

Reflections on Montana Conservation: Considerations for Future Funders

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The Kendeda Fund (Kendeda) will spend the remainder of its assets and end its grantmaking operations by the end of 2023. Earlier this year, we asked 23 of our Montana conservation partners for their insights. The goal of this project was threefold: to reflect on past conservation practices, to understand current concerns, and to learn what practitioners think lies ahead. One interviewee put it this way:

“The goal is about the integrity of wild places, and communities and justice and equity and much, much more.”

Their thoughts and ideas:

- ➔ Provide examples of conservation success across rural, conservative landscapes
- ➔ Detail the diversity of partners necessary for current and future success, and
- ➔ Suggest learning opportunities for funders and others interested in progress across diverse communities.

In addition, these leaders offered reflections on what drives effective relationships between funders and grantees: going big, providing long-term investments and emergency grants, a willingness to experiment, trusting in new leaders, and supporting partnerships. These are just a few of the ideas we heard about how grantmakers can optimize partnership with and among the organizations they support.

Kendeda’s Montana investments supported decades of success achieved by innovative partners and communities. Their insights inspire us and we hope that their work and the opportunities they envision prompt future funder interest and engagement in Montana’s continued conservation success.

It has been an honor to support this vital work. We are, and will remain, humbled by the dedication and commitment of Montana’s conservation community.

Best,

Tim Stevens

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A U T H O R S ' N O T E

This report is based on conversations with 23 Montana conservation leaders and grantees of the Kendeda Fund. We gleaned additional data from shared documents, correspondence, and on-line resources. These interviews ranged in length from 60 to 90 minutes each, and followed best practices for qualitative research. Overarching themes are based on insights shared by Montana conservationists. Unattributed quotes in the text came from interviews and most were lightly edited for clarity. To ensure candid sharing, we offered anonymity and all participants chose this option.

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Background and Key Themes



BACKGROUND

For decades, conservationists in Montana have focused on protecting large landscapes and its wildlife using a variety of tools. Successes are many — beginning with wilderness areas secured in the 1960-70s and subsequent protections safeguarded through legislation and public agency administrative processes. Thanks to skilled and determined conservationists across those decades, Montana retains an intact cohort of wildlife from grizzly bears to wolves, wolverine and lynx, as well as functioning ecosystems.

However, climate, demographic and land use changes threaten to disrupt Montana's species and ecosystems. Habitat loss, invasive species and landscape fragmentation contribute to declining species richness, while climate change accelerates habitat alteration, disrupting migration patterns and impacting communities through flood, drought and fire. These reinforcing crises, biodiversity loss and climate change, undermine ecosystem function and threaten Montana's people, wildlife and landscapes.

Kendeda's Montana program goals included protecting the natural environment, strengthening community leadership, and educating residents and decision-makers on conservation, economic and community issues. By supporting those with decades of success, innovative partners and communities with a strong stewardship ethic, Kendeda has helped to advance community-based conservation in service to the vision of an ecologically, economically and culturally thriving Montana.

KEY THEMES

Within this context, five instructive themes emerged from the conversations with Kendeda's conservation partners, summarized below.

Collaboration “is not a zero-sum effort.”

Participants — ranchers, agency land managers, Indigenous communities, rural leaders and decision-makers, must be part of co-created solutions that include economic, social, cultural and conservation considerations to sustain gains over time. Also, given the complexity of the issues — fire risk, flood, drought and the concomitant economic and social implications

— additional voices like community planners, housing specialists, and transportation experts may need to join deliberations.

Connecting landscapes is key to building ecological resilience

and may stem biological diversity loss and abate climate change risks to communities. Restoring and increasing landscape and habitat resiliency can only be accomplished across a patchwork of land ownership, public, tribal and private land ownership, and will necessitate new tools, relationships and approaches.

Community-based engagement and advocacy inspires action and creates change through meaningful relationships, finding common ground, and spending time in conversation. Connecting more community voices such as local decision-makers, neighbors, and civic leaders for collective action is essential to advance community and ecological resilience. Despite the urgency of the current crises, the time invested in stakeholder-driven, community-based conversation is essential for durable outcomes.

A diversity of place-based perspectives is critical. The voices of Indigenous and rural leaders, youth activists, business owners, etc. need to be part of crafting solutions for lasting outcomes. Montana is blessed with large, mostly intact landscapes, which conservationists have successfully protected over the past 30+ years. However, increasing pressures brought on by climate change, growth, and landscape

fragmentation present new and immediate challenges. Protecting and connecting landscapes through co-created solutions by impacted community members presents the conservation community with a ‘both/and’ opportunity. Pace and patience, urgency combined with relationship-based deliberation offers more potential for tailored and creative solutions.

Montana’s skilled conservation organizations are facing many pressures. Their decades of accomplishment are indelibly inked across the Montana landscape and supporting their continued success will continue the decades-long tradition of Montana’s “clean and healthful environment” into the future. Interviewees noted that significant organizational pressures and transitions include generational leadership transitions, pandemic-related workplace flux, Montana’s housing crunch impacting housing affordability and compensation, and market volatility and inflation roiling charitable giving by foundations and individuals.



Challenges, Examples of Solutions and Funding Opportunities



Rural Landscape Conservation

CHALLENGES

A recent study on [rural attitudes](#)¹ toward the environment and conservation policy found that rural residents view where they live as an important part of how they define themselves. **Values such as community, environmental stewardship and a strong connection to nature inform how rural residents view issues of conservation and the management of local resources.** Rural residents may also be skeptical of both the science and regulatory responses to climate change but are concerned about its disproportionate impact on rural landscapes.

Rural communities grapple with the risks of catastrophic events, degraded infrastructure and damaged water-sheds and forests. Recent legislation 2021-2022,^{2,3,4} provides significant resources to address climate change impacts (fire, floods, drought), rebuilding/building renewable energy infrastructure, and restoring forests and watersheds. While these new

funds are intended for rural communities, many lack the resources to access these resources because of the time and expertise required to gather data about and for grants, write grants, and then manage the project(s). Two recent [reports](#)⁵ and⁶ suggest some avenues to build rural community capacity and access newly available funding.

Bridging conversation on the environment with rural communities will require engagement and new trust-based partnerships, rethinking the design of environmental policies and issue resolution and new communication strategies. Action in the face of biodiversity degradation may seem expedient yet it often comes at the expense of rural community alienation because transparency, relationship development, and social and political support fall short. Solution development and appropriate engagement to reach consensus will [take time](#)⁷ and cannot be short circuited.

EXAMPLES OF SOLUTIONS

The success and sustainability of conservation is inextricably linked to rural community vitality, economic well-being, and shared values. Conflict resolution efforts in the Crazy Mountains on the Custer Gallatin National Forest Plan provide a glimpse into the complexity and challenges of the path forward.

The Crazy Mountains (Crazies) like most Montana public lands have strong constituencies: ranchers, who can trace back five generations on those lands; landowners, who have recently arrived; businesses, including Yellowstone Club owner CrossHarbor Capital Partners; and recreationists and conservationists, who know the Mountains intimately and appreciate them for their



ecological values and through outdoor activities. None, however, know the Crazy Mountains like the Apsáalooke (Crow Nation) for whom it is home — historically, culturally, and spiritually.

Like much of the West, the Crazies have alternating sections of private and public land ownership, known as checkerboard, with significant private ownership across the Mountains. Access disagreements, leading to the current USFS assessment, arise from the conflicts surrounding trails, private lands, and land management. The checkerboard hinders effective public land management and leaves much of the Crazies vulnerable to private, amenity-driven development in a rapidly growing region.

Resolving the access situation has been fraught. Private landowners are concerned about the multiple issues associated with public access: privacy, lack of respect for gates, and untended campfires, to name a few. On the other hand, historic public access via its trails along with the associated recreational opportunities, such as hiking, camping and hunting, is long, storied and cherished. A lawsuit, on appeal to the Ninth Circuit Court, provides abundant evidence on the depth of angst over access.

For nearly a decade, [Park County Environmental Council](#)⁸ (PCEC), has been building local relationships and participating in discussions with community members as a member of the Crazy Mountain Working

Group. PCEC aims to protect the wild, working, and Indigenous landscapes of the Crazies. A successful resolution to a particularly thorny West-side access issue gave PCEC and the Working Group the confidence to tackle the East-side access problems.

In 2020, the [Crazy Mountain Access Project](#)⁹, a diverse coalition, including PCEC, advocated for a land swap proposal to resolve disputes over public access along the mountain range's eastern flank. The Forest Service released its preliminary environmental assessment for the East Crazy Inspiration Divide Land Exchange in early November 2022. Over 1,000 comments were submitted, many lauding the preliminary environmental assessments' openness to the coalitions' solution to consolidate federal land and resolve longstanding access issues. However, the proposed exchange was by no means perfect and it received many comments urging an improved deal,

with many opposing the exchange outright. The Forest Service is currently weighing the concerns alongside the proposed exchange.

Protecting the wilderness character, biodiversity, habitat connectivity, cultural sites and working landscapes is complicated, challenging and time-consuming. However, Shane Doyle, Apsáalooke educator and artist, and long-time member of the Working Group, provided a measured perspective on an earlier concern atop the Crazies, which might provide solace pending the forthcoming decision. **“These things are all temporary. The next generation will come, they’ll change things, they’ll do things differently,” he said. “[And] we want to give them a model for how to keep the conversation going**¹⁰.”

How the Forest Service and the Courts parse the community interests might be a model for handling land use conflict and conservation engagement. Or, maybe it will provide an important lesson along the way.



..... OPPORTUNITIES FOR FUNDERS

The passage of recent conservation-oriented legislation, together with annual appropriations and other mandatory funding streams, indicates that funding availability may not be the biggest problem for enacting rural conservation. **A myriad of barriers exists, which limit the reach of conservation funding.**

Access hurdles include: financial barriers (community match requirements and the use of loans vs. grants), grant writers and technical assistance, and awareness of application deadlines and funding award criteria.

- ➔ Private and philanthropic investments can help conservationists leverage federal funding to accelerate land, water, and wildlife restoration and conservation efforts. The [America the Beautiful Initiative and other recent legislation](#)^{2,3,4} provide funding and guidance^{6,11}, for programs that are popular with Montana private landowners¹⁵ including:
 - **Regional Conservation Partnership Program (USDA):** for partner-led conservation and restoration projects on private lands that generate climate benefits.
 - **Agricultural Conservation Easement (ALE) Program (USDA):** to acquire easements on agricultural land, including wetlands and grasslands.
 - **Forest Legacy Program (USDA):** to acquire easements on forest lands identified by states as being especially vulnerable to conversion and nature loss.
 - **Federal Surface Transportation Programs:** funding for wildlife-vehicle collision reduction projects; projects that improve habitat connectivity;

and training/research/data support for wildlife-vehicle conflict and needed projects.

- ➔ Uneven communications during the rollout of the “30x30” effort by the Administration challenged many Montana decision-makers and communities, creating suspicion and backlash. Conservationists are working overtime to assure communities and landowners about the effort and the opportunities. Assistance with communications and personnel to meet with potential partners will advance utilization of the programs.
- ➔ Support rural communities and NGO’s with staff or contractors to provide technical assistance and advice on the community assistance that might be appropriate for community needs. It’s a labyrinth of programs that could be presented more simply.
- ➔ Provide community organizations with staff or contractors, who specialize in technical government grant writing. One such effort has grown the ALE program and would [similarly](#)¹² develop and bring sought-after funds to Montana landscapes.
- ➔ Funders can also partner with tribes, ranchers and rural landowners to connect rural lands to public lands, using innovative protection tools, such as habitat leases, and exploring the feasibility of ideas working in other places.
- ➔ Fund community-based efforts that support local values and seek common ground/common sense solutions. ([Keep it Connected](#)¹⁵, a project of Heart of the Rockies Initiative and its 27 members, marries capital with landowners seeking tools to conserve and ecologically connect their land.)

Organizational Change

CHALLENGES

Since the pandemic and the “great resignation,” managers put staffing challenges into three categories: compensation, mental well-being, and cultural norms. Additionally, Montana’s growth, particularly in high-amenity areas, exacerbates housing affordability and availability, which tests an organizations’ ability to provide livable wages. Anecdotally, one interviewee mentioned that three staff members received rent increases of \$500/month or more in December 2022 — something recent salary increases could not address. **“We have a massive housing crisis right now. And it’s really terrifying.”**

Many of the organizations interviewed reported growth in staff and salaries (in a five-year period one organization went from seven full-time employees to 16) and most were optimistic about sustaining operations. However, there were threads of concern. Notably, most interviewees highlighted the generational shift in NGO leadership and the difficulty hiring, mentoring and retaining staff. Some expressed the difficulty in hiring staff to work in rural areas.

EXAMPLES OF SOLUTIONS

Solutions to the compensation, mental well-being, and cultural norms challenges included: instituting compensation ranges for positions providing employees with a salary trajectory; adding other compensation methods including bonuses and cost of living increases; moving personnel from a contractor to staff position; and reevaluating staffing costs to ensure that future grant proposals fully capture expenses.

In one instance, addressing the difficulty of hiring staff to work in rural areas was resolved by hiring and training local community members who participated in prior campaigns/issues; others managed with short-term contracts at higher costs/hour (this was especially true for traditional canvassers).

One interviewee noted that a position had been open for over a year but he was “willing to wait for the right candidate.” Others, facing hiring challenges have rewritten job descriptions, shifted the work to contractor positions or periodically deployed staff from other offices to rural project areas.

Managers have incorporated new policies to address employee well-being including: reducing the work week to 32 hours; increasing paid time off/vacation days; adding one or more ‘mental health’ days to the benefits package; and ensuring that all successes, even small organizational milestones, are celebrated — preferably in person.



A number of organizations mentioned reassessing internal cultural norms since undertaking diversity, equity and inclusion conversations. For many, revamping salary guidelines, incorporating internal decision-making models, and providing advancement opportunities addressed many employee needs. In other instances, employee passion for melding organizational mission with external social justice issues have led to mission and vision statements with an equity lens.

Managers advanced these conversations by increasing transparency, inclusion and communication around decision-making; providing training and professional development opportunities, and building avenues for staff to take on leadership roles. A recent [essay](#)¹⁴ addresses the fulfillment desires sought by employees, noting historical and structural challenges movements face and providing insights and suggestions for moving forward.

The word “commitment” arose often — that the work extended beyond attending a training or adopting a new policy. It required an ongoing, intentional effort to incorporate learnings and policies into organizations and programs. A number of interviewees mentioned some internal and external challenges: funding,

especially to retain Indigenous consultants; helping staff to transition to new ideas and “cultural norms” and balancing necessary internal conversations and learning while ensuring that programmatic responsibilities continue. “I think equity is an aha moment ...the idea that we really are biased, and we should be aware of it, and that we should try to do something about it.”

Interviewees shared practical examples and lessons learned in strengthening and continuing their diversity, equity and inclusion efforts. Two organizations have moved from a classic organizational hierarchy to a more distributed leadership structure, with power, decision-making and compensation readjusted across the organization based on roles and expertise. One interviewee offered this salient point on internal conversations, “we stay focused on what we can do about equity within our conservation mission. I think the board and staff agrees that we’re a conservation organization with an equity lens. We are not an equity organization with a conservation lens. **So, we’re not looking for equity projects for conservation to solve, we’re looking for conservation projects to produce equitably.**”



Montana Conservation Corps

Photo: National Park Service

One story of an organization’s equity journey began in 2014, when the [Montana Conservation Corps](#)¹⁵ (MCC) completely transformed its operations to embody its justice, equity and inclusion tenets. MCC aims to inspire young people through hands-on conservation service to be leaders, stewards of the land, and engaged citizens who improve their communities. It embarked on a strategic plan¹⁶ to double the number of diverse participants, to diversify its offerings with an emphasis on engaging younger Montanans, and to explore opportunities to partner with Indigenous communities. MCC realized that a focus on diversity and inclusion would bring significant opportunity to address contemporary issues while strengthening the organization and the delivery of its mission.

By 2019, MCC achieved much of what it had set out to do: it doubled the number of participants with innovative and specialized adult crews, added partnerships with tribal communities and schools, and it delivered innovative summer and after-school programs for high school and middle school students¹⁷. Its hard work was noticed — it received accolades and awards. However, transformation touched and strained every part of the organization from finances, human resources, and board governance. At the end of 2019, MCC decided to pause growth, reassess staff capacity, and ensure financial resilience going forward²⁰.

Today, MCC’s programs embodying its commitment include: **1)** Corps Members of Color and LGBTQIA2+ Corps Members, that build community, connection, and support during the season, **2)** specialty crews made up of members who hold the same or similar identities, the [Piikuni Lands Crew](#), [Women’s+ Trail Crews](#), and [Women’s Fuels and Fire Training Crews](#), and, **3)** two financial assistance programs to make programs more accessible. MCC has a 10 staff-member DEI team that oversees strategic direction and actively assesses DEI efforts.¹⁸ MCC’s prescient transformation was not without challenges but its intentional commitment provides a roadmap for other organizations embarking on change.

..... OPPORTUNITIES FOR FUNDERS

[Studies](#)¹⁹ have found that most (70%) learning and development comes from on-the-job training; with coaching and mentoring contributing 20%; and 10% from formal training through conferences, classes, etc. Interviewees were divided on the “capacity-building” support they received. Some did not get nearly enough and others wanted to be asked about the need for support before receiving it.

Additionally, many interviewees highlighted the lack of consistent, long-term, and flexible funding and described the challenges that result from short-term and restricted grants. Organizational inefficiencies described include more time spent looking for new funding, writing several reports per year for one-year grants, and the inability to invest in staff development.

Leaders mentioned that innovation and complex landscape programs suffer because of short-term or restricted funding looking for quick “wins.” Challenges included the inability to plan, to retain knowledgeable staff, and to keep multiple organizations and agencies committed to a long-term landscape vision. In addition, the number of foundations funding long-term landscape efforts has decreased, increasing program risks.

Finally, several large donors and foundations that have supported short-term projects have moved to other states due to the rise in Montana partisanship — in two instances leaving a six-figure budget shortfall requiring staff layoffs/reassignment.

➔ Ask grant-seekers about the changing costs of doing business: increasing wages, bonuses, and cost-of-living increases; cost of benefits; attracting and

keeping staff in expensive high-amenity communities; etc. Several interviewees mentioned the difficulty in hiring canvassers — explore solutions.

- ➔ Learn what organizations need to create greater impact: some need mentoring, others leadership training, others crave training on how to be better advocates. Support capacity investments that fit the organization.
- ➔ Support and develop more organizers through training, peer networks, and skill development. [Western Organization for Resource Councils](#) (WORC) shared grassroots organizing “how to” in Appendix III. WORC is holding two [Principles of Community Organizing Trainings](#)²⁰ in 2023. Help WORC and other organizers develop additional training and leadership development opportunities.
- ➔ The pandemic and current uncertain economic conditions have disrupted otherwise fairly dependable budget forecasting. All interviewees requested grant flexibility, general operating support grants, and multi-year grants.
- ➔ Support “entry-level positions” within organizations to provide new, aspiring conservationists an opportunity to become a part of the conservation movement.
- ➔ Support long-term/bigger-picture programs and not just short-term projects.

Emerging Partnerships

CHALLENGES

All interviewees recognize that the Western conservation movement has excluded and ignored diverse voices and perspectives, especially those of Indigenous peoples. Interviewees discussed their responsibility to find and embrace mission-aligned roles to advance and elevate tribal interests and rights.

While participation from tribes on public land conservation issues off the reservation is invaluable,

Another suggestion supported an ongoing commitment through education to a community of up-and-coming Native students, veteran Native environmental advocates and scholars via Montana State University and University of Montana. Courses, internships, visiting speakers, sponsorship of campus Native celebrations, etc. will build the next generation of leaders and bring indigenous-led conservation opportunities to the forefront.

“Some of the biggest lessons I’ve learned are that tribes and conservation groups need each other. Probably more than they realize...”

several interviewees spoke of the challenges. Tribal capacity is a significant issue as is the propensity for well-meaning but insufficient NGO engagement efforts, such as “...one and done requests like an invitation for a talk or a request for comments.” One interviewee suggested that organizations support Indigenous consultants who can advise conservationists, **“someone has to advocate and interface with conservation groups on behalf of tribes, especially on different issues off the reservation.”**

A number of interviewees noted that culturally and economically salient solutions to address biological diversity loss and climate change impacts must reflect the people who live, work and play on affected landscapes. Unlikely partners include housing advocates, rural community leaders, rural civic organizations, and clean air and water advocates to name a few. In addition to tribes, a number of organizations mentioned youth, retirees, veterans and industry as new partners.

EXAMPLES OF SOLUTIONS

Many interviewees believe Montana conservationists are employing a new iteration of internal and external strategies and tactics. “Collaboration plus,” e.g., addressing resource management planning across boundaries; building partnerships and trust with youth, tribes, and rural communities; finding shared values; and incorporating new organizational practices are core to current and future success.



Two grassroots organizations, [Forward Montana Foundation](#)²¹ and [Western Native Voice](#)²² are tackling voter registration, voter mobilization and leadership development to create sustainable change through community action. An inability to defeat bad legislation led both groups to advocate for change.

Three laws, passed in the 2021 Montana legislative session, would have ended Election Day voter registration, changed voter ID requirements, and banned paid ballot collection. Forward Montana Foundation, and Indigenous led Western Native Voice as well as four tribes and several other [plaintiffs](#)²³ challenged those laws, recognizing that the cumulative and detrimental impact of the laws fell on young and Indigenous voters.

House Bill 176 eliminated Election Day voter registration; Senate Bill 169 reduced student identification to a second-class form of voter ID; and House Bill 530 prohibited paid ballot collection.

Together and separately, the two organizations argued that the laws “[unconstitutionally burdened](#)” Montanans’ right to vote²⁴. After a September 2022 Montana Supreme Court ruling and a nine-day bench trial, the district court permanently enjoined the laws. As a result, none of the laws were in effect for Montana voters last November. The case has been appealed by the Secretary of State.

One interviewee familiar with the suite of cases mentioned three factors enabling its organization to take on the litigation: the importance of growing staff to take on challenging issues, a board of directors willing to step into litigation (a first for the organization), and the organizations’ ability to deepen and expand issue advocacy by building power and community.

Wild Montana and Business for Montana’s Outdoors (BFMO) are another example of a close and effective partnership. For over a decade they’ve worked together



on projects from securing permanent funding for the Land and Water Conservation Fund to acquiring new public lands and creating new state parks along the Lower Yellowstone River. This collaboration boosts the reach and efficacy of BFMO's efforts to protect public

land so that it continues to attract businesses and talent to Montana's communities. It also gives Wild Montana an even deeper bench of business and community leaders to grow a conservation movement around a shared love for Montana's wild public lands and waters.^{e3}

..... OPPORTUNITIES FOR FUNDERS

Engaging, organizing and mobilizing voices as diverse as the Montana landscape and its communities will generate durable conservation solutions. Embracing ecological, economic and social values through community-based collaborative conservation is necessary for resilient landscape scale conservation and management.

- ➔ Link landscape restoration, job training and new partners through programs that invite Indigenous youth, young women, and other young adults to hone leadership development, teamwork, and civic engagement skills like [Montana Conservation Corps](#)¹⁸.



- ➔ Work with conservationists to incorporate diversity, equity and inclusion concepts into their organizations, their program work and their engagement. Interviewees fell along a spectrum

of engagement from “just beginning that journey” to robust programs and staffing efforts.

- ➔ Develop inclusive collaborations/coalitions with diverse participants working with farmers and ranchers, sportsmen and women, tribes, and others with connections to the land and resources.
- ➔ Encourage authentic and respectful relationships with tribal nations. Provide assistance, via [Native Nexus](#)²⁵ or other Indigenous consultants for developing cross cultural competencies, assisting with off-reservation natural resource management issues, and creating positive relationships with Native American neighbors.
- ➔ Bring conservation leaders, tribal leaders and students into conversation about opportunities beyond specific projects. Sponsor courses, internships, Native scholars/academics on environmental issues.
- ➔ It is incumbent upon funders to take the time to learn firsthand the incredible indigenous-led conservation work happening across Montana's seven indigenous reservations. Organizations like Hopa Mountain are great resources who can help funders connect directly with tribal leaders working to protect their environment and culture while building economies and employing tribal members.

Public Land Management

CHALLENGES

There's an increasing recognition that the first century of conservation in the West was protecting [landscapes] and the second century is going to be connecting [landscapes].”

The survival of Montana's remarkably intact wildlife populations depends on their ability to move across the landscape for food, security and migration. Habitat loss and fragmentation threaten wildlife populations while climate change hastens the need for species to adapt to new conditions. An updated 2012 USFS Planning Rule and recent BLM guidance for identifying and protecting habitat connectivity provide ample policy and directives for science-based, ecologically resilient, and adaptive land management. Connectivity [modeling](#)²⁶ is increasingly becoming a key component of conservation planning.

However, connectivity management on federal lands alone is insufficient to protect migrating species that must cross private lands. Federal land managers need to collaborate with impacted

communities and implement policies and adaptive management efforts through integrated approaches and with unprecedented cooperation across agency, tribal, and private landowner boundaries to address these challenges. “It's about rulemaking, administrative decisions and other public land efforts that string wild nature and private lands together across the valley floors through easements, purchases of ranches and restoration ecology.”

One interviewee shared a current example of federal land management that is neither adaptive nor seemingly collaborative in northwestern Montana. The Flathead National Forest Special Use Permit program (commercial services, trails, facilities, and new structures) has proposed dozens of [commercial](#)²⁷ permits, which will increase access and use, while neighboring Glacier National Park, in an effort to reduce congestion, enhance visitor experience and protect resources, has instituted a vehicle permit entry system. It appears that use, access, and impacts on natural resources are changing dramatically and not coordinated.

EXAMPLES OF SOLUTIONS

After six years, 20,000 comments, and dozens of public hearings, the Custer-Gallatin National Forest released a final revised forest plan in 2022. The Custer-Gallatin Forest plays a crucial role in Greater Yellowstone: it links

Yellowstone National Park to Bozeman and beyond via the Gallatin and Madison Ranges and it is home to grizzly, elk and native trout. It is among the most visited National Forests in the country and also supplies 80%

of Bozeman's water to its [expanding population](#)²⁸. To say it is the region's recreation playground understates visitation and use — adjacent Yellowstone National Park welcomed 4.8M visitors in 2021, and the [Bozeman airport](#)²⁹ is the busiest in the region.

Conservationists realized that new forest protections and better land management would occur only if they joined forces with outdoor users and presented the Forest Service with a co-created agreement for land conservation and management. The recommendations needed to be drafted with recreationists, business owners, citizens and conservationists — a daunting and time-intensive endeavor.

The [Gallatin Forest Partnership](#) [30] (GFP), a coalition representing hunters, anglers, conservationists ([Greater Yellowstone Coalition](#), [The Wilderness Society](#), [Wild Montana](#)), outfitters, backcountry horsemen and women, mountain bikers, backcountry skiers, business owners, and others agreed to work together in late 2017. “We started with looking at our values versus our positions. We all have similar values. We may have different positions. I feel like the process was really impressive in this polarized environment that we are living in,” said one participant³¹.

To ensure a purposeful and equitable process, GFP adopted a charter for how the partners would work together and a strict schedule that tackled even the

thorniest issues. After 13 months of collaboration and trust building, a jointly supported plan with seven sections that addressed issues from new designations to invasive weed management and prescribed fire was codified by the Partnership and submitted to the Forest Service for consideration.

Together, the process and the resulting agreement proved that multiple interests can coexist in a place that is home to strong convictions, valuable resources, and a fiercely loved landscape.

It demonstrated that cooperation and involvement can lead to success. Not all needs were satisfied but flexibility, patience, and tenacity produced a process and an agreement that conservationists, recreationists and community members could live with and the Forest Service could accept.

The Final Forest Plan incorporates many recommendations submitted by the Partnership, adding 100,000 acres of recommended wilderness, of which 92,000 acres are in the Gallatin Range and its first-ever recommended wilderness. Additionally, designating 62,000 acres of backcountry areas allows existing recreation, adds conservation measures to limit activities and gives a recreation emphasis designation to several popular areas. While the GFP has its critics, this collective effort is working to advance conservation and certainly does not represent the end of the story for land protection efforts in the Gallatin range.

“It’s not a coincidence that the Final Plan included significant recommendations from the Gallatin Forest Partnership Agreement, which Forest Supervisor Mary Erickson called ‘the most compelling for this landscape ... due to the area-specific recommendations combined with local knowledge, and the outreach and coalition-building across diverse interests that accompanied their proposal.’”

— Maddy Munson, Bozeman Chronicle Feb 10, 2022³²

..... OPPORTUNITIES FOR FUNDERS

Several major national forest planning processes are coming to a close, but several more opportunities wait in the wings. These forest plans are significant in that they will direct all aspects of forest management for the next 20 years or more. The next phase of public land management engagement will contend with the implementation of recently updated plans for National Forests and BLM lands.

➔ Due to staff turnover, there are fewer skilled public land planning specialists to influence the implementation phase of the new Forest Service and BLM plans, which is especially important as the new plans monitoring, assessment, and amendment

processes proceed. Funding a small centralized and shared team of nonprofit specialists could serve a number of organizations and communities in Montana. Consider supporting training to build organizational skills and understanding of forest planning.

- ➔ Support increased co-management & co-stewardship of public lands & waters by tribes. Explore avenues for Indigenous land protection and cultural conservation efforts.
- ➔ Provide support that increases staffing capacity with more expertise to deeply engage in agency processes and decision-making.



Growth

CHALLENGES

All across the state of Montana, the impacts of population growth on affordable housing are profound. Housing affordability is impacting the ability of nonprofit partners to find and retain quality staff. Businesses are closing or reducing their hours because they can no longer find employees to work there and many have left the state due to lack of housing.

According to the [Montana Regional MLS](#)³³, nearly 1,000 properties, all 50 acres or larger, have sold in western Montana between 2020-2022, nearly doubling the number of sales from the previous three years. A 2020 update by [Headwaters Economics](#)³⁴ found that one-quarter of all homes in Montana were constructed since 2000 with the number of single-family homes growing by more than 50% from 1990 to 2018; more

than 60% of homes constructed in Montana were built outside of incorporated areas; and, nearly half of homes were constructed on large lots of more than 10 acres. Between 1990-2020, 1.3 million acres of undeveloped land have been converted to housing, an area larger than Glacier National Park.

The recent explosion of [land prices](#)³⁵ may hamper organizations hoping to establish wildlife corridors and assist private landowners [seeking](#)¹² conservation opportunities for their lands. Continued demand for amenity properties³⁶ (riparian corridors, adjacent to National Forests, etc.) and limited real estate supply near larger population centers are factors driving price/acre and land conversion, which is not forecast to diminish in the near term, particularly in Western Montana.

EXAMPLES OF SOLUTIONS

Knowledge is power. Understanding public perception is key to mobilizing toward solutions. The recent University of Montana 2022 [Public Lands Survey](#)³⁷ indicated an increasing concern (57%) about the pace of growth and its impacts on housing affordability and availability (92% a serious problem) and the loss of open space and ranches (85% a serious problem). **“Our mountain communities rely on recreation, rely on service workers, rely on nonprofits to continue....**

[what happens] when those local businesses and organizations can’t sustain the workforce?”

A week after the poll was released, Montana released data showing its 2021 economic growth as 7th [strongest](#)³⁸ in the nation, which was likely reflected in the earlier poll results. Census [data](#)³⁹ released in late 2022, indicate a growth rate of 1.6% during July 2020 and July 2021, reportedly one of only a few states that grew by over 1%.

Just as important is data about land use. Headwaters Economics (HE) studied recreational access and **demand**⁴⁰ in Bozeman’s nearby Bridger Mountains finding that weekend summer trail counts exceeded 2,400 uses/day with 1,400 uses/day during the week. Recreation and tourism are important **economic**⁴¹ drivers for Montana yet **pressure on popular places can outstrip ecological carrying capacity, downgrade the experience and negatively impact natural resources**. Custer Gallatin National Forest and Gallatin County joined HE on the study and are working with surrounding communities and stakeholders to measure increased uses of public lands and develop resource priorities so that demand is planned and impacts to wildlife and other resources are reduced.

A forthcoming report from Headwaters Economics⁴² will address issues and strategies to mitigate rapid growth impacts on communities and landscapes.

As Montana towns and cities look for solutions, many are urging that new housing be built that minimizes sprawl and includes environmentally sustainable building practices while keeping new homes affordable.

One such development, **Bridger View**, is pioneering a new model that incorporates “compact neighborhood design,” sustainability and affordability all in one development. Bridger View is building 63 homes on 8 acres on Bozeman’s north side. Half of those units are earmarked as “workforce” housing affordable units — targeting the 80-120% “area mean income,” with essential workers such as teachers, firefighters, nurses and city workers in mind. In addition, these units are some of the most environmentally sustainable homes ever built in the area, having received two different awards from the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design award rating system.^{e4}

..... OPPORTUNITIES FOR FUNDERS

Montana’s economy is changing as evidenced by the increasing population and record real estate sales. Growth is fueled by an increase in remote work, a diversifying economy, high quality of life with easy access to public lands, and access to a connected airport. Challenges stemming from the growing population include affordable housing for rural and urban residents, particularly in high recreation-dependent communities, and wage sustainability so that employees can live and work at organizations that now find themselves in high-amenity communities.

➔ Funders need to consider encouraging grant-seekers to include adequate overhead when seeking funds. Often the “hidden” costs (unexpected wage increases

to attract staff, increasing cost of rent, etc.) of a project or program are not fully accounted for or anticipated in grant applications. Flexibility to manage unexpected costs was mentioned several times.

- ➔ Query grant-seekers, especially those living/working in high amenity areas about how housing is impacting attracting/hiring/retaining staff.
- ➔ Work closely with communities to help identify solutions to the economic, social and cultural impacts of growth.

Climate Change

CHALLENGES

The 2021 [Greater Yellowstone Climate Assessment](#)⁴³ described climate change impacts on six major watersheds, detailing past trends, current conditions, and projected future changes. The assessment forecast a drier and warmer Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem (GYE), with warmer winters and hotter summers, earlier runoff, a longer growing season, and less overall precipitation. A larger percentage of winter precipitation will fall as rain, reducing seasonal snowpack stores necessary for steady water release through the year. The 2017 [Montana Climate Assessment](#)⁴⁴, focused on agriculture, forests, and water for the entire state, but findings were similar: hotter temperatures and decreased snowpack will

exacerbate late season streamflow and there will be more frequent and more severe forest fires.

Changes in precipitation, both timing and amounts, are of particular concern. The unprecedented 2022 [flooding](#)⁴⁵ of Montana rivers inflicted chaos on families, communities, and infrastructure. The impacts on agriculture and rural landscapes/livelihoods, recreation, public health, wildlife connectivity, and the economy, including community development, are hard to overstate. “In the wake of the flooding last year, I am thinking about how we start helping communities prepare to be resilient to extreme weather events that wreak havoc and reveal the weaknesses of rural economies.”

EXAMPLES OF SOLUTIONS

A recent [study](#)⁴⁷ examined shifting ecoregions due to climate change and the subsequent impacts on biodiversity. A visualization tool, [Analog Atlas](#)⁴⁸ shows how ecosystems might change with the climate. It is clear that the static boundaries of public lands cannot fully contain ecoregion shifts resulting from climate change. Other recent tools available for land managers

and conservation planners include the [Climate Atlas](#)⁴⁹ and a decision-support framework⁵⁰ for resource management in a changing climate. Land managers and conservation planners have the opportunity to incorporate these new tools and consider adding climate corridors to planning and management decisions.

“You’ve got to have public support for environmental protection or it won’t happen.”

— William Ruckelshaus, First EPA Administrator⁴⁶

Citizens will also have a large role to play. Environmental activism addressing climate concerns has a long history in Montana. [Northern Plains Resource Council](#), [Montana Environmental Information Center](#) and many other citizen groups shaped Montana's bedrock environmental laws including the Major Facility Siting Act, Hard Rock Mining Impact Act, Water Use Act, Strip Mining and Reclamation Act, Coal Conservation Act, Coal Severance Tax Act, and the federal Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act of 1977⁵¹.

More recently, other civic engagement organizations, including the Forward Montana Foundation are connecting climate issues to the candidates because **“without leaders in office who are willing to act on climate, we cannot enact the policy solutions necessary to keep our planet livable.”** Nationally,

climate activism was key to new legislation^{4,3}, which provides incentives to decarbonize Montana through funding improvements to roads, bridges, and buildings; for block grants to prepare community climate readiness; and much more.

Three groups, [Montana Environmental Information Center](#)⁵² (MEIC), [Northern Plains Resource Council](#)⁵³, and concerned residents comprising the “Thiel Road Coalition” are using the full suite of advocacy tools: educating decision-makers, [using media](#)⁵⁴ to influence public opinion, bringing [legal action](#)⁵⁵, and engaging in direct action, to hold NorthWestern Energy accountable for pursuing destructive new fossil fuel development.

NorthWestern Energy proposed building a 175-megawatt methane gas plant in Laurel, MT with a pipeline to the plant through a community park and under the



Yellowstone River. The project, sited across from a residential neighborhood and 300 feet from the Yellowstone River, currently sits in zoning limbo with neither the City of Laurel nor Yellowstone County asserting zoning jurisdiction over the construction site. MEIC also requested a District Court hearing⁵⁶ on

the scope of the Montana Department of Environmental Quality's (DEQ) environmental analysis for the Northwestern Energy air pollution permit. A decision is expected at any time. **In the meantime, Montana's engaged citizenry continues its decades-long tradition of climate activism.**

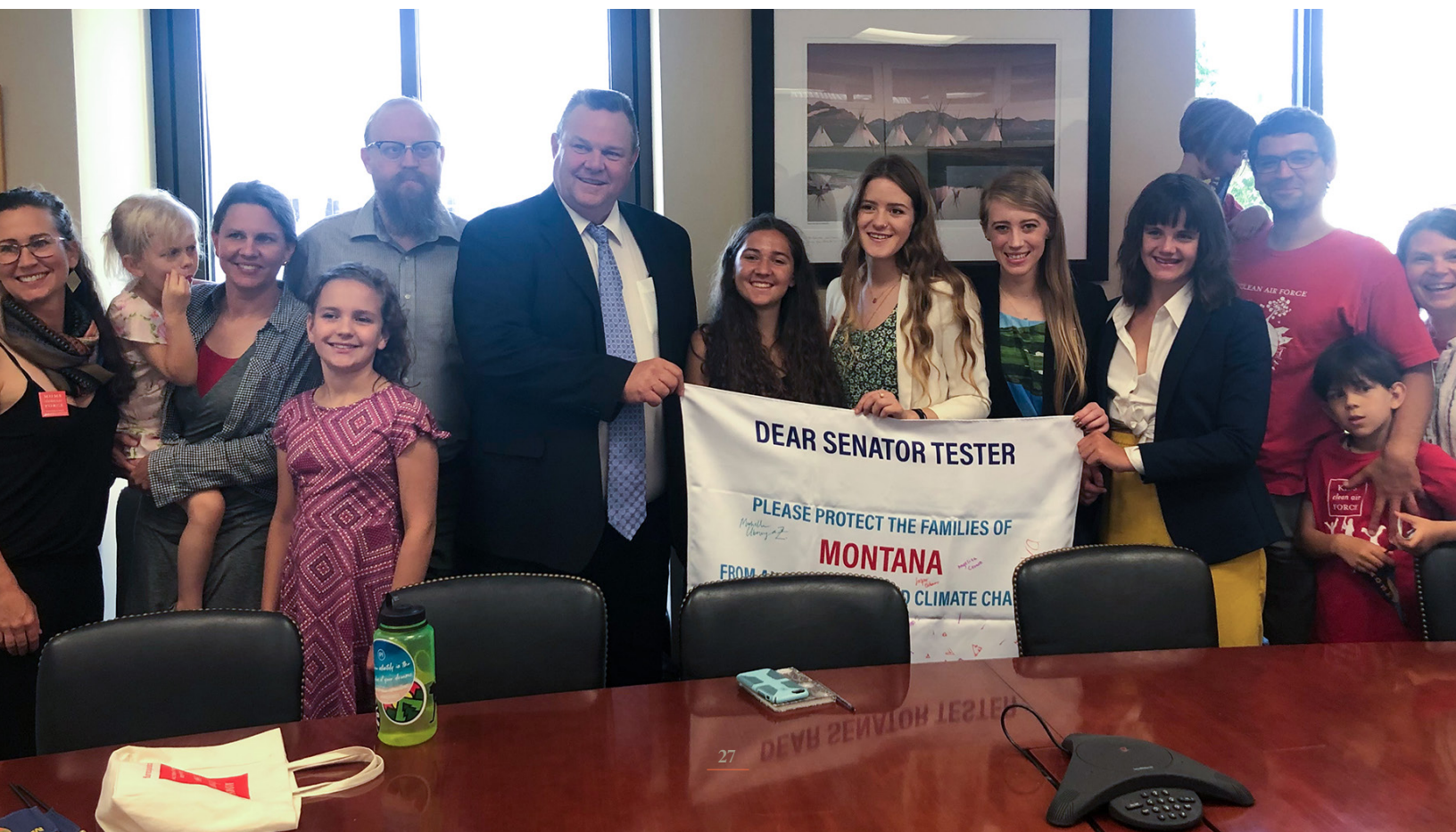
..... OPPORTUNITIES FOR FUNDERS

As Montana's climate changes so do its natural resources. Maintaining a healthy and sustainable landscape is vital for people, wildlife and ecosystems.

➔ Protecting or restoring habitat connectivity during climate change is a new and often confusing undertaking. Support solutions-oriented research such as [this new study](#)⁵⁷ that illustrates an approach that combines the importance of place to sustaining

connectivity and the type of land ownership.

➔ Support development and implementation of Community Resilience Plans in Park County, Missoula, Bozeman and other interested communities. Plans address the impacts of flood, drought, or fire, on community residents and infrastructure, housing, transportation and mental health.



Wildlife Expansion

CHALLENGES

Wildlife conflicts threaten the long-term viability of carnivore populations and migratory wildlife as well as landowner operations. The private lands that connect public lands are crucial elements

of migratory habitats and winter ranges. Expanding populations of wolves, bears and some ungulates (elk in particular) have frustrated rural communities, livestock producers, land managers and resource advocates due to competing interests.

EXAMPLES OF SOLUTIONS

Emerging [carnivore conflict prevention](#)⁵⁸ efforts and [elk management conversations](#)⁵⁹ are aimed at reducing the risks of and to migratory species and recovering wildlife populations across private lands. Predictable stable funding along with improved coordination at both the state and federal level will help mitigate and prevent conflicts. Effective and durable solutions must be co-produced by and with livestock producers, landowners, hunters, agency land managers, and resource advocates.

A [recent](#)³³ headline, *Even grizzly bears are getting priced out as Montana real estate booms*, noted the challenges of connecting grizzly bear habitat in the fast-paced Montana real estate market. Additionally, as grizzly bear populations continue to recover, bears are moving across private lands with homes, small communities and working lands. These private lands, often adjoining

protected areas, support wildlife corridors for expanding wide-ranging species and important winter range for migratory species. Conflict prevention programs aim to reduce threats to wildlife populations on the move while maintaining the health and resiliency of rural communities that confront the challenges of living and working with wildlife.

“It’s complicated trying to get all those public and private interests [working] together and towards solutions for conflict prevention,” said one interviewee when asked about the partnerships and people working to find solutions for wildlife conflicts. There are a number of conflict prevention partnerships ([Montanan’s for Safe Wildlife Passage](#)⁶⁰, [Yellowstone Safe Passages](#)⁶¹), as well as a multi-state suite of partners, the [Conflict Reduction Consortium](#)⁶² (with Heart of the Rockies Initiative⁶³ and Greater Yellowstone Coalition⁶⁴) that

“It’s complicated trying to get all those public and private interests [working] together and towards solutions for conflict prevention.”

are working to protect wildlife connectivity, to improve coordination with state/federal land managers and to build understanding and trust through increased communication and coordination.

Montana's Scaling Up, a trio of unlikely partners: Heart of the Rockies Initiative, [Natural Resource Defense Council](#) (NRDC), and [National Parks and Conservation Association](#) (NPCA), are focused on collaborating for conflict prevention. Scaling Up partners share many of the concerns of the other efforts and have found common ground in two wildlife conflict strategies: conflict prevention and collaboration. The partners

recently submitted a suite of recommendations to the US Department of Interior and the US Department of Agriculture to drive incentive-based conflict prevention measures. The measures are intended to sustain working-land livelihoods, increase safety, reduce bear mortality, enhance habitat connectivity, and build the durable political alliances necessary for management of grizzly bear populations irrespective of their listing status⁶⁵. The Scaling Up partners are moving towards a more deliberate partnership with the Conflict Reduction Consortium, including a joint conflict prevention workshop for agencies, landowners, tribes and partners.

..... OPPORTUNITIES FOR FUNDERS

Conflict prevention and collaboration by landowners and conservationists must address social, ecological and economic aspects of living with wildlife, particularly grizzly bears. In Montana, bears moving between the Northern Continental Divide and Greater Yellowstone Ecosystems provide an opportunity to restore genetic connectivity between populations. There is no institutional structure for funding or landowner assistance to prevent conflicts from occurring.

- ➔ Support Scaling Up and similar efforts to grow federal and state technical assistance for core conflict prevention practices through financial assistance to state, tribal nation and local partners, including watershed associations and landowner-led groups. Consider supporting delivery of outreach and education efforts.
- ➔ Support efforts to reduce wildlife conflicts, including [Blackfoot Challenge](#)⁶⁶, [People and Carnivores](#)⁶⁷ and local watershed organizations.



Future Conservation Strategies



S T R A T E G I E S

For many, this moment feels like an inflection point — a recognition that the way the 2005-2016 conservation wins occurred would not be sufficient to meet current and anticipated opportunities and challenges. Although past conservation efforts were very successful, in retrospect, some felt those very significant conservation gains were “transactional” and came at the expense of “transformational change.” Several interviewees mentioned the rise of ideological/partisan pushback from Western conservation gains as one reason for needed changes. Others stressed the importance of inclusive conversation, authentic engagement, and community collaboration in developing lasting approaches for conservation. Durable conservation was interpreted to mean not just securing a conservation win but about “deepening the bench” so that future wins are built on shared decision-making, broader framing of the needs and opportunities, and building a community movement for transformational change.

Several interviewees mentioned that the volatility of current partisanship, nationally and in Montana, undermines what success might look like. One interviewee stressed the need to use “all available tools” to advance essential conservation. “I think the most durable social change in a movement requires bringing people along. But I’m becoming less averse to the opportunistic strike and then hanging on to it because it feels like [with climate change] everything’s eroding too quickly. You have to play both the long game and the short game. But maybe in this era, in this time, in this moment, right now in Montana, maybe the short game matters more than we thought it did.”

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Collaborate more broadly.

Recent collaborative efforts focused on voices that mattered to state/federal agencies and/or elected officials. Building a campaign within an affected community and empowering local leaders impacted by the issue to voice support to decision-makers proved to be a powerful combination, which demonstrated that community advocates and a decision-maker’s constituents collaborated in the quest for conservation. But there is a distinct recognition that how collaboratives are organized is shifting.

“Who are we battling? It’s not timber companies. So, maybe, it’s just that the collaboratives look different [now] than they did. We’re building different kinds of networks with tribes and First Nations and different kinds of voices. And it’s still a networking process, but it’s just networking in different spaces.”

Consequently, a new *“network phase”* of collaboratives is emerging in Montana. One effort, involving wildlife conflict, which was previously discussed, assigns funding responsibilities to national/regional organizations and implementation to local, known and trusted organizations.

Several interviewees also suggested that a subtle shift in how collaborations were funded might significantly improve and address landscape scale efforts. By funding the overall collaborative effort instead of each individual member organization working in the collaborative, competition for funding and credit for accomplishment would diminish and the focus on solutions might improve. “I see organizations and people more willing to appreciate the roles of other organizations and see the value of collaborative work as opposed to trying to own certain work or certain spaces ... [However], if the funding is coming in at the landscape scale, I think that starts to shift that competitive dynamic.”

With a focus on landscape scale efforts, the collaborations that are forming need to be long-term endeavors. One interviewee suggested that landscape-scale strategies could take 10 years, much like the early conservation efforts in the Crown of the Continent. Finally, one interviewee offered this advice on working locally: **using common sense, showing up, doing what you say you will do, and importantly, “we need to listen to what they say and quit trying to tell people what their local problems are.”**



Community-based grassroots organizing is key.

Civic power does not just materialize from an election or a successful mobilization event, it requires long-term attention to community needs, processes, and sustainable organizations. Grassroots organizations and their leaders must engage people in activism if they are going to be successful. Interviewees suggested a number of ways to strengthen efforts emphasizing recruiting, developing, and training volunteer leaders, “I think there is a need to train more organizers and to do real leadership development.”

Grassroots organizing integrates local values and goals into powerful narratives in a myriad of ways such as holding public figures accountable, developing pragmatic solutions with a community, or building alliances in the face of marginalization. Many interviewees mentioned the importance of connecting with local allies, “it’s really easy to get somebody to sign a petition or send an email by clicking a button, and that does have impact. But who are we engaging, and how strong are those connections? **We need to have people that believe in our work, that live in rural Montana. We need to have people be willing to speak up..... and not just by sending an email, but by actually contacting their legislator, doing an individual outreach or recruiting other volunteers.**” Evolving [research](#)⁶⁸ shows that authentic grassroots voices and organizations that develop partnerships and collaborative efforts result in successful outcomes more often than not.



Interviewees mentioned the perils and the pitfalls of technology. Access to sophisticated data and data analysts has been helpful but “I think that reliance on data has resulted in a subjugation of anecdotal and qualitative experience of organizers on the ground.” As a result, many organizers are creating a hybrid, “marrying the qualitative and the quantitative, to meet our communities where they are.”

Finally, several interviewees mentioned the need for organizations to join forces to tackle complex challenges, “more work together between organizations, recognizing that a single organization won’t have the ability to actually meet this current political moment. But it has to be a coordinated effort across multiple organizations in the movement.”

Developing New Allies and Partners.

Relationships and partnerships that include affected communities are emerging to address common interests. Interviewees talked about developing and deepening relationships with landowners, rural communities, tribes/tribal nations, as well as housing advocates, businesses, community associations, etc. All interviewees spoke of their work with tribal nations including this example: “We have a whole program area that we built into and launched out of a new strategic plan focused on working with tribes. We have hired Indigenous staff and have an office on a tribal reservation in the region. We had to get to a place [with our board] where we were talking about it and planning for it [to be] a permanent part of the organizational chart moving forward.”

“It’s not anything new, it’s going slow, it’s showing up, it’s being consistent. It’s knowing when to support and knowing when to step back. And I think genuinely also, just knowing when to apologize, and how to apologize effectively, when you do mess up.”

Most interviewees recognized the power of tribes/tribal nations both on offense and defense. “A fundamental change is the power and involvement of tribes. Tribal power is recognized, especially the power of the veto — if a tribe doesn’t want something, it’s not going to happen. But if the tribe does want something, it’s far more likely to happen.”

When asked about building relationships with tribes, an Indigenous interviewee shared this, “It’s not anything new, it’s going slow, it’s showing up, it’s being consistent. It’s knowing when to support and knowing when to step back. And I think genuinely also, just knowing when to apologize, and how to apologize effectively, when you do mess up. The organizations that I think are the ones that are doing the best at it are where you have staff that genuinely enjoy that engagement and are committed to it. **I think we need to make sure that that’s not just a fad. And it doesn’t fade from the priority of other funders because, in all of these campaigns, whether it’s transboundary mining or the Lower Snake River Dam, or return of buffalo, the tribes are in this for the long haul, whether there’s funding or not.**”



Building power for progressive change.

Interviewees spoke broadly about their 501(c)(3) nonpartisan efforts but often noted work undertaken by allied 501(c)(4) organizations. Interviewees were clear that while they referenced allied work, only 501(c)(3) efforts were supported by The Kendeda Fund and other philanthropic funders.

Civic engagement and progressive social change activists are developing new relationships and broader and deeper networks through policy advocacy, voter education, organizing and in some instances litigation. While many of the interviewees are specifically structured to organize and mobilize for change, most interviewees mentioned the core value of engagement: enabling and inspiring people to use their voices to effect change.

Boldness, flexibility and persistence were three consistent themes that emerged from interviews. The ability to tackle new endeavors was attributed to organizational growth in staff capacity/compensation, skill building, and adaptive leadership. Three illustrative examples follow.



Boldness. When strategic efforts around voter education and mobilization didn't prevent several bills limiting voter participation in the 2021 legislature, one organization's staff, board and its constituency strategically and boldly pivoted. "I think another area of change is trying out new tactics and strategies. Litigation, that was a really huge step for the board. It was a big moment to step into the litigation arena and take that risk."

Persistence. Relationships, skill, and commitment are key to developing and building leadership and power, as is knowing what to change and what to keep constant. For one interviewee, organizing is fundamental:

"One thing that's a constant in terms of the work we do, and the outreach, is that basic focus on community organizing and the outreach to individuals. It is working locally, on local issues that people care about, and engaging them in the struggle to solve those issues."

Flexibility. The pandemic, social reckoning, and partisan politics have challenged interviewees in the last 3-5 years. The ability to adapt to circumstances and remain flexible, whether for internal organizational change or external strategy and tactics was shared by all interviewees. "We're constantly looking for where we will have influence and leverage, and we will adapt our strategies accordingly."



Building Rural Economies.

Interviewees identified rural community vitality, economic well-being, and shared values inextricably intertwined with conservation. Several recent [reports](#)^{1,69} support interviewees' beliefs and indicate that rural residents expressed strong support for environmental protection — even if doing so entails some cost to economic growth.

The same reports offered insights on who rural residents trust with respect to environmental issues and what messages are most appealing to rural residents. A recent messaging [report](#)⁷⁰ on rural conservation and partnership offers suggestions, as does advice on working locally from Ben Long, Resource Media (Appendix II).

Several new opportunities for rural investment indicate that attention to how federal assistance is delivered to rural landscapes is getting attention. Recent investments announced by the Administration^{2,3,4} and the upcoming reauthorization of the Farm Bill present ample opportunities to secure funding for private landowners and conservation partnerships. **“The value in investing in rural communities and investing in long term work to bridge that urban-rural divide [needs to be] the rule and not the exception.”**

Interviewees are bridging rural and tribal lands conservation efforts despite the political, cultural and economic challenges. “Local community economic development is much more of a commitment for [us] but [also] for a number of the [other] groups in Montana and that’s something we all need to be focusing on. It’s helped by the fact that there’s suddenly money for communities. We can be helping bring funding, helping see opportunities, and building new engagement, relationships, and trust that can then set us up for dialogue that might or might not lead to conservation. There’s movement in Montana — groups and individuals are recognizing [community resilience] and wanting to focus on that.”

Despite the challenges, the often conflicting and competing interests, and the uncertainty of climate change, all interviewees mentioned their resolve and their hope. Current leaders are building on decades of success, diversifying their ranks and addressing challenges. One interviewee wrote:

“While we know challenges await us ...we’ve been building our capacity for this moment, and we are ready to make sure [constituent] voices are heard throughout all of our democratic processes.”



Current and Emerging Conservation Partners



CONSERVATION PARTNERS

Conservation leaders attributed past and current conservation successes to timely and effective partnerships^{TS1.e2}. Going forward, interviewees stressed the need to develop deeper and stronger relationships with diverse partners and stakeholders to ensure sustainable solutions, and gave instructive examples of this work in action.

Working in rural communities and with landowners.

Private lands in Montana are the most productive for wildlife food, security and migration. A recent [study](#)¹ indicates that **rural Westerners broadly support conservation but place their greatest trust in solutions forged close to home**. Not surprisingly, communities want a say in decision making and resource management. While many residents support conservation ([Public Lands Survey](#)⁷¹), interviewees noted the need to build stronger and deeper partnerships with rural community leaders and landowners to develop better solutions, design new approaches and fashion sustainable outcomes. The added complexity of climate change and its risks will require coordinated conservation approaches that are flexible, adaptive and dynamic.



Building local power to achieve conservation goals.

Interviewees noted that meaningful change occurs through and with people who advocate for their own needs and priorities. A number of Montana organizations create that change through community



organizing, outreach, issue education and/or policy advocacy. A number of interviewees have expanded their reach by adding 501(c)(4)s and political organizations (PAC's) so they can better highlight their issues with elected officials. Further, several Montana 501(c)(3) and 501(c)(4) conservation organizations work in coalition to organize conferences, lobby on legislation, or better coordinate their advocacy activities. [Forward Montana Foundation](#)²¹, [Montana Conservation Voters](#)⁷², [Northern Plains Resource Council](#)⁷³, and [Park County Environmental Council](#)⁷⁴ are a few of the civic engagement entities that are making significant contributions in Montana through engagement at the local level.

Local, Regional and National Organizations working in concert.

Conservation leaders were clear that Montana's conservation success lies in the diversity of its conservation organizations from local watershed organizations and ranchland associations to regional, state-wide and national organizations. Broadly, and traditionally, local organizations provide on-the-ground action for habitat restoration, land management and/or raising public concern through education and outreach. State and national organizations provide expertise (science, communications, government relations), address issues across a larger landscape, and/or provide comments on public agency land management and policy decisions. National organizations provide access to decision makers in Washington, D.C. While these traditional roles still play out, there are other forces at play such as technology and new financial models changing how Montana conservation organizations' work at multiple scales. It's not unusual to have ranchland association members keynoting national meetings or scientists from national organizations tackling local resource challenges.

Creating alliances with decision-makers.

Local, state, federal and tribal governments fill a multitude of conservation roles: making stewardship and protection decisions, setting resource policy and regulation, and providing service through education, funding, science, and interagency coordination. Natural resource management involves agencies managing water quantity/quality/infrastructure, highway construction, housing, and agricultural policy.

Interviewees listed a number of new and critical funding opportunities involving governments and agencies that

promise to significantly advance conservation work. Federal legislation in 2021-2022 included the [America the Beautiful Initiative](#)², the [Inflation Reduction Act](#)³, and the [Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act](#)⁴ administered by multiple agencies with state, local and tribal governments, providing significant resources for land protection and stewardship. A 2021 joint [Secretarial Order](#)⁷⁵ between USDA and DOI codified a policy to facilitate tribal agreements to collaborate on co-stewardship of natural resources, heralding interagency cooperation. Engaging appropriate agency partners with communities and their decision-makers offers an opportunity for durable solutions.

Engaging tribes.

Tribes and Indigenous communities have stewarded Montana land, water, and wildlife for millennia although their lands were ceded or taken by the US Government through treaties and forced removal. Many of these lands



are now federally managed by the National Park Service, US Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, and US Fish and Wildlife Service. Grantee partners have identified building lasting partnerships with tribes and tribal governments as a high priority and an emerging opportunity.

Montana offers a number of examples of tribal efforts to obtain protection of traditional and cultural

lands, including the 1982 [Mission Mountains Tribal Wilderness](#)⁷⁶ negotiated between the US Forest Service and Confederated Salish Kootenai Tribes (CSKT) and the recent transfer of the [National Bison Range](#)⁷⁷ to CSKT management. Despite decades of opposition, exploitation of federally-managed Indigenous cultural and ecological lands continues, most recently by a US District Court's [reinstatement](#)⁷⁸ of a federal oil and gas lease in Badger Two Medicine. A [recent](#)⁷⁹ paper by

Monte Mills, University of Washington School of Law and Native American Law Center and Martin Nie, University of Montana, Bolle Center for People and Forests, presents the context of co-management of federal lands as well as the legal framework, current and potential policies, and practical paths forward. The current Administration is beginning to [collaborate](#)⁸⁰ with tribal nations on co-stewardship of public lands and waters.



Conclusion



..... A SUCCESS STORY

Montana conservation efforts have been exceedingly successful including: significant public land protection, growth of the private land protection cohort, available conservation and climate science, seasoned and emerging organizers, effective coalition and collaboration models, nascent inclusion of Indigenous people and impacted communities in conservation conversations, and a talented cadre of skilled, knowledgeable, and talented conservationists. Recent polls indicate a high receptivity of Montanans to more conservation. Bringing all components essential for success to scale across priority public lands and private lands will stem biological diversity losses and mitigate climate change impacts.

Given the availability of federal funds and potential for the next generation of philanthropic investments, surmounting obstacles and achieving more community-based transformational progress becomes possible. ●



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Appendix



Appendix I: Interviewees

Name	Affiliation
Kiah Abbey	Montana Voices
Peter Aengst	The Wilderness Society
Daniel Anderson	Common Ground
Kayje Booker	Wild Montana
Betsy Buffington	National Parks and Conservation Association
Gary Burnett	Heart of the Rockies Initiative
Caroline Byrd	Cbyrd Strategies
Barb Cestero	The Wilderness Society
Scott Christiansen	Greater Yellowstone Coalition
Shane Doyle	Native Nexus
Teresa Erikson	Northern Plains Resource Council (former staff now volunteer)
Jennifer Ferenstein	The Wilderness Society
Ben Gabriel	Wild Montana
Jodi Hilty	Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative
Kiersten Iwai	Forward Montana
Michael Jamison	National Parks and Conservation Association
Cari Kimball	Montana Environmental Information Center
Peter Metcalf	Glacier Two Medicine Alliance
Erin Farris-Olsen	National Wildlife Federation
Pat Sweeney	A Better Big Sky (formerly WORC)
Land Tawney	Backcountry Hunters and Anglers
Whitney Tawney	Montana Conservation Voters
Michelle Uberuaga	Park County Environmental Coalition

Appendix II: Ten Ways to Win In the Conservative West

by Ben Long, Resource Media Advisor

Ways to win in the (Red) West

Conservation is always hard. It's always been hard in the American West, and not getting easier. The deck is stacked and the slog is uphill. Quick wins are usually short term. We are most often on the defense. But given what is at stake, there is no time to waste. And there is no reason to quit. I've watched conservationists win in states like Idaho and Montana for 30 years and have learned this:

1. Rule No. 1: Meet people where they are. We are not like most people. Conservationists tend to be wealthier, whiter, more liberal, more secular, more educated than our neighbors. We need to understand our neighbors':

- ➔ Values
- ➔ Hopes
- ➔ Fears
- ➔ Language
- ➔ Media choices

2. Issues divide but values bridge. We need to answer the questions, So what? Why should I care? The answer boils down to values. Deep down, so called "conservative" values aren't really conservative. We tend to win when we successfully frame our issues around shared core values.

- ➔ Freedom
- ➔ Prosperity
- ➔ Patriotism
- ➔ Pride of place
- ➔ Family
- ➔ Spirituality/religion
- ➔ Responsibility

3. There is no monopoly on the truth. Agree to disagree. We can all stand a bit of humility. We can all stand to walk in another's shoes and see the world from

their perspective. We may not change our views, but we will better understand our neighbors and find better solutions.

- ➔ Listen to learn
- ➔ Bite thy tongue
- ➔ Focus on the bridge, not the gulf
- ➔ We are here to make policy, not just make a point.

4. Trust is the basic currency of communication.

Who is doing the talking is more important than what is said. Learn to share the spotlight. This means putting your ego and even your organization aside. Of course it's sometimes important to take credit. But to win, it's more important to share it.

- ➔ Be prepared to answer the question, says who?
- ➔ If they don't trust you, who do they trust?
- ➔ If that someone is not yet an ally, they are part of your audience.
- ➔ Work to build trust through mutual understanding
- ➔ Relationships are fundamental.
- ➔ We don't have the numbers to win alone. We need allies.
- ➔ Be prepared to answer: What have you done for me lately?
- ➔ Learn to be good allies — not just transactional

6. *Patience and flexibility*

- ➔ None of this is quick. It takes real dedication.
- ➔ Leaders have both deep local understanding and global vision.
- ➔ “The most radical thing an environmentalist can do is stay put,” Gary Snyder.
- ➔ Always be learning, everything is an experiment
- ➔ Never waste a good mistake

7. *Understand the appetite for change*

- ➔ John Russonello: social movements rise and fall on the public’s core values and appetite for change.
- ➔ Hint: Out West, the appetite for change is LOW. People like the West how it is or how it was.
- ➔ Frame our issues around preserving the status quo, not upending it.

8. *Understand that people can have the same goal for different reasons. We protected Haskill Basin, near Whitefish for the following reasons. They are ALL valid.*

- ➔ Habitat for threatened lynx and grizzly bear
- ➔ Recreation for mountain bikes and cross-country skiing
- ➔ A good place to hunt and fish
- ➔ Protecting a source of clean water
- ➔ Keeping a supply of logs for the local sawmill
- ➔ Keeping taxes down

9. *Take the opportunity, but not the bait. Our critics want to force us to play the villain in their narrative. Don’t do it. Tell OUR story. Don’t let them set the agenda, define the narrative or dominate the conversation.*

- ➔ “Are you or are you not a green nazi” is a losing frame
- ➔ Sometimes a few key words (like “strategic” or “critical” minerals) can set a frame

- ➔ REJECT bad frames
- ➔ REPLACE them with more accurate, effective and productive ones

10. *Recognize identities. “It’s not just what we do, it’s who we are.” You can’t budge an identity.*

- ➔ Partisan
- ➔ Geographical
- ➔ Religious
- ➔ Social

11. *Pride in place*

- ➔ People are provincial. Make it work for you.
- ➔ Avoid “top down” solutions
- ➔ Respect local voices
- ➔ People love their back yard;
- ➔ Talk about real places, not abstract ones.

12. *Know the limits of data. Recognize when the discussion is about data and when it’s about values and emotions.*

- ➔ Science is great but won’t win alone
- ➔ Applying more data or facts doesn’t persuade
- ➔ Refuting people’s facts only makes them dig in
- ➔ Engineers may design a great car, but selling it is another story

Appendix III: Organizing Essentials from the Western Organization of Resource Councils

The following information and links for grassroots organizing are provided courtesy of the [Western Organization of Resource Councils](#).

Building Organizations

[How to Recruit Members](#)

[How to Find and Develop Leaders](#)

[How to Run Good Meetings](#)

[How to Deal with Intimidation](#)

[How to Hold a House Meeting](#)

[How to Develop a Fundraising Plan](#)

[How to Understand the Role of a Community Organizer](#)

[How to Organize Strong Local Chapters](#)

[How to Build a Successful Major Donor Program](#)

Winning Issues

[How to Develop a Winning Strategy](#)

[How to Take Action](#)

[How to Hold an Accountability Session](#)

[How to Research for Organizing](#)

[How to Influence Public Officials](#)

[How to Work in Coalitions](#)

[How to Have an Impact on Your Rural Electric Cooperative](#)

[How to Research Corporations](#)

[How to Have A Successful Lobby Meeting](#)

Media

[Hold a Press Conference](#)

[How to Speak in Public](#)

[Receive Positive Media Attention](#)

[How to Promote Your Cause on YouTube](#)

Voter Participation

[How to Recruit Candidates to Run for Office](#)



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