](#) for siting utility-scale solar energy development on public lands in 11 Western states "to improve and expand its capacity to meet these goals." The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, too, has a large role in permitting such projects on public lands.

And let's not forget about mining, which must expand to provide access to necessary minerals for EV batteries, renewables, and other climate-responsive technologies. In April 2022, the Biden Administration invoked the Defense Production Act to fund the mining, processing, and recycling of lithium, nickel, cobalt, graphite, and manganese. The IRA further incentivizes new domestic critical mineral production by creating a new tax credit for mines.

Transition minerals and renewable energy are unquestionably essential to meet the nation's decarbonization goals and foster energy security, but we must ensure that development projects are sited appropriately and held to strict social and environmental standards. Philanthropy can play a critical role in helping craft a roadmap for how the country can accelerate a clean energy transition both equitably and without sacrificing biodiversity or community values. As a long-

standing funder in both conservation and climate, Hewlett is uniquely positioned to help resolve tensions and stem the growing conflicts between those who reject any effort to develop our national public lands and waters and those who use only a carbon reduction lens to determine their best use.

To do this, we and our grantees need to rethink how we approach building coalitions and alliances and find ways to collaboratively design and implement systemic solutions. Building relationships and trust among national and local advocates, private landowners, industry, rural community leaders, and Tribes is essential to identifying a productive path forward that isn't derailed by rhetoric and litigation.

In the end, siting decisions will be made locally, so a place-based approach is still necessary. This means investing in the capacity for self-determination of local communities and Tribes, in building coalitions at the national and state level to set broad parameters for local negotiations, and in strategic communications to combat misinformation campaigns and highlight examples of successful siting and mitigation projects.

Communities across the U.S. West, particularly rural ones and those facing economic transition, require thoughtful development that is balanced with conserving the natural resources that make those communities physically and economically resilient. Responsible development means focusing on reclaimed lands; mitigating impacts by investing in both community needs and conservation at scale; employing new models, such as profit-sharing with communities of color and Tribes; paying a fair return to U.S. taxpayers; and, in the case of mining, investing in cleanup, mitigation, and abandoned mine remediation to protect fish and wildlife and downstream communities from toxic runoff and pollution.

Addressing the growing threat of wildfires is another way to promote climate mitigation while building trust in places where conservation is increasingly needed, as wildfire mitigation strategies simultaneously build the resilience of communities and natural ecosystems and protect downstream water supplies. For example, floodplain restoration is a way to build healthy riparian areas which are more resilient to wildfires and could help to reduce flood risk. Other strategies include proactive forest management, prescribed burns, resourcing Tribes for cultural burning practices, wildfire smoke mitigation, and community "hardening" to protect people living in the wildland-urban interface.

Here is a quick summary of our goals over the next five years:

Conservation Pathway	Intermediate Goals Over the Next Five Years Toward Long-Term Progress
Freshwater Conservation	The loss of freshwater species and decline of freshwater ecosystem health in priority geographies is halted and restoration initiated.
Landscape-Scale Connectivity	Measures to conserve core landscapes and connectivity for fish and wildlife are applied across 10 million acres of public and private land and rivers across the U.S. West.
State and Tribal Wildlife Conservation	As an indicator of ecological integrity, the populations of key indicator species in priority geographies (e.g., salmon in the Klamath River) are restored or maintained.
Climate Responsive Solutions	Federal and state policies minimize carbon emissions and ensure that projects are held to strict social and environmental standards and balance the needs of communities and nature.

D. Criteria for Prioritization

Even narrowed to these four pathways, there remain countless opportunities and ways to advance our goals. We must make difficult choices about where to focus our grantmaking given a limited budget, the size of the U.S. West, and the urgency of the biodiversity crisis. To narrow our choices to a manageable set of priorities, we developed the criteria below to help discover grantmaking opportunities that are likely to be both effective and durable — and, just as important, to identify issues that, while important, will *not* be supported in this next phase of our work:

Criteria for Identifying Grantmaking Priorities Toward Durable Conservation Solutions	
Multibenefit Solutions	Our grantmaking will focus on conservation that delivers positive impacts for the environment and communities, instead of prioritizing one at the expense of the other.
Community-Driven Process to Determine Solutions	Durable conservation solutions must be crafted through participatory processes. An inclusive process centers affected communities, including those that live in and value Western landscapes, and especially those that have in the past been marginalized by the conservation movement. The process of developing relevant conservation solutions must allow for the time and space to build trust and develop relationships; for inclusion of new and diverse voices; and for different ways of knowing to be recognized and reflected.
Solutions that Advance Equity	Research shows that communities of color have less access to forests, streams, wetlands, and other natural places. Notably, families with children — especially people of color with children — have less access to nature. These findings, as well as polling that consistently shows communities of color strongly support climate and conservation efforts, affirm the urgent need for proactive efforts to distribute nature’s benefits equitably.
Solutions that Build Climate Resilience	Conservation solutions must be climate resilient, as warming will continue to affect access to water, increase average temperatures, and change weather patterns and volatility.
Climate Responsive Solutions	To effectively respond to the climate crisis, we must pursue climate mitigation solutions like renewable energy and transition minerals development, but in a manner that thoughtfully balances the necessary trade-offs on ecosystem impact.
Scalable Solutions that Focus on Areas in the U.S. West of Biodiversity Importance and Policy Opportunity	Hewlett will combine community consultation, Western science, and Indigenous knowledge to assess conservation policy and advocacy strategies. We will prioritize grantmaking in a subset of these areas that have potential for scaled impact because of political, social, or collaborative conditions.

Using these criteria, efforts that are unlikely to be supported include such things as planting urban tree cover; restoration projects (e.g., trail improvements); public lands grazing; philanthropic funding for land acquisition; wild horse and burro management; environmental education; ocean or coastal conservation; natural disaster response; capital campaigns and construction projects; citizen science; and youth fellowship programs.

E. Our Role as a Catalyst

Several features of our approach create opportunities for the Hewlett Foundation to play a meaningful catalytic role, such as support of our grantees' work during the previous strategy to address the systemic cultural, physical, and economic barriers to access to the outdoors, which has catalyzed a broader, more inclusive conservation movement.

In particular, we see two areas where our catalytic support is necessary to advance this refreshed strategy: (a) support for collaboration at the landscape scale, and (b) support for Indigenous-led conservation.

1. Collaboration at the Landscape Scale

From experience, we believe that the most creative, climate resilient, and durable conservation solutions are driven by affected communities, on the one hand, while being informed by national organizations, on the other. Both are essential. Affected communities — by which we mean the full diversity of people who live in and value our Western landscapes — are ultimately those who live with both the problems and the impacts of well-intended solutions. National organizations can inform efforts to develop and advocate for conservation solutions by providing the real-time knowledge of rapidly shifting policy opportunities and by facilitating access to policymakers in federal and state policy ecosystems.

Collaboration among such diverse stakeholders, working to advance a collective vision at the scale of an entire landscape or watershed, is necessary to achieve lasting conservation outcomes. That takes significant time and resources, but as past successes make clear, the time and effort pay off.

Take the greater sage-grouse, for example, an indicator species of the health of the sagebrush ecosystem. It has thus far avoided being listed on the Endangered Species List because of collaborative conservation plans, developed by diverse stakeholders, that conserve habitat, 350 interdependent species, and the rural way of life across 10 western states. Sustaining this collaboration, including the ongoing work of rural landowners and state and Tribal wildlife agencies, is critical as sage-grouse populations remain imperiled.

In another example, the Seacoast Trust is a perpetual funding source for the Sustainable Southeast Partnership (SSP), a collective which includes international, regional, and community-based organizations, Tribal governments, Native corporations, and individual experts in food sovereignty, land management, and more. The Trust supports a range of programs weaving Indigenous knowledge and values into new approaches for resource management, ecological revitalization, and economic development, and promotes the collective well-being of rural communities alongside Alaska Native communities in stewarding the Tongass National Forest, a coastal temperate rainforest in Southeast Alaska. Proving the success of SSP, [USDA invested \\$25 million](#) in 2022 toward the region's twin goals of balanced land management and economic stability.

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Our strategy will look to catalyze support for collaboratives like these — and there are others — to generate durable solutions for conserving our land, waters, and wildlife. Investing in collaborative, community-driven approaches in priority geographies means supporting such key functions as:

- Building relationships, coordination, clear and transparent communication, and convening partners.
- Planning and developing shared priorities.
- Project development and design.
- Technical support, grant writing and reporting, and fundraising.
- Workforce development and training.
- Monitoring, evaluation (recognizing and resetting when the collaboration isn't yielding substantive outcomes), and adaptive management.
- Involvement in policymaking.

One effort that aims to address these needs at scale is the Network for Landscape Conservation's Catalyst Fund, which already is funded in part by the Hewlett Foundation. This grant and peer-learning program provides modest support to help landscape collaboratives build capacity. In its first four years, the Catalyst Fund received more than 520 requests — a clear indication of need and opportunity — and awarded 55 grants.

Philanthropic support is also needed to help movement leaders learn together and to strengthen collaboration among the leaders of coalitions and networks working across conservation. A “network of network leaders,” grounded in shared values, will strengthen inclusive, relationship-oriented, power-conscious, and equity-centered field and coalition work.

Such investments cannot and will not make conflict disappear, even among our own grantees, but they are essential for increasing the trust-based relationships that are necessary to a path forward. Having a place and process for conversation is the essential first step toward effective collaboration. As Catalyst Fund Program Manager Jonathan Peterson puts it, “literal common ground is a powerful way to build figurative common ground.”

2. Indigenous-Led Conservation

For almost two decades, Hewlett supported the International Boreal Conservation Campaign's efforts to restore Indigenous stewardship of Canada's last great natural redoubts. We learned how investments in systemic and structural change can create much-needed space for Indigenous communities to envision and implement stewardship strategies that produce broader economic, ecological, cultural, and social benefits. These values are reflected in the view of Val Courtois, executive director of the Indigenous Leadership Initiative: “We take care of the land, and the land takes care of us.”

This approach to change in Canada has yielded outsized gains for conservation, garnered sustained support from policymakers across the political spectrum, and accelerated the country's progress toward its climate goals. It has, at the same time, strengthened Indigenous governance models, contributed to healing communities by supporting their reconnection to the land, and fueled the self-determination of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples.

Here in the U.S., the federal government, states, philanthropic institutions, and conservation organizations have increasingly begun to recognize that Tribes bring unique tools and resources to the conservation movement through their nation-to-nation relationship with the federal government, legally enforceable treaty rights, and conservation knowledge from millennia of land and water stewardship. To that end, the Biden Administration released [Indigenous Knowledge Guidance for Federal Agencies](#) in 2022, accompanied by an implementation memorandum to guide agencies on including Tribal Nations in research, policy, and decision making. An example of this can be seen in the federal management plan for the Bears Ears National Monument, which draws on both Western science and Indigenous knowledge, and authorizes Tribal members to serve as on-the-ground stewards of the landscape.

States and nonprofit organizations have also collaborated with Tribes to remove dams, as in the Klamath River basin, as well as to restore ecosystems, inform wildfire resilience strategies, reintroduce species, and co-manage fisheries. California has agreed to co-manage coastal areas and select state parks with Tribes and Indigenous communities. It is also one of the first states to dedicate public funding for Tribes to reacquire and steward ancestral lands, which the state recognizes as a core strategy to achieving its goal of conserving 30% of the state's land and coastal waters by 2030. These systemic and structural changes in the practice of conservation strengthen the sovereignty of Tribes and Indigenous communities. The U.S. public lands system itself is a result of the violent dispossession of Indigenous people from their lands and the assault on their cultures, languages, communal practices, and knowledge systems. Acknowledging this history is a necessary first step toward building trust between Tribes and philanthropy, federal and state management agencies, and conservation advocates.

Consistent with our participation in the [Native Americans in Philanthropy's Tribal Nations Climate and Conservation Pledge](#), we hope to use our grantmaking and our voice to catalyze philanthropic and field support for Indigenous-led conservation. Drawing on what we have learned from our grantees and partners, we will explore opportunities in our priority geographies to invest in:

- **Strengthening the capacity of Tribes and NGOs.** The systemic and structural changes needed to advance Indigenous stewardship are complex and multidimensional, including research, legal analysis, and workforce development. Where one Tribe might need a boat, another needs support for legal reviews and due diligence in land acquisition, and so on. We will invest in the capacity of Tribes, culture bearers, and advocates for Indigenous-led conservation to ensure that there is a robust ecosystem of partners with the capacity to collectively advance ecological sovereignty for Tribes and Indigenous communities in our priority geographies.
- **Fostering relationships and sharing knowledge across communities.** Hewlett has supported webinars, training programs, and relationship-building across Native and non-Native partners. Going forward, we will support substantive place-based and issue-driven collaboration between Tribes and nonprofits, as well as collective learning among the growing ranks of practitioners working to advance Indigenous-led conservation in U.S. environmental organizations.
- **Supporting national public lands stewardship.** Indigenous Guardians programs in Canada allow First Nations to employ and train Indigenous people to monitor and manage protected areas and inform land-use planning. Guardians connect youth with elders to hand down knowledge and language, to prepare young people to become the next generation of educators and leaders, and to foster cultural healing by reconnecting Indigenous people to their ancestral lands. The Canadian programs have also demonstrated how having an Indigenous presence on the ground improves real-time natural resource monitoring, search-and-rescue and wildfire response, and public education — adding critical land management capacity for overstretched federal or provincial governments.

Recognizing these benefits, in 2020, the U.S. Forest Service launched the first U.S. Guardians program with the Central Council of the Tlingit and Haida in Southeast Alaska. The National Park Service and other federal land management agencies have for years been leveraging their contracting authority and signing co-stewardship agreements with Tribes across the U.S. Until now, however, the low profile and wide diversity of these agreements has slowed the process of scaling this approach to conservation. In 2021, President Biden announced the [Tribal Homelands Initiative](#) to improve federal management of national public lands by strengthening the role of Tribes in stewardship and decision-making.



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New public and philanthropic funding is necessary to research, pilot, implement, and scale such approaches, where it is sought and prioritized by Tribes. It will be important, too, to capture and disseminate conservation outcomes and best practices from these and other federal-Tribal or state-Tribal partnerships. Strategic investments in communications capacity and storytelling are essential. These investments are necessary to help Tribes and Indigenous communities exercise their ecological sovereignty.

III. Obstacles, Learning, and Preparing to Adapt

A. Risks

Our revised strategy is ambitious, and the path forward is not without obstacles (not least of which is the accelerating pace of both the biodiversity and climate crises). Key potential challenges include:

- **The uncertain and divisive political landscape.** In a 2022 online survey, Hewlett’s Western Conservation grantees identified “increased partisanship at all levels of government” as one of the biggest challenges to progress. To be sure, Congress approved major investments in conservation in the IIJA and IRA, but those funds are at risk of politically motivated reallocation. States, too, have seen progress stalled by hyper-partisanship. A new presidential administration could also roll back conservation policies. This is precisely why building community-driven, inclusive coalitions is so critical to durability of outcomes.
- **The need to balance addressing the accelerating threats with working “at the speed of trust.”** We continue to believe that the only way to achieve lasting progress and promote more equitable results is by supporting community-driven solutions that balance ecological, economic, and social outcomes, and include people of diverse political views, race and ethnicities, gender identities, and livelihoods. As we have learned over the past five years, that process takes time and cannot be forced. It is an exercise in democracy.
- **The climate and conservation movements operate in silos, and often in competition.** The policy goals of two sets of funders and their respective grantees are often at odds, which limits collaboration, stymies creative problem solving, and empowers those who oppose both conservation and climate progress. We must identify and fight for shared solutions and find the most effective ways to simultaneously tackle threats to both biodiversity and climate. Hewlett’s work in both these spaces provides us an important opportunity to create bridges across these silos.
- **Conservation can cause harm.** We need to carefully consider how we approach issues such as suburban sprawl, energy siting, wildfire, and the like, and avoid funding approaches that cause new harms (especially to communities marginalized by systemic racism) or have unintended negative consequences, such as for Tribal sovereignty. To do this, we need to listen carefully and be responsive to the experience and knowledge of our grantees and partners — and, as highlighted in the prioritization criteria discussed above, ensure that conservation approaches we support truly are community-driven and equity-centered.
- **Long-term funding limits flexibility.** While long-term general support is necessary to help grantees achieve durable conservation outcomes, with our limited budget it can also limit our ability to be nimble and take advantage of emergent opportunities. To find the right balance, we need to collaborate with other funders and help our grantees use the flexibility of Hewlett’s funding to make needed adjustments.

B. Investing in Organizational Strengthening

A meaningful share of grantmaking in the new strategy will be done through intermediaries, like the Resources Legacy Fund, the Water Foundation, and Justice Outside. While so doing, we need to ensure that these intermediaries invest in their subgrantees in ways that strengthen them and build their capacities. This means grantmaking that is done in a manner that facilitates co-creation, transparency, and accountability. In a nutshell, regranting done the way Hewlett tries to do our direct grantmaking.

From which it follows that, if regranters are to serve as field-builders, they need themselves to have capacity to support the field. Developing, funding, and leading capacity-building programs, which may vary from providing nonprofit mentorship and executive coaching to funding a new boat for a Tribal fisheries department, is distinct from the campaign management expertise of most Western Conservation regranters and requires intentional investment, an equity mindset, and trust-building.

Lastly, there is increasing recognition that wellness, self-care, and community care are essential for organizations to thrive. [Studies indicate](#) high percentages of nonprofit employees report stress and burnout. In addition to the excessive workload and mission fatigue common in the nonprofit sector, Indigenous people and leaders of color in conservation, including racial equity directors, often face the same harms they seek to dismantle in our systems as [they can experience racism, tokenism, and marginalization](#), which contributes to burnout.

Care must be grounded in respect for grantee autonomy to choose the wellness approaches that work for them. Tribes, for instance, might use grant funds for charitable activities that educate about and reconnect to cultural practices. Moreover, grantees may need support to navigate threats to physical and digital safety, including relocating or upgrading office security and communications training to counter dangerous and divisive online narratives. So, while our supplemental Organizational Effectiveness grants have always and will continue to be available, we will put a special focus in the new strategy on making sure grantees know they can use these funds for charitable activities that support staffwellness and safety.

Turning to One Another

There is no power greater than a community discovering what it cares about.
Ask “What’s possible?” not “What’s wrong?” Keep asking.

Notice what you care about.
Assume that many others share your dreams.

Be brave enough to start a conversation that matters.
Talk to people you know.
Talk to people you don’t know.
Talk to people you never talk to.

Be intrigued by the differences you hear.
Expect to be surprised.
Treasure curiosity more than certainty.

Invite in everybody who cares to work on what’s possible.
Acknowledge that everyone is an expert about something.
Know that creative solutions come from new connections.

Remember, you don’t fear people whose story you know.
Real listening always brings people closer together.

Trust that meaningful conversations can change your world.

Rely on human goodness. Stay together.

—Margaret Wheatley, “Turning to One Another,” 2002; shared by Jonathan Peterson, Program Director, Network for Landscape Conservation’s Catalyst Fund

Footnotes

1. The 2018 strategy also included the final years of the foundation's long-standing Boreal Forest Conservation Initiative, which supported grantee efforts in Canada to protect the Boreal Forest. Hewlett funding supported First Nations in strengthening land rights and title, in advocating for new Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas across the Boreal Forest, and in securing Indigenous Guardians programs to steward Indigenous lands and provide economic opportunity for their communities — now a model for the U.S.
2. Empowering people of the Klamath River basin to tell the story of the long-term work to heal and restore the river could be one of these priority focus areas. For 20 years, Hewlett has supported Tribal-led efforts to remove four dams and restore over 400 miles of this “salmon highway,” the largest river restoration project in world history. If we can help leverage the opportunity, Klamath River restoration could someday be cited as a premier example of freshwater conservation *and* restorative justice on an unprecedented scale.
3. For example, the California condor, reintroduced in Northern California by the Yurok Tribe, has soared across ecosystem boundaries, while Nez Perce-managed habitat restoration programs have benefitted not just Tribal fishers, but also sport anglers and the larger Idaho economy.