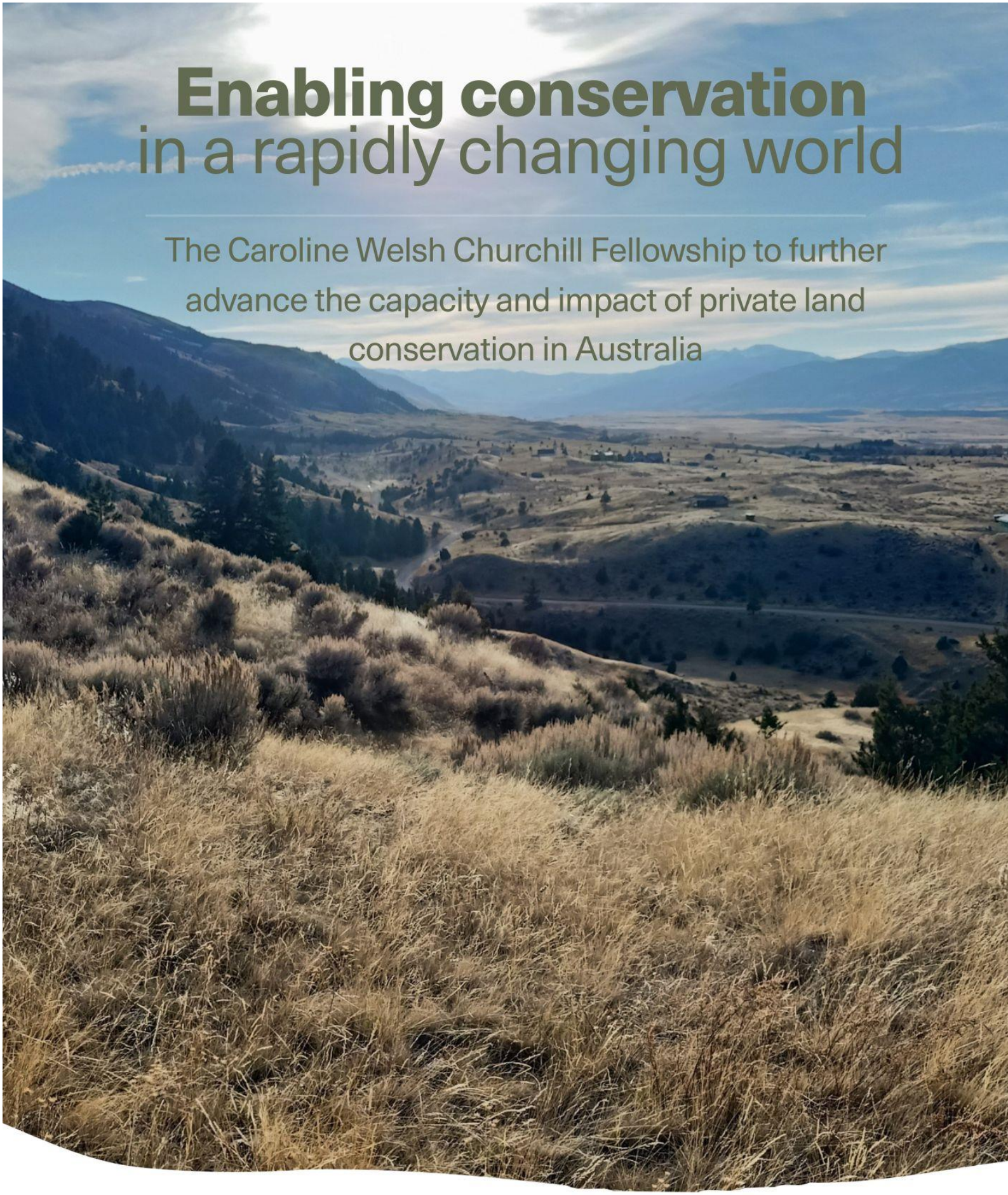
Enabling conservation in a rapidly changing world

The Caroline Welsh Churchill Fellowship to further advance the capacity and impact of private land conservation in Australia



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2022 Churchill Fellowship Report

Report by Dr Jody Gunn, PhD
Churchill Fellow

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Cover image: *View across Paradise Valley, Montana, a mosaic landscape of ranches, valley floor, river and mountains.*

Indemnity Clause

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By Jody Gunn, 2022 Churchill Fellow

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Signed Jody Gunn

Date 13 March 2025

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Acknowledgements

I acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the lands on which this report was written, the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation, and pay my respects to Elders past present and emerging. I acknowledge the enduring connection and care for country that has been passed down for tens of thousands of years.

I thank the sponsor of this Fellowship, Caroline Welsh, whose advice based on her own previous experience undertaking a Fellowship was appreciated and valued, and whose leadership in supporting the agricultural industry to adapt to changing climates is appreciated.

Thank you to everyone who met me as part of my Fellowship, who opened their diaries, their knowledge, their contacts and even their spare rooms.

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Deb Davidson and Gary Tabor – opening so many doors, into what is truly Paradise Valley.

Sharon Farrell, your generosity of time, home and family was much appreciated during such a busy time for you.

And to all those who spared an hour, a coffee or a field trip – with appreciation.

I would also like to thank the Australian Land Conservation Alliance (ALCA), board and staff, for supporting my Fellowship, enabling me the time and space to travel, and providing valuable introductions and insights into networks and connections that had long been built by ALCA leaders past.

Finally, the trip would not have been possible without the support of my family – my three boys. The journey was long without you with me, and the basketball game would have been much more enjoyable with you cheering beside me. Mike, your endless support of my relentless pursuit to find better outcomes for our planet, our communities, and for our children is appreciated more than I could possibly let you know. Thank you.

Me at an NBL basketball game in Washington – for my boys.

Executive Summary

This report presents the findings from the 2022 Caroline Welsh Churchill Fellowship, undertaken to advance the capacity and impact of private land conservation in Australia. The Fellowship provided an opportunity to explore innovative conservation models, financing strategies, policy mechanisms, and collaboration frameworks across the United States and Canada, with the aim of applying these insights to strengthen conservation efforts in Australia.

Key Findings:

Private Land Conservation Strategies:

- Conservation easements in the U.S. have been highly effective in protecting ecologically significant private lands while allowing continued landholder use.
- Land trusts play a critical role in facilitating conservation agreements, providing stewardship support, and mobilizing financial incentives for conservation.

Indigenous-Led Conservation:

- Indigenous communities across America are increasingly leading conservation efforts, integrating Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) with contemporary science, and coordinating with state and federal policies and funding.
- Land-back initiatives and co-management models, while not as wide-spread as they could be, demonstrate effective strategies for restoring Indigenous stewardship over culturally and ecologically significant lands. T

Landscape-Scale Conservation Initiatives:

- Collaborative networks and coalitions such as the Greater Yellowstone Coalition and California Landscape Stewardship Network illustrate the power of regional-scale conservation efforts.
- These networks align multiple stakeholders, including landholders, conservation groups, government bodies, and Indigenous organizations, to achieve large-scale conservation outcomes.

Conservation Finance and Funding Mechanisms:

- The U.S. has well-established conservation finance models, including public-private partnerships, philanthropic investments, and government funding mechanisms such as the Land and Water Conservation Fund.
- Market-based approaches, including program-related investments and ecological asset markets, offer promising avenues for diversifying conservation funding sources, though challenges remain.

Wildlife Connectivity and Infrastructure:

- The protection of wildlife corridors and the construction of road-crossing structures, as promoted by the Yellowstone Safe Passages Initiative and the Centre for Large Landscapes

Conservation, demonstrate the effectiveness of infrastructure and conservation in mitigating habitat fragmentation.

- These projects offer valuable lessons for Australia, particularly in integrating ecological connectivity into transport and infrastructure planning.

Recommendations for Australia

- Expand Conservation Easement Programs: Strengthen legal and financial mechanisms to incentivise private land conservation through voluntary agreements.
- Support Indigenous-Led Conservation: Increase direct funding and capacity-building initiatives for Indigenous-led conservation programs.
- Enhance Collaboration Through Conservation Networks: Strengthen networks and conservation alliances to coordinate efforts across landscapes and ecosystems.
- Diversify Conservation Finance Mechanisms: Explore and build capacity for new funding models, including blended finance approaches, philanthropic investments, and biodiversity credits.
- Improve Wildlife Connectivity Infrastructure: Advocate for dedicated funding and policy support for wildlife crossings and habitat corridors as part of federal and state policies.

The insights from this Fellowship reinforce the urgent need for scalable, inclusive, and well-resourced conservation strategies to address biodiversity loss and climate change in Australia. By adopting and adapting successful international models, Australia can strengthen its conservation impact, ensuring long-term environmental and social benefits. The target audience for this report is the Australian Land Conservation Alliance; however other national and international conservation organisations will benefit from the case studies, insights and summaries outlined in this report.

Bird hide at Cap Tourmente National Wildlife Area, Canada, as part of the International Land Conservation Network Global Congress Field Trip

Contents

Experience Itinerary

Date (2024	Meeting/site visit	Location
Oct 15	Meeting: Global Stewardship Network, hosted by **Centre for Natural Resources & Environmental Policy**, University of Montana	Quebec, Canada
Oct 16	Field Trip: Cap Tourmente National Wildlife Area	Quebec, Canada
Oct 16 – 18	Conference: International Land Conservation Network Global Congress	Quebec, Canada
Oct 18	Meeting: Renata Woodward, Alliance of Canadian Land Trusts	Quebec, Canada
Oct 18	Meeting: Land Trust Alliance, Eurosite and Alliance of Canadian Land Trusts	Quebec, Canada
Oct 19	Meeting: Tilmann Disselhoff, **Eurosite**	Quebec, Canada
Oct 21	Tour: International Land Conservation Network at Lincoln Institute of Policy	Cambridge, Massachusetts
Oct 22	Meeting: Peter Stein, Co-Founder **Conservation Finance Network**; Jim Levitt (Director of the **International Land Conservation Network, Lincoln Institute of Land Policy**) and Chandni Navalkha (Associate Director, Sustainably Managed Land and Water Resources**, Lincoln Institute of Land Policy**	Cambridge, Massachusetts
Oct 23	Meeting: Charlie Chester, Assistant Professor of Environmental Studies, **Brandeis University**	Cambridge, Massachusetts
Oct 24	Site visit: Joel Dunn, CEO, **Chesapeake Land Conservancy**	Annapolis, Maryland
Oct 25	Meeting: Jennifer Miller Hertzog, Acting CEO **Land Trust Alliance**	Washington DC
Oct 25	Interview: Pat Gonzales-Rogers, Yale School of the Environment and **Yale Centre for Environmental Justice**	Online
Oct 28	Meeting: David Epstein, CEO, The Land Conservancy of New Jersey	Boonton, New Jersey
Oct 28	Meeting: Madeline Betancourt, CEO, **Ramapo Munsee Land Alliance**	Boonton, New Jersey
Oct 31	Interview: Bradford Gentry, Senior Associate Dean of Professional Practice, Director of Research Program on Private Investment and the Environment, **Yale School of the Environment**	Online
Nov 1	Meeting: Lori Faeth, Senior Director Government Relations, **Land Trust Alliance**	Washington DC
Nov 1	Interview: Heather Richards, Vice President and Regional Director, **The Conservation Fund**	Online
Nov 3	Field Trip: Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes Bison Range	Montana
Nov 4	Graduate lead Class: Natural Resources Conflict Resolution, **University of Montana**	Missoula, Montana
Nov 4	Meeting: Seth Wilson, Blackfoot Challenge; JoAnn Grant, Heart of the Rockies, Shawn Johnson, University of Montana	Missoula, Montana
Nov 5	Meeting: Devin Landry, Coordinator, Californian Landscape Stewardship Network	Missoula, Montana
Nov 5	Meeting: Shawn Johnson, Director and Travis Anklam, Program Director; **Centre for Natural Resources and Environmental Policy** University of Montana	Missoula, Montana

Date (2024	Meeting/site visit	Location
Nov 6	Meeting: Scott Christensen (Executive Director), Shana Drimal (Wildlife Program Manager), Melissa Richey (Deputy Director), Craig Benjamin (Director of Conservation); **Greater Yellowstone Coalition**; and Deb Davidson (Chief Strategy Officer), Centre for Large Landscapes Conservation	Bozeman, Montana
Nov 6	Meeting: Chet Work (Executive Director), Brendan Weiner (Conservation Director) and EJ Porth (Associate Director), **Gallatin Valley Land Trust**; and Deb Davidson (Chief Strategy Officer) Centre for Large Landscapes Conservation	Bozeman, Montana
Nov 6	Meeting: Michelle Uberuaga (Senior Program Manager) and Betsy Buffington (regional Director), **National Parks Conservation Association**; and Deb Davidson (Chief Strategy Officer) Centre for Large Landscapes Conservation	Bozeman, Montana
Nov 7	Field Trip: **Mountain Sky Guest Ranch** Peter Brown (Senior Program Officer) AMB West Conservation Fund, as part of Arther M Blank Family Foundation; and Deb Davidson (Chief Strategy Officer) and Liz Fairbank Centre for Large Landscapes Conservation	Paradise Valley, Montana
Nov 8	Field Trip: **Anderson Ranch and Common Ground**; Daniel Anderson and Deb Davidson (Chief Strategy Officer) Centre for Large Landscapes Conservation	Tom Miner Basin, Montana
Nov 8	Field Trip: **Yellowstone National Park**; Gary Tabor (CEO) Centre for Large Landscapes Conservation	Yellowstone National Park, Montana
Nov 11	Meeting: Colleen Matzke, Smithsonian National Zoo and Conservation Biology Institute, Northern Great Plains	Bozeman Montana
Nov 13	Event: Major donor event hosted by Centre for Large Landscapes Conservation	Bozeman Montana
Nov 15	Meeting: Michael Wainwright (Individual Giving Director) Centre for Large Landscapes Conservation; **American Prairie**	Bozeman Montana
Nov 15	Meeting: Dick Dolan (Northern Rockies Director) **Trust for Public Land**	Bozeman Montana
Nov 15	Interview: Omar Al-farisi The Conservation Finance Network	Online
Nov 18	Meeting: Sharon Farrell Californian Land Stewardship Network	San Francisco, California
Nov 18	Interview: National Forest Foundation	Online
Nov 18	Interview: Stacey Olson (Program Manager) **Resources Legacy Fund**	Online
Nov 18	Meeting: Genny Biggs (Program Director) **Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation**	San Francisco, California
Nov 18	Meeting: Lindsay Bouchelle (Senior Advisor) **Marin Community Foundation**	San Francisco, California
Nov 18	Meeting: Annie Burke (CEO) **Together Bay Area**	San Francisco, California
Nov 19	Gary Knoblock (Former Advisor and Strategist) **Bechtel/Moore Foundations**	San Francisco, California

Key words and Acronyms

30 by 30 Goal	A national and global goal of protecting 30% of lands and waters by 2030
ACEP	Agricultural Conservation Easement Program
ACLT	Alliance of Canadian Land Trusts
ALCA	Australian Land Conservation Alliance
U.S.	United States
CLLC	Centre for Large Landscape Conservation
Conservation Easements	A legally binding agreement between a landowner and a land trust or government agency where the landowner retains many private property rights. They provide a voluntary, flexible and permanent mechanism for protecting private lands with significant environmental, agricultural or historical value
CRP	Conservation Reserve Program
CSKT	Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes
CLSN	California Landscape Stewardship Network
DEIJ	Diversity, equity inclusion and justice and refers to the work of making organisations places that value and are supportive of different groups of individuals, including people of different races, ethnicities, religions, abilities, genders, and sexual orientations.
EQIP	Environmental Quality Incentives Program
GVLT	Gallatin Valley Land Trust
GYC	Greater Yellowstone Coalition
IRA	Inflation Reduction Act
LTA	Land Trust Alliance
LWCF	Land and Water Conservation Fund – a long-term Federal Government Fund PERC Property and Environment Research Centre
NFF	National Forest Foundation
NGO	Non-government organisation
PPPs	Public Private Partnerships
REPI	Readiness and Environmental Protection Integration Program
RLF	Resources Legacy Fund
TBA	Together Bay Area
TCF	The Conservation Fund
TLCNJ	The Land Conservancy of New Jersey

Preamble

I have always been drawn to unity—to the idea that two seemingly opposing truths can coexist. This perspective has shaped my approach as a conservation scientist, often challenging traditional narratives that advocate for preservation at all costs while disregarding the complex realities of human dependence on our planet's resources. This approach is why I thrive on the increasing diversity of expanding alliances.

Primatology captivated me—not just in terms of primate behaviour but in how humans perceive and interact with our closest animal relatives. Studying primates, I became less preoccupied with their grooming, eating, and sleeping habits and more intrigued by the relationships between subsistence communities and these animals. I was drawn to the tension between conflict and stewardship, the ways people both protected and contested their coexistence with primates.

Similarly, my elephant research initially focused on their distribution in space and time—examining movement patterns, and seasonal behaviours. But what truly captivated me was the complex relationship between humans and elephants. How did their seasonal migrations intersect with expanding human settlements? How did shifting political narratives shape local attitudes toward the wildlife that raided crops and threatened livelihoods? Could visible, values-driven leadership that publicly championed biodiversity foster greater community tolerance toward wildlife? My PhD research left me deeply curious.

Though I lacked definitive data, my intuition suggested that leadership plays a significant role in shaping environmental attitudes. How do people interact with their landscapes? How do national and global leadership decisions influence local stewardship? These questions continue to shape my work and perspective.

I am driven by the conviction that local knowledge and action are critical, but they are most effective when supported by strong national and global leadership. I seek collaborations that bridge sectors, breaking down silos rather than reinforcing them. I believe fostering shared values between diverse groups can lead to better outcomes for both people and the planet. Not because I believe in a utopia, but because I recognize that all people share a fundamental connection to the earth. Now more than ever, that connection, should be nurtured rather than eroded. We face a choice: to deepen divisions or to bring worldviews closer together. As I observe the world today, I believe that efforts to cultivate shared values and embrace diversity will define the legacy we leave for future generations.

When I initially drafted my Churchill concept, I envisioned a traditional approach—gathering case studies, identifying best practices, and exploring organizational structures. While this approach remained central to the structure and style of the tour and report, my focus and line of enquiry evolved. Underlying the core construct of my study, I remain interested in where worldviews intersect to inform best practices, where locally and Indigenous-led initiatives shape conservation success, and how national and global leadership can foster a shared vision across sectors and communities. Some of these reflections emerged retrospectively, as I processed experiences and contextualized them within my own community. Thinking evolves, shaped by experience, by returning home, and by considering the future I want for my children.

Being in the U.S. during a federal election sharpened my awareness of the broader social and political forces at play. The timing of discussions coloured people's perspectives, optimism, and planning. I deliberately consumed a diversity of news sources, engaged with travellers, and

observed public discourse unfold in real-time. I was struck by the pervasiveness of gender equity debates. I became acutely aware of how media narratives, political spending, and social discourse could shape divisive gender-based rhetoric. The casual misogyny in public discourse was alarming, reinforcing the realisation that progress—whether in gender equity, diversity, or inclusion—is never guaranteed. It can be undone far more easily than it is achieved. This awareness extended beyond gender and beyond the U.S., leading me to consider its implications for equity, justice, inclusion, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and LGBTQI communities in Australia.

I recently listened to a podcast reflecting on gender equity since the 1980s, reminding listeners that while there is still much to fight for, tremendous progress has been made in just 40 years—contrasting with thousands of years of patriarchal dominance. It was a sobering reminder that we must acknowledge achievements while remaining vigilant.

Similarly, shortly after I returned, I attended the memorial of Faye Marles AM, the first Chancellor of Melbourne University and Victoria's first Equity Commissioner. I never met her, but through the stories of a close colleague, I saw the depth of her impact. Attending her service immediately following my Churchill travels and the U.S. election heightened my awareness of how much there is to lose—and how we must actively protect the progress made.

What does this have to do with biodiversity conservation? What is the relevance to this study? Everything.

This same sentiment applies to environmental conservation. Discussing the prosect of major change, dramatic funding cuts and significant shifts in policy priorities had organisations preparing for a pivot from progressive planning to dramatic mitigation tactics – the primary priority – to protect the progress made.

The impacts of human society on biodiversity are only increasing, and the polarisation and politicisation of climate change persists. On hopeful days, we celebrate progress. On challenging days, it can feel like an endless battle—sometimes even against our own communities. Recognising the deep interconnection between these issues highlights that they touch nearly everyone on the planet. For the environment underpins not only the survival of Australia's unique species and landscapes but also our food security, climate resilience, health, well-being, and economy. We stand to gain—or lose—so much of the progress we have made. We have the power to shape a future where struggles are not fought in isolation but as part of a larger, more inclusive movement toward a healthier, more just world.

And so, we must continue working at the intersection of these issues. Some are deeply committed to one cause, focusing on a singular outcome—and we need those voices. Others work across multiple domains, weaving connections between conservation, climate, social equity, and governance.

Early in my career while working with the Jane Goodall Institute in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, I asked Jane how she could engage with schoolchildren, community members, and government leaders all in one day, connecting meaningfully with each. She told me a story about how, like her, a Minister she was meeting had a dog. That shared experience became an entry point to discussing care for animals, which lead to wildlife and conservation. Through these simple but powerful connections, even those with vastly different perspectives can find common ground. And from that foundation, a bridge can be built—from division to unity, from discord to collective action.

Introduction

Private land conservation is a critical tool in addressing some of the most pressing global challenges – climate change and biodiversity loss. Across Australia, thousands of landholders are actively protecting and restoring biodiversity on the land they steward. These efforts contribute significantly to environmental protection and sustainability, yet they are often met with barriers that limit participation and impact. Organisations that work to protect, manage and restore nature play a crucial role in supporting landholders by tackling invasive species, expanding the protected area estate, and building resilience in the face of environmental pressures.

Importantly, First Nations leadership is vital in shaping land stewardship practices that enhance culture, biodiversity conservation and food security.

Australia has a range of mechanisms that support landholders in these conservation efforts, including financial incentives, conservation covenants, and policy frameworks. However, these mechanisms remain limited. Challenges such as inadequate tax incentives, chronic under-funding, and policy constraints hinder both landholder engagement and organisational effectiveness. To overcome these barriers, the exploration and application of innovative policy development, emerging funding mechanisms, and capacity building strategies are essential. Strengthening the capacity of the conservation and land management sector will help drive ALCA's vision of a well-resourced, diverse, and highly capable sector that can halt and reverse nature loss for a healthy and resilient Australia.

The conservation and land management sector is diverse, encompassing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups, conservation organisations, landholders, and those integrating productive land use with environmental stewardship. Understanding and promoting best practices across these varied groups is crucial for scaling impact. To that end, case studies exploring the diversity of initiatives being delivered across the U.S. will be developed to highlight successful conservation approaches and the factors that enable them.

As the peak body representing organisations that protect, manage, and restore nature across privately managed land, The Australian Land Conservation Alliance (ALCA) is committed to strengthening conservation efforts through advocacy, scaling funding, building sector-capability and knowledge-sharing. Since 2021, as CEO I have been focused on implementing ALCA's first strategic plan, expanding its membership, and driving systemic change in conservation policy and practice.

Undertaking a Churchill Fellowship provided a unique opportunity to explore innovations and leadership in conservation across the U.S., particularly in tackling biodiversity loss and climate change impacts on private land. The insights from this study tour were shaped by three key objectives:

- Understanding and exploring diverse approaches to protecting and stewarding nature and culture in the U.S. and their relevance to Australia.
- Investigating key enablers for scaling conservation success and applying these insights to the Australian context.
- Learning from established conservation alliances about strategic development and implementation, member engagement, communications and sector-wide capacity building.

The findings from this Fellowship will benefit a range of stakeholders. Australian NGOs can leverage emerging conservation trends to enhance their impact, while ALCA can refine its strategic approach to meet the needs of its expanding and diverse membership. More broadly, the Australian conservation sector can strengthen its resilience and capacity to protect biodiversity in a rapidly changing environment, for all Australians. Additionally, the global community of conservation practitioners may gain insights from innovative land trust models, alliance structures, and Indigenous-led conservation initiatives. Some reflections from colleagues who have reviewed the full or parts of the report captured below are demonstration of its value to global colleagues.

This study was conducted during a time of significant political and environmental change, coinciding with the U.S. federal election. The experience underscored the importance of adaptability and resilience in conservation efforts, particularly as political and societal shifts increasingly influence environmental policies and priorities. These insights reaffirm the urgency of championing nature protection and enhancing sector capacity, even in constrained and uncertain environments.

The Fellowship experience provided an invaluable opportunity to deepen professional networks, build sectoral knowledge, and identify pathways for positive change. By applying these learnings to the Australian context, this report aims to contribute to a more resilient, well-resourced, and effective conservation and land management sector, ultimately ensuring a healthy and thriving natural environment for future generations.

"... this is an inspiring report. You covered a huge amount of landscape, and interviewed a great many people during your visit to the United States. I am proud to call you a colleague in international land conservation."

"Congratulations and hats off on this impressive report!"

In reading this, I may have felt, in small measure, the way an American feels reading de Tocqueville – so amazed at a foreigner's grasp of us! But I shouldn't be surprised. Before and more so after visiting your country seven years ago now, I am continually struck by you and your fellow Australians eagerness and curiosity to explore and understand what lies beyond your own extraordinary continent."

"Well done, sounds like an amazing journey and study that will be very useful for the sector."

".. wow, that is an incredibly impressive report! It captures so much: the thinking, the caring, the structures, the relationships. Thank you for your time and clear thinking to write down the complexities of coalition building. Coalitions like ours, like all the ones written about in your report, are needed now more than ever."

Section 1: Private land conservation in action

1a Protecting and stewarding lands and watersheds

Private land conservation in the U.S. plays a crucial role in protecting biodiversity, mitigating climate change, building resilience in food systems, and preserving cultural landscapes. Through permanent protection mechanisms such as conservation easements and land acquisitions, land trusts and conservation organisations ensure that ecologically significant areas remain safeguarded for future generations. Beyond legal protection, ongoing land stewardship is essential to maintaining healthy ecosystems, involving active management practices like habitat restoration, invasive species control and sustainable land use. Increasingly, Indigenous-led conservation is reshaping the field, centering Traditional Ecological Knowledge and restoring native governance over ancestral lands. These efforts, supported by partnerships among private landowners, nonprofits and government agencies demonstrate the power of collaborative, long term investment in the land and its communities.

Protected forever – private land conservation easements

Conservation easements play a crucial role in land conservation in the United States (Brown, 2023) by providing a voluntary, flexible and permanent mechanisms for protecting private lands with significant environmental, agricultural or historical value. These legal instruments are designed to restrict certain types of development or land use while allowing landowners to retain ownership and continue sustainable practices, such as farming, ranching or forestry.

Conservation easements are a legally binding agreement between a landowner and a land trust or government agency where the landowner retains many private property rights. They keep land in private ownership and continue to provide economic benefits to the area. If donated, conservation easements may provide valuable tax benefits to landowners (National Conservation Easement Database, 2024), including tax deductions, estate tax reductions and property tax benefits. These incentives are designed to encourage private land conservation.

Similar to Australia, the majority of privately owned lands make up the majority of the total land area in the United States, which means private land conservation has an important role to play (Brown, 2023), including in achieving the country's goal of conserving at least 30% of the U.S. lands and waters by 2030 (As per the Executive Order 14,008 on Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad made in 2021).

Conservation easements are typically held and monitored by land trusts or government entities, which ensure compliance with the terms of the agreement through regular inspections and legal enforcement if necessary. There are thousands of land trusts operating across the USA and the Land Trust Alliance has been operating for decades empowering and mobilizing land trusts in communities across America to conserve land and connect people to the land – for the benefit of all. (Land Trust Alliance, 2017 - 2025).

There are a range of conservation easements delivered across the country, including agricultural conservation easements, conservation easements for natural resource protection, scenic easements protecting viewsheds, open space and significant landscapes from visual intrusion, and historic preservation easements.

Conservation easements can be delivered to protect biodiversity through a range of programs. For example, National Wildlife Refuge System Conservation Easements help the U.S Fish and

Wildlife Service achieve its mission while keeping land in private ownership (National Wildlife Refuge System, 2022). This program requires collaboration and connection between public and private lands.

Forest conservation easements aim to conserve working forests and their ecological, economic and carbon sequestration benefits. They allow sustainable forestry practices while restricting development and deforestation. They work to maintain forest health, wildlife corridors and water quality. Programs like the Forest Legacy Program (United States Government, 2025) is administered by the Forest Service in partnership with state agencies to encourage the protection for privately owned forest lands through conservation easements and land purchases.

Initiatives like the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) support the use of easements to preserve agricultural lands and wetlands. The program seeks to preserve productive agricultural land by preventing development or uses that would interfere with farming or ranching (United States Government, 2025). Landholders retain the right to farm, ranch or conduct forestry activities, while the easement prohibits non-agricultural development such as subdivisions or commercial buildings. These types of easements can encourage conservation or sustainable land management practices.

The critical role of land trusts in scaling private land conservation

Through my Churchill Fellowship I had the opportunity to meet with a range of land trusts, exploring opportunities and challenges to their work. The following section explores some significant outcomes of four land trusts: Gallatin Valley Land Trust, The Ramapo Munsee Land Alliance, the Land Conservancy of New Jersey and Chesapeake Conservancy, and goes further to examine common challenges and opportunities that they face.

CASE STUDY – Safeguarding habitats and landscapes:

The Land Conservancy of New Jersey

Winner of the 2024 Land Trust Excellence Award, the Land Conservancy of New Jersey (TLCNJ) has achieved significant milestones in environmental preservation, farmland protection, and the advancement of Indigenous land rights. At its core, TLCNJ is dedicated to connecting communities with their natural lands, a mission it has pursued with passion and purpose for over 40 years (The Land Conservancy of New Jersey: Our Vision, 2024).

Since its inception, TLCNJ has been a trusted partner for landowners seeking to preserve their lands. Since 1997, the organization has completed over 500 land acquisitions, permanently protecting nearly 30,000 acres. Over the last decade alone, TLCNJ has facilitated more than US$230 million in payments to landowners, ensuring their stewardship efforts are rewarded while safeguarding critical landscapes for future generations.

Projects such as the restoration of Yards Creek Preserve highlight TLCNJ's multifaceted approach to conservation. By enhancing biodiversity, improving wetlands, and creating public access opportunities, the Conservancy has demonstrated how ecological preservation can harmoniously coexist with community involvement.

TLCNJ's success lies in its deep understanding of its community and its ability to respond to changing needs. From amplifying stories of farmland and food security to advocating for affordable housing and public recreational use, the organization consistently aligns its programs with the priorities of the communities it serves.

Over the years, TLCNJ has earned numerous local and county awards, culminating in the prestigious 2024 Land Trust Excellence Award (Land Trust Alliance, 2025). This recognition celebrates the Conservancy's continuous innovation, leadership, and impact in the field of land conservation.

The Land Conservancy of New Jersey exemplifies the power of collaboration, adaptability, and visionary leadership in advancing land conservation. With a legacy built on trust, innovation, and community engagement, TLCNJ continues to inspire and lead the way in preserving our natural and cultural heritage for generations to come.

CASE STUDY – First Nations leadership:

Ramapo Munsee Land Alliance, New York and New Jersey

The Ramapo Peoples are an Indigenous nation and a New Jersey state-recognised Tribe. The Ramapo Munsee Land Alliance, established in 2021, is a nonprofit land trust established by the Ramapough Lenape Nation dedicated to creating a safe and secure tomorrow for humankind (Ramapo Munsee Land Alliance, 2025). It. Its mission encompasses advancing food sovereignty, land preservation, Indigenous protection and cultural enrichment.

Despite being a relatively new organization, the Alliance has achieved extraordinary success in land rematriation – restoring ancestral lands to Indigenous stewardship. A notable milestone occurred in 2023 when the Alliance re-acquired ancestral land for the first time since the Revolutionary War. This achievement underscores the trust's pivotal role in preserving Indigenous cultural heritage and highlights the potential for meaningful collaboration between Indigenous groups and other land conservation entities.

The Alliance's efforts simultaneously promote ecological restoration and fosters a deep connection between people and the land. The acquired 54 acres of forest holds immense cultural and ecological significance, including ancient cairns and cradle rocks – features deeply intertwined with the spiritual and historical practices of the Ramapo people (Ramapo Munsee Land Alliance, 2025). The trust intends to protect this site from development, and embark on a food forest restoration project, planting native food and medicine-producing trees, shrubs and plants. This initiative is a testament to their commitment to blending cultural preservation with ecological stewardship.

Meeting with Madeline Betancourt of the Ramapo Munsee Land Alliance in Boonton New Jersey where we shared an enjoyable coffee and conversation.

For new land trusts, establishing sustainability and credibility is a critical first step, but First Nations groups face unique and compounded challenges in achieving these goals. During our meeting in the small town of Boonton in Morris County, Madeline Betancourt, Executive Director of the Ramapo Munsee Land Alliance, shared insights into the foundational importance of trust in building relationships and partnerships. She emphasized how crucial those early connections are for supporting organisational capacity building and securing initial funding.

Reflecting on the road ahead, Betancourt remarked "Going forward, establishing your own connections, funding relationships and demonstrating reliability and integrity requires hard work, commitment

and adequate resourcing on your part, but also requires partners and funders to come forward with openness and whole-heartedness, and be willing to invest in Indigenous leadership and capacity."

This case study showcases the Ramapo Munsee Land Alliance as an inspiring example of Indigenous leadership in land ownership, protection and stewardship, demonstrating how cultural renewal and ecological restoration can go hand in hand.

By advancing collaboration and investing in building organizational capacity, the Alliance is paving the way for a more inclusive and sustainable future.

CASE STUDY – Embracing diversity, equity inclusion and justice:

Chesapeake Conservancy, Annapolis, Maryland

The Chesapeake Conservancy has played a transformative role in advancing conservation efforts across the Chesapeake Bay watershed. By leveraging cutting-edge technologies, collaborative partnerships, and innovative strategies, the organization has protected vital habitats, restored degraded ecosystems, and improved water quality throughout the region. Through initiatives like precision conservation mapping and large-scale restoration projects, the Conservancy has helped conserve thousands of acres of critical lands and waterways while promoting sustainable practices (Chesapeake Conservancy, 2025). This work has not only preserved the ecological health of the Chesapeake Bay but also enhanced the well-being of communities that depend on its resources.

During my visit with Joel Dunn, outgoing President and CEO of the Chesapeake Conservancy, he elaborated on the organisation's pivotal role in advancing the goal to conserve 30% of the Chesapeake by 2030. He highlighted the Conservancy's impact on watershed conservation and its partnerships with First Nations communities.

Joel Dunn in front of the new office of the Chesapeake Conservancy.

One significant focus has been the organisation's strides to embrace diversity, equity, inclusion and justice (DEIJ) as integral to its mission to protect and restore the Chesapeake Bay and its surrounding landscapes. Joel also took me into the field to visit one of their flagship projects, Elktonia-Carr's Beach Heritage Park.

Elktonia-Carr's Beach Heritage Park, a five-acre waterfront parcel on the Chesapeake Bay, represents a rich cultural and historical legacy. From the 1930s to the 1970s, "The Beaches" as they were known, became the heart of entertainment throughout the mid-Atlantic region, welcoming African-American families during a time of segregation (Chesapeake Conservancy, 2025). As we walked through the property towards the beachfront, I noted the historical markers that highlight its significance as a gathering place where the local community enjoyed dance, music and performances by iconic American musicians such as Chuck Berry, Ella Fitzgerald and the Temptations.

After years of advocacy and fundraising by the Conservancy and its partners, the property was acquired in 2022 and transferred to the City of Annapolis, creating a new city park with beach

access. In 2024, the park was expanded, further honoring its cultural significance and providing the community with a valuable natural and recreational resource.

The Chesapeake Conservancy has demonstrated a strong commitment to recognizing the history and contributions of African-American Communities in the Chesapeake Bay region. Joel explained that ***systemic inequities have historically excluded Black and marginalized communities from conservation efforts and decision-making; and so the organisation has sought to address these gaps by fostering inclusion in its programs and priorities.***

By focusing on projects like Elktonia-Carr's Beach Heritage Park and other community-centred initiatives (McGarvey, 2025), the Conservancy is working to ensure that historically excluded groups can enjoy the benefits of conservation and the outdoor spaces.

Signage at the Elktonia-Carr's Beach Heritage Park reflect the rich cultural heritage of this reserve.

By addressing historical inequities while partnering with marginalized groups in the Chesapeake Bay region, the organisation is creating a model for conservation that is not only ecologically effective but also socially just. These efforts, combined with their innovative approaches to watershed conservation, demonstrate the transformative potential of a truly inclusive approach to environmental stewardship in the Chesapeake Bay Region.

CASE STUDY – Community access and working farms:

Gallatin Valley Land Trust Bozeman Montana

Since its founding in 1990, the Gallatin Valley Land Trust (GVLT) has helped conserve over 72,000 acres of land in Gallatin, Madison and Park counties through partnerships with private landowners, using voluntary agreements (Gallatin Valley Land Trust, 2024). The land trust has also helped expand trail systems, providing recreation, transport and connection to nature.

Similar to other land trusts, conservation easements are a critical tool in GVLT's strategy to protect habitat for their area's most iconic wildlife species, and to keep working farms working. Conservation easements on working farms and ranches have become a major part of this program. For example, in December 2024, they partnered with a landholder, Rob Forstenzer to conserve his 546-acre ranch in Park County northeast of Livingston, Montana. While the property is used primarily for agriculture, both irrigated fields and grazing, the open space also provides transitional wildlife habitat for elk, pronghorn, deer, fox badgers, raptors, and various birds and migratory species. "Permanently conserving Ferry Creek Ranch will help to ensure important

natural resources and the rural character of Livingston and central Park Country are protected forever" Kelsie Huyser, GVLT Conservation Project Manager (The Livingston Enterprise, 2024).

I met with Executive Director Chet Work and his team, and they explained that while they focus on preserving local biodiversity and agricultural lands, the Trust's earliest partnerships with local communities prioritized projects with public access, such as its first project to protect a popular sledding and walking area that was slated for residential development. These early projects built visible public impact and credibility with the local community. The team attests that being highly visible and delivering outcomes that are close to the everyday lives of their community has supported their organizational credibility and thus their ability to engage the community and solicit funds. Their ability to bring funding to the table to get projects off the ground is notable, and staying grass roots and community driven has been an intentional strategy.

Chet Work and Brendan Weiner of the Gallatin Valley Land Trust with Deb Davidson of the Centre for Large Landscapes Conservation at the Gallatin Valley Land Trust office in Bozeman, Montana.

Chet described how the GVLT has been instrumental in developing many of the trails that make up the Mainstreet to the Mountains trail system which now totals nearly 100 miles. Partnerships with government and civil society organisations have been critical to scaling this program, including to access funding or secure land acquisitions.

While the organization has developed a significant trail infrastructure across the broader Bozeman landscape, their long-term plan remains highly ambitious and central to what they believe will be their continued success: to ensure that in 30 years, everyone in the greater Bozeman area will have convenient access to immersive experiences in nature and live within a 10-minute walk of a safe, connected trail system.

"... the special sauce for us is the blend of the community conservation and the depth the community engages with it. Without the trails, without the access, the quality-of-life enhancement that we have in this community, I don't think we'd have had as much success."
Chet Work, Executive Director, Gallatin Valley Land Trust.

Common challenges and opportunities for land trusts

While this section highlighted a series of individual case studies, there are some common challenges and successes.

Common Challenges:

1. **Funding Constraints:** Securing sufficient funding remains a significant obstacle for land trusts, especially for large-scale conservation projects, land purchases or restoration. Dependence on grants, donations, and partnerships can limit the scope and speed of projects.
2. **Balancing Development and Conservation:** Land trusts grapple with competing interests between conservation goals and the pressures of urban or other development. Striking a balance between preserving natural spaces and accommodating economic growth is an ongoing tension.

3. **Stakeholder Coordination:** The diverse range of stakeholders involved in land conservation, including private landowners, Indigenous groups, government agencies, and community members, can lead to conflicts or delays. Aligning interests and fostering collaboration is essential but challenging.
4. **Legal and Policy Barriers:** Navigating legal complexities, such as property rights and zoning laws, often slows down conservation efforts. Additionally, advocacy for policy changes can be time-intensive and politically sensitive.

Common Opportunities:

1. **Strengthening Partnerships:** Collaborations with Indigenous groups, private entities, and government organizations offer opportunities for mutual benefit. Partnerships can enhance resource availability, diversify expertise, and build broader community support.
2. **Leveraging Technology:** Advancements in geographic information systems (GIS), remote sensing, and data analytics provide land trusts with powerful tools to identify priority conservation areas and monitor ecological changes. These technologies enable more precise and effective conservation planning.
3. **Public Engagement and Education:** Increasing public awareness about the importance of land conservation fosters community support and participation. Educational programs, recreational activities, and volunteer opportunities help build a sense of ownership and stewardship among local communities.
4. **Advocacy for Policy Support:** Advancing policies that incentivise land conservation, such as tax benefits for land donations or conservation easements, can facilitate broader adoption of conservation practices. Advocacy efforts can also promote systemic changes to prioritize environmental sustainability.

Insights

The efforts of land trusts like Gallatin Valley Land Trust, the Ramapo Munsee Land Alliance, the Land Conservancy of New Jersey, and Chesapeake Conservancy underscore their critical role in conserving natural and cultural resources. By addressing these challenges and capitalizing on opportunities, land trusts can continue to make significant contributions to environmental protection, sustainability and cultural preservation for generations to come.

1b Insights on Indigenous-led conservation

Throughout my study tour, it was evident that Indigenous-led conservation and opportunities for land-back were reshaping the conservation sector, by centering Indigenous rights, knowledge and governance. Across most organisations I met with, there was acknowledgement that Indigenous communities are primary stewards of biodiversity and there was evidence that the sector was moving to actively address systemic land access inequities. Further for some organisations, there was a demonstrable shift from protecting land solely for nature to ensuring that land benefits communities, reflecting a more holistic understanding of conservation. And while many organisations feel they are on or getting on the right path, Indigenous people and groups I spoke with articulated that there was still much work to be done.

Pat Gonzales-Rogers, Lecturer and Distinguished Practitioner in Residence at the Yale School for the Environment and Yale Center for Environmental Justice outlined how the growing recognition of Indigenous land stewardship has led to successful co-management arrangements and land transfers. These initiatives are not only restoring Indigenous sovereignty but also enhancing ecological outcomes through traditional land management practices. Mr Gonzales-Rogers provided examples such as Bears Ears National Monument (US Department of the Interior, 2025), highlighting how co-management agreements between Indigenous nations and government agencies can lead to more effective, culturally attuned conservation. My study tour provided evidence of such examples as per case studies shared previously and ahead.

Interpretation of First Nations history, culture and leadership overserved during my tour. Left to right: Payne Family Native American Centre at University of Montana; Visitors Centre at Cap Tourmente National Wildlife Area, Canada; and interpretation at the CSKT Bison Range Visitor Center.

Conservation easements are a key tool for land protection, restricting development while maintaining private ownership; however, some Indigenous communities and people I engaged with advised that conservation easements may be inadequate or inappropriate for Indigenous communities. There are opportunities for conservation easements to adapt to support Indigenous needs, as farm easements have done in productive landscapes.

On conservation funding and traditional conservation models, Mr Gonzales-Rogers asserted that while large conservation organisations have traditionally controlled conservation funding, Indigenous groups were increasingly demanding direct access to resources. He also recommended that conservation must shift from being a privileged model that can restrict Indigenous and public access to one that aligns with Indigenous values and prioritises relational approaches to land and water stewardship. He indicated that organisations were shifting in this direction, and I saw evidence of this through my study tour. I explored the challenges and opportunities of partnerships with many groups I met with, and consistently was advised that trust is critical and creating meaningful partnerships is a long-term process.

As I visited different groups around the country, there were numerous examples of how Indigenous-led conservation organisations are combining traditional knowledge with scientific expertise to manage lands and waters effectively. Mr Gonzales-Rogers highlighted how the Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission employs hydrologists and biologists to restore salmon populations while maintaining Indigenous fishing rights (Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission, 2025).

As part of my participation in a student-led class at the University of Montana, where students were studying Natural Resources Conflict Resolution, colleagues and students shared information about the Bison Shared Stewardship Strategy (National Park Service, 2024), which was co-authored by Department of Interior staff and tribal members and was provided as a case study of collaborative effort bringing together western science and Indigenous knowledge to develop a national strategy for partnership-based approaches to conservation.

View from the Confederated Salish & Kootenai Tribes' Bison Range across the broader landscape.

CASE STUDY – Conservation, culture and sovereignty:

Confederated Salish & Kootenai Tribes' Bison Range

The Confederated Salish & Kootenai Tribes' (CSKT) Bison Range is a breathtaking landscape where the CSKT steward approximately 350 bison across nearly 20,000 acres at the heart of the Flathead Indian Reservation. Driving through the range, spotting antelope, elk, and bison against the vast open grasslands, I was struck by a powerful sense of déjà vu—transported back to the African savannahs where I had spent many years working in conservation. The landscape was vast and wildlife were large!

Wildlife observed at the CSKT Bison Range – left Bison in the sunset and right Pronghorn through binoculars.

The CSKT are a federally recognized tribal government, and the Flathead Indian Reservation represents just a small portion of their traditional homelands. In a landmark decision in 2020, Congress restored the Bison Range (which had previously been managed by the US Federal Government and called the National Bison Range) to the CSKT, and by 2022, full ownership and management had transferred to the CSKT Natural Resource Department. The tribe now stewards the land and its wildlife, while legal title remains held in trust by the federal government (Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes Bison Range, 2025).

The return of the Bison Range marks a profound moment of environmental and cultural restoration. The CSKT played a crucial role in saving bison as a species—members of the tribe were among those who brought bison back to the Flathead Indian Reservation from east of the Continental Divide when the species teetered on the brink of extinction. Today, the CSKT continue that legacy, ensuring the herd thrives under Indigenous stewardship while also welcoming visitors to experience this extraordinary conservation success story firsthand.

Reflections for the Australian context:

- To support Indigenous-led conservation, there are opportunities to expand and demonstrate co-management, land-return models, and Indigenous governance.
- Expanding direct Indigenous access to conservation funding is a crucial opportunity.
- Philanthropy and government could invest more in Indigenous led initiatives, considering the role of intermediaries and scale capacity building programs that empower Indigenous organisations to manage large-scale projects effectively.
- Conservation NGOs continue to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups to reimagine conservation models to better recognize Indigenous rights and leadership.
- Continue the work already underway to review and adapt conservation covenants or agreements to better reflect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander interests and rights.
- Amplify and build more long-term, trust-based partnerships and effective collaborative arrangements. In doing so, recognise that this will require patience, cultural understanding and a commitment to Indigenous leadership.

Insights

My observations of Indigenous-led conservation in the U.S. are that it can lead to a fundamental shift in how land and biodiversity are protected. By recognising Indigenous governance, addressing systemic land access inequities, and supporting Indigenous-led initiatives, conservation efforts can move towards models that benefit both the environment and human communities. The growing momentum behind the land-back movement, co-management arrangements and Indigenous-led science offers opportunities for collaborative learning and collective leadership between Australia the U.S. and Canada and can demonstrate a path forward that is inclusive, effective and just.

1c Landscape scale initiatives and conservation networks

Landscape-scale initiatives and conservation networks were demonstrated to be critical to the success of private land conservation in the U.S., recognising that ecosystems and wildlife thrive beyond individual property boundaries. By working across large, connected landscapes, these initiatives enhance ecological resilience, protect migratory corridors and address climate change at a meaningful scale. Collaborative networks – comprising land trusts, Indigenous nations, private landowners, government agencies, non-government and conservation finance organisations – help align and leverage resources, share knowledge, and implement region-wide projects and strategies.

Case studies outlined below exemplify how landscape-scale approaches can restore ecosystems, sustain working lands, and strengthen community-led conservation. Such interconnected efforts can ensure that conservation action is durable, adaptive and responsive to the increasing pressures facing our environment today.

CASE STUDY – Protecting a globally significant ecosystem:

Greater Yellowstone Coalition

The Greater Yellowstone Coalition (GYC) is a registered non-profit organization with a bold vision: a Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem where wild nature flourishes, plant and animal communities thrive in harmony, and people work together to conserve this globally significant landscape for future generations. Operating for more than 40 years, the Coalition works across 22 million acres, three states and two national parks, using innovative tools and strategies to protect the lands, waters, and wildlife of this iconic region, and has incredible impact and conservation successes (Greater Yellowstone Coalition, 2025).

GYC prioritizes protecting the low-elevation valley floors which are critical for ecological connectivity and wildlife migration, ensuring key landscapes remain functional for species like grizzly bears, wolves, elk, and bison. Much of the valley floor is made up of privately managed lands.

I met with Scott Christensen (Executive Director) and Melissa Richey (Director of Development) whose insights provided a detailed understanding of the Coalition's history, innovative approaches, and the unique factors driving its success.

Since its founding in 1983, GYC has delivered transformative results for the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem:

- Wildlife Crossings: Secured US $100 million in county, state, and federal funds for wildlife crossings in Wyoming since 2015.
- Habitat Conservation: Protected, restored, and conserved over 1.1 million acres of public and private lands.
- Bison Coexistence: Supported 56 bison coexistence projects and secured over 250,000 acres of habitat for migrating bison outside Yellowstone National Park.
- River and Stream Protections: Achieved federal protections for 20 river miles and administrative safeguards for 30 streams.

A Comprehensive Toolbox

GYC employs a broad and flexible array of tools to achieve its mission, including litigation, advocacy, community collaboration, and market-based approaches. For example:

- Program-Related Investments: Long-term, low or no-interest loans to buy at-risk private lands for conservation, returning them to public ownership.
- Grazing Allotment Retirement: Voluntary programs to repurpose public lands for wildlife habitat.
- Elk Occupancy Agreements: Developing creative partnerships to open private lands for wildlife while supporting ranchers' needs.

Elk Occupancy Agreements are voluntary agreements which incentivise ranchers to provide crucial, unobstructed habitat for elk and other wildlife on private land while reducing competition between elk and cattle (Greater Yellowstone Coalition, 2025). This program has been described as a win-win for wildlife and landowners by the two project partners, the Greater Yellowstone Coalition and the Property and Environment Research Centre (PERC) (Dwyer, 2021). As part of the agreement, landholders perform land management activities including invasive species control and fire management. The agreements are funded by private resources and donations raised by wildlife interests and can be partnered with the landowners who provide valuable wildlife habitat. To reduce the risks that wildlife pose to private landowners while conserving biodiversity, innovative tools such as this are proving to be successful in privately managed landscapes (Regan, 2024).

Female Elk observed during a visit to Yellowstone National Park.

Private funding has been critical to the GYC's success, with individual donors and foundations forming a loyal and engaged base. Scott reflects that for these donors, it has been the connection to Yellowstone National Park that has tied supporters together and kept their connection to the organisation strong. High-impact initiatives, such as the Crevice Mountain gold mine acquisition, new innovations or market-based approaches attract new supporters while strengthening existing relationships and unique tools. This dynamic, adaptive approach allows GYC to address diverse challenges across a complex landscape.

Tailored strategies

With a vision that all people work together to conserve this globally significant ecosystem, the Greater Yellowstone Coalition has designed its strategies to suit the needs of the diverse communities living within the landscape. Such an approach has proven to not only protect habitat but also foster trust and long-term collaboration with local communities.

1. Local presence and ground-up action

With 34 staff members headquartered in Bozeman, Montana, and offices in Idaho and Wyoming, GYC hires local people within the communities it serves. The boots-on-ground local presence ensures grassroots collaboration, a hallmark of the Coalition's success.

As Scott Christensen explained, *"Having people in the communities working from the ground up is critical—that's where the change happens."*

2. Indigenous partnerships and historical connections

Indigenous people have stewarded Greater Yellowstone's lands, waters and wildlife since time immemorial. Today, over 49 Indigenous Tribes maintain current or ancestral ties to the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem. GYC acknowledges and collaborates with these Tribes to elevate Indigenous voices and protect the cultural, spiritual and ecological integrity of Greater Yellowstone. Partnerships with local Tribes include (Greater Yellowstone Coalition, 2025):

- Supporting the expansion of Tribal buffalo herds through, for example, expanding the Yellowstone Bison Conservation Transfer program facility; restoring 1,000 buffalo across 100,000 acres of the Wind River Indian Reservation.
- Working alongside Tribal leadership and partners to develop and implement programs and projects to help restore segments of the Big Wind River, which supports ecologically, economically and culturally vital riparian habitats.

3. Collaborating with ranchers to maintain open spaces

Partnering with ranchers, land trusts and public land agencies to preserve critical open spaces in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem is an important strategy. Ranches, which are often located in low-elevation valley bottoms, are essential for wildlife migration and ecological connectivity. As informed through field excursions to Anderson Ranch (Johns, 2021) and Mountain Sky Guest Ranch (Mountain Sky, 2025), delivering a productive and profitable farm as well as effective wildlife stewardship requires innovation, determination, capacity building and adequate resourcing. GYC works with private landowners and other partners such as land trusts to balance agricultural livelihoods with conservation needs (Greater Yellowstone Coalition, 2025), advocating for and sometimes funding conservation tools such as:

- Conservation Easements: a land conservation tool deployed by land trusts and public land agencies in partnership with private land owners to protect open space. These ensure land remains undeveloped while allowing ranchers to continue their operations. GYC has helped pay for easements in important areas for wildlife connectivity.
- Elk Occupancy Agreements: an emerging development that seeks to incentivise ranchers to adjust grazing practices, such as moving cattle off the land during winter months, allowing elk to migrate more freely.

Visting the Mountain Sky Guest Ranch with Peter Brown and CLLC staff.

4. Mitigating impacts

Being adaptable and nimble means that innovative and creative solutions can be deployed when needed. For example, in 2023, GYC achieved a landmark conservation victory by stopping a proposed gold mine on Crevice Mountain, located on the northern border of Yellowstone National Park (Greater Yellowstone Coalition, 2025). This was accomplished through a particularly innovative strategy: GYC purchased the mining company's assets, including 56 unpatented mining claims spanning 1,200 acres of public land. These claims were subsequently relinquished to the Bureau of Land Management, which extinguished them.

This initiative was made possible through the Yellowstone Gateway Protection Act, a pivotal law passed in 2019 with GYC's leadership (Greater Yellowstone Coalition, 2019). The Act permanently bans mining and new mining claims on more than 30,000 acres of the Custer Gallatin National Forest. Thanks to these efforts, there are no longer mining threats along Yellowstone's northern boundary, ensuring the permanent protection of this critical landscape.

Looking forward

GYC's story is one of ecological recovery. When the Coalition was founded, grizzly bear populations had plummeted to just 130 individuals; today, there are more than 1,000. Similarly, bison numbers in Yellowstone were as low as 23 in 1972 and have now rebounded to over 6,000. These successes highlight GYC's pivotal role in shaping a thriving future for the region's iconic wildlife.

GYC's work continues to evolve, with new market-based strategies on the horizon and an ever-growing emphasis on fostering coexistence between wildlife and communities. Its ability to adapt, innovate, and collaborate ensures that the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem remains one of the most intact, celebrated, and globally significant landscapes on our planet.

Visiting Anderson Ranch to meet with Daniel Anderson and his wife Louise Johns with Deb Davidson.

CASE STUDY – Land acquisition across the Northern Great Plains :

The American Prairie

While in Bozeman, I had the unique opportunity to speak with two individuals deeply connected to the American Prairie program: Michael Wainwright, former Senior Philanthropy Manager at the American Prairie, and Colleen Matzke, a member of the Smithsonian's Great Plains Science Program and former Wildlife Restoration Specialist at American Prairie. While I was not able to visit the site or meet with their staff, my conversations with previous employees inspired me to undertake online research as the program appeared to have some synergies and parallel challenges and opportunities to some private land conservation organisations operating in Australia. I was not in a position to have this section reviewed, so this section contains publicly available information obtained from the organisation's website (American Prairie, 2025) and research papers.

The Vision of American Prairie

"The American Prairie's mission is to create one of the largest nature reserves in the United States—a refuge for people and wildlife, preserved forever as part of America's heritage."

The ambitious goal of the American Prairie is to restore and conserve over three million acres of contiguous private and public land, recreating a vast expanse of iconic grasslands that once dominated central North America. This landscape helped shape the ecological and cultural identity of the United States, but today, grassland habitats face widespread decline globally (Grasslands, Rangelands, Savannahs and Shrublands Alliance, 2024), with the U.S. being no exception.

Why the Northern Great Plains?

The Northern Great Plains is a prime candidate for conservation due to its existing expanse of public lands, including national parks, monuments, and public leasehold areas. While pre-colonisation the movement of bison and Tribal communities shaped this landscape, historical land use after colonization shaped this region further. The Homestead Act and subsequent Grazing Acts of the 19th century spurred increased settlements in the area. However, the arid nature of the landscape made farming and grazing difficult.

As a result, large portions of the prairie remained in a relatively intact native vegetative state, offering immense potential for supporting wildlife. This intactness and the region's ecological importance motivated the establishment of a new nonprofit organization—American Prairie—to promote and implement the conservation strategy.

The acquisition model

American Prairie's land acquisition model strategically prioritises private lands adjacent to public leasehold lands. Private (deeded) land is tied to an allotment of leased state and federal land that is traditionally used for grazing. By leveraging that structure, and building on existing protected lands, American Prairie can buy a relatively small amount of land and still achieve landscape-scale results. Under the Homestead (Digital Public Library of America, 2025) and Grazing Acts, grazing is required on these leasehold lands, so the organization often sub-leases the properties to maintain grazing practices.

Meeting with Colleen Matske exploring the incredible landscape of the American Prairie by map.

A unique advantage of this landscape is the legal recognition of bison as a grazing species in Montana, enabling American Prairie to restore bison herds under state law. This aligns with their conservation goals while complying with grazing requirements.

Challenges and community engagement

The program continues to address challenges, particularly from local pastoral communities (Johnson, 2022). Some community members see the organization's land acquisitions as "buying up the land" and removing it from productive use. However, over time, American Prairie has implemented several strategies to address these tensions:

1. **Community engagement and tourism opportunities:**

   The organization actively communicates the economic benefits of ecotourism, ensuring public access to properties for activities such as visitation and hunting.

2. **Maintaining grazing practices:**

   Grazing continues on the properties, including the agistment of cattle and the management of bison.

3. **Establishing a visitor center:**

   Two of the core tenants are providing education about the prairie and access to the land. The National Discovery Center in the nearby town of Lewistown provides a platform for community engagement, education and regional economic development.

4. **Wild Sky Ranching Program:**

   This initiative incentivizes neighbouring ranchers to adopt wildlife-friendly practices, promoting connectivity across 80,000 acres.

Legislative and cultural challenges

Similar to challenges faced in Australia, the regulatory framework for leasehold lands in the U.S. does not readily recognize conservation as a primary land use. Additionally, there are cultural hurdles to adopting non-traditional land management approaches, requiring long-term relationship building.

Partnerships with tribal nations

Partnerships with Indigenous tribes are important to American Prairie. The program collaborates with tribes and external partners to support tribal recovery of bison and swift fox populations, emphasizing the cultural and ecological importance of these species. In many cases, Native Americans are leading wildlife restoration efforts for bison, as well as for other species of cultural and economic importance across their more than 15 million acres of the Plains under tribal stewardship (World Wildlife Fund, 2016).

Progress and achievements

Today, American Prairie owns and manages over 500,000 acres, excluding federal refuges and monuments. The bison population has grown to 855 individuals, with increasing genetic diversity thanks to the introduction of animals from Elk Island National Park, Alberta, Canada. Tribal partnerships have also facilitated the return of species like bison and elk to their ancestral lands.

The Discovery Center has become a valuable resource for the community, bolstering local economic development and strengthening regional ties.

Insights and reflections for Australia

The American Prairie program and Australian conservation organisations with an acquisition strategy share several similarities in their approaches to conserving large ecologically significant landscapes, particularly within pastoral rangelands. There are also key differences driven by their unique regional contexts. Some of these differences and similarities are outlined below:

- Taking a landscape scale approach to the acquisition and conservation strategies supports broader ecological health and provides opportunities for greater engagement with the broader community.
- In both countries there is resistance from local communities concerned about land use change; deliberate and intentional strategies to address these tensions will be critical to success. Community engagement is fundamental.
- While ecotourism has been a major factor in the success of the American Prairie, because they bolster local economies and foster community acceptance, the difference in geography, access and human populations may limit the success of this strategy in some Australian contexts. In these cases, on-ground community partnerships may be more successful. Nonetheless, the American Prairie example demonstrates how creating high-quality visitor experiences can reduce local tensions and provide tangible economic benefits to communities.
- Leveraging public lands adjacent to private acquisitions can extend conservation reach and create corridors enhancing connectivity. There are opportunities for shared learning with respect to the grazing/pastoral lease system and land use tenure policy.

The American Prairie program exemplifies how large-scale conservation can integrate ecological restoration with community engagement and economic development. By maintaining a focus on collaboration, the program is not only restoring a critical ecosystem but also ensuring it remains a shared heritage for future generations.

CASE STUDY – Conservation networks supporting private land conservation:

Collaborative conservation networks play a critical role in scaling private land conservation across the U.S. by fostering partnerships, sharing resources and aligning collective conservation goals across landscapes. Networks like the Blackfoot Challenge, Heart of the Rockies Initiative and California Landscape Stewardship Network bring together landowners, Indigenous nations, conservation groups and government agencies to address large-scale environmental challenge such as habitat loss, climate resilience and sustainable land management.

On a cold evening in Missoula, I had the privilege of spending time with Seth Wilson (Blackfoot Challenge) and JoAnn Grant (Heart of the Rockies). The Blackfoot Challenge and the Heart of the Rockies Initiatives are arguably among the most effective landscape-scale conservation networks in the western U.S. They demonstrate the power of collaboration in private land conservation.

The Blackfoot Challenge, based in Montana's Blackfoot Valley, unites ranchers, landowners, conservation groups, and government agencies to promote sustainable land management, protect wildlife corridors, and restore watersheds. Through conservation easements, habitat restoration, and innovative stewardship practices, the network has helped protect over 1.5 million acres of private and public land while supporting local livelihoods (Blackfoot Challenge, 2022). Seth described how the governance structure of the organisation, giving a seat at the table to all public agencies that manage land in the watershed, along with key landholders, local business owners and NGOs, has built trust between diverse groups and demonstrated value to government agencies.

The Heart of the Rockies Initiative operates at an even larger scale, connecting land trusts, Indigenous nations, and conservation organizations across Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, and beyond. By aligning resources and expertise, Heart of the Rockies supports private land conservation efforts that protect working lands, maintain biodiversity, and build climate resilience across the Northern Rockies and High Divide (Heart of the Rockies Initiative, 2024). The opportunity to build and demonstrate collective impact of the participating Land Trusts and reduce competition have, according to JoAnn, strengthened opportunities across the entire landscape.

Both networks share key successes: fostering trust among diverse stakeholders, securing funding for conservation easements, and integrating conservation with sustainable ranching and forestry. Their emphasis on voluntary, community-driven conservation has strengthened private land stewardship and ensured the protection of critical landscapes at a meaningful scale. Their impact extends beyond individual properties, demonstrating how landscape-scale collaboration can sustain ecosystems, rural economies, and cultural heritage for future generations.

Further to the south-west in the US is the practitioner-led California Landscape Stewardship Network (CLSN), where long-term colleague Sharon Farrell served as the Coordinator for 3 years, handing the leadership role to Devin Landry in 2020. Speaking with both colleagues, it became clear that there is an abundance of landscape conservation and stewardship networks operating across the U.S., and that they are essential in advancing practice and policy for conservation across boundaries, sectors and cultures.

The CLSN is a coalition of land managers, conservation organisations, government agencies, private landowners and Indigenous partners working to advance collaborative, landscape-scale stewardship across California. The CLSN was formed to break down barriers to effective conservation, and foster innovative solutions and partnerships that address complex environmental challenges such as wildfire resilience, habitat connectivity, ecosystem health and climate adaptation. The network has worked with state and regional governments to increase funding through grant programs, supported multi-benefit approaches for aligning conservation priorities and scaled up stewardship efforts by amplifying shared learning, policy innovation and cross-sector collaboration.

Sharon and Devin both articulated the ways that the CLSN has been instrumental in bridging gaps between public and private land conservation. They described their successful advocacy for programs and policies that support landscape resilience, such as Cutting Green Tape (California Landscape Stewardship Network, 2020), and in securing funding for multi-jurisdictional projects.

A specific focus for the CLSN model is their investment in and thought leadership around capacity building for collaboration, asserting that collaborative capacity is critical to delivering stewardship projects and programs (DeSilva, 2022).

The CLSN attests that their success lies in strengthening relationships, improving land management coordination and empowering local stewards with the tools and resources needed for long-term conservation; and in doing so has become a model for integrating science, policy, equity and community engagement to scale private land stewardship efforts that contribute to California's biodiversity, water security and climate resilience.

By leveraging collective expertise and funding, these networks have expanded the reach of conservation easements, improved land stewardship practices and ensured conservation efforts are both ecologically effective and economically viable.

Spending time with Sharon Farrell at the International Land Conservation Network Global Congress in Quebec, Canada.

Insights

What we can learn from these landscape scale initiatives and conservation networks is that their success lies in breaking down silos, building trust and creating durable and scalable conservation solutions that benefit both people and nature. Many effective conservation efforts happen through local networks that connect individuals, businesses and landowners to shared conservation or stewardship goals. Ensuring that conservation efforts align with the lived realities and priorities of local communities can increase the chances of success.

As climate and biodiversity challenges intensify, these collaborative efforts provide scalable, community driven models for safeguarding private lands, amplifying First Nations leadership, and ensuring long-term landscape resilience.

1d Enhancing connectivity through wildlife crossings

Wildlife road crossings, such as underpasses and overpasses, play an increasingly critical role in environmental management (Centre for Large Landscape Conservation, 2023). They reconnect fragmented habitats, allow safe wildlife movement, and support breeding and migration. These crossings also provide exceptionally high return on investment; providing economic and social benefits by reducing wildlife-vehicle collisions, saving human lives, and preventing injuries (Centre for Large Landscape Conservation, 2023). For example, in the western USA, one study (Paul, 2023) reports that wildlife-vehicle collisions cost at least US $1.6 billion annually. Additionally, wildlife crossings can foster public understanding of environmental issues. High-profile projects, such as the world's largest wildlife crossing in California (Gammon, 2022), showcase their ecological value and increase support for conservation initiatives.

Example of wildlife road crossing on route up to CSKT Bison Reserve

The role of the Centre for Large Landscape Conservation (CLLC)

The Centre for Large Landscape Conservation is a US-based global organization that advances ecological connectivity and climate resilience through science, policy, practice, and collaboration (Centre for Large Landscape Conservation, 2022). CLLC uses spatial models and maps to help planners identify wildlife movement pathways and assess how human activities either help or hinder these movements. Beyond technical guidance, the organisation provides policy expertise, working collaboratively with decision-makers at national, state, and local levels to implement landscape-scale conservation efforts. Many wildlife corridors and crossing infrastructure projects across the globe have been advanced by the efforts of this organization.

CASE STUDY – Enhancing human and wildlife safety:

Yellowstone Safe Passages Initiative, Paradise Valley, Montana

In Paradise Valley, Montana, the Yellowstone Safe Passages Initiative (Yellowstone Safe Passages Initiative, 2024) exemplifies successful collaboration aiming to enhance human and wildlife safety along Highway 89. This partnership includes federal and state agencies, local government officials, conservation groups, landowners, businesses, and community organizations. With CLLC's support, the project secured policy and funding to explore and design two wildlife crossings, demonstrating the economic and ecological case for such infrastructure.

Field observations: During a week-long field visit to Paradise Valley, I travelled back and forth along Highway 89 from Bozeman to Yellowstone National Park, where I observed firsthand how species like pronghorn, elk, and bighorn sheep navigate a mosaic of parks, ranch land, rivers and busy roads. I engaged with stakeholders, including ranch managers, First Nations and community groups, government officials, environmental organizations, and funders, to understand the

challenges and opportunities presented by wildlife and wildlife crossings. I heard from many of the founding members of the project, at an end of year celebration event. The founding members of the Yellowstone Safe Passages Initiative includes: the Common Ground Project, Greater Yellowstone Coalition, National Parks Conservation Association, Park County Environmental Council, and the CLLC.

A summary of key observations about wildlife crossings from this field trip are outlined below:

1. **Policy enablers**: Federal and state government policy and funding are critical to securing successful outcomes for wildlife transport infrastructure.
    - The **Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act of 2021** provided US $350 million over five years for the Wildlife Crossings Pilot Program, the first federal initiative dedicated solely to wildlife crossings (United States Department of Transport, 2021).
    - State agencies are critical for policy, project developments and approvals as well as funding. For the highway 89 project, the **Montana Department of Transportation** is a critical partner, providing approval for an engineering feasibility study for a wildlife crossing near a critical ecological site, Dome Mountain, to prevent animal-vehicle collisions (Astin, 2024). This approval will be a critical step to securing a pathway for project development.
    - State policies, such as California's **Safe Roads and Wildlife Protection Act**, mandate the integration of wildlife connectivity into road infrastructure projects (Wildlands Network, 2022).
2. **Collaboration and funding:**
    - Federal and state funding is often insufficient, requiring partnerships with philanthropic organizations and local stakeholders to fill funding gaps.
    - Trusted advisors, such as universities and transport institutes, play a critical role in building the evidence base and advocating for projects.
3. **Community engagement:**
    - Effective consultation with local communities and Indigenous groups builds trust and ensures projects address ecological, cultural, and social priorities.
    - Securing participation from privately managed land is often critical to project success; from gaining positive support for a complex project to requiring infrastructure development on the land itself.
    - The integration of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) strengthens the design and implementation of crossings (Gann, 2019). For example, the Highway 89
    - project supported a full cultural background survey of the Paradise Valley project, fostering broader collaboration and support.
4. **Data and research:**
    - Reliable transport and ecological studies, facilitated by partnerships with universities and government agencies, were crucial to demonstrating the need for and benefits of the crossings.
    - CLLC's Toolkit (Paul K., 2023 (Rev)) offers best practices for developing wildlife crossing projects under the Federal Wildlife Crossings Pilot Program.

Lessons for Australia

While wildlife road crossings are less widespread in Australia than in the USA, their importance is growing (Walker, 2023). Habitat fragmentation, biodiversity decline, and infrastructure expansion into critical habitats highlight the need for such measures. Australian wildlife crossings primarily target species like kangaroos, wallabies, koalas, and arboreal animals (e.g., possums and gliders).

Examples in Australia include:

- **Western Australia's First Fauna Bridge**: Designed to support native fauna crossings (Hastie, 2018).
- **Pacific Highway Koala Underpasses (NSW)**: Critical for protecting koala populations (Transport for NSW, 2023).
- **Hume Highway Glider Poles (Vic/NSW)**: Enabling arboreal species to cross safely (Taylor, 2023).

Policy and funding context:

- The **Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation (EPBC) Act 1999** requires environmental assessments for major infrastructure projects, including wildlife mitigation measures. However, a recent review (Samuel, 2020) found the Act outdated and insufficient to address current biodiversity challenges.
- While Australia lacks a dedicated federal program like the Wildlife Crossings Pilot Program, funding could be integrated into broader national and state initiatives such as the Infrastructure Investment Program (Australian Government commitment to over AU $120 billion into infrastructure over 10 years) (Australian Government, 2024). Such a program should set priorities for targeted and strategic wildlife crossing investigations and investment.

Celebration event for the Yellowstone Safe Passages partnership program at the Mountain Sky Guest Ranch

Wildlife observations from highway during visit to Paradise valley: left to right: Bighorn Sheep, Pronghorn and Female Elk.

Challenges and opportunities:

- **Limited research**: Australia has fewer studies on wildlife crossings compared to the USA (Goldingay, 2022). Increased research is needed to understand their effectiveness and optimize designs.
- **Collaborative approaches**: Partnerships with First Nations leaders, universities, and private stakeholders are essential for successful implementation.
- **Advocacy for dedicated funding**: Establishing a targeted wildlife crossings program could drive broader adoption and effectiveness.

Recommendations for improving and expanding connectivity through wildlife crossings in Australia

1. **Promote wildlife crossings**: Increase the awareness of wildlife road crossings and connectivity infrastructure as a vital tool for biodiversity conservation and road safety.
2. **Advocate for dedicated funding**: Explore opportunities for targeted federal and state funding programs to support wildlife crossings.
3. **Encourage research and monitoring**: Increase investment in studies to evaluate the effectiveness of crossings and identify priority locations.
4. **Foster partnerships**: Collaborate with First Nations communities, environmental organizations, government agencies, and universities to integrate cultural knowledge and scientific research into infrastructure and community-led project planning.

Insights

Wildlife road crossings are a critical investment in Australia's future. They safeguard biodiversity, reduce roadkill, enhance public safety, and support ecosystem services. By learning from successful models in the U.S. and leveraging local expertise, Australia can scale up its efforts to implement effective, targeted, and culturally inclusive wildlife connectivity solutions.

Section 2: Enablers for conservation action

This section is broken up into three chapters:

2a Government policy critical to success

2b Funding and finance for conservation

2c Winds of change

Consolidating insights from across the study tour, there were a range of policy levers that helped to scale environmental action and support landholder participation in environment and climate programs in the U.S. While not exhaustive, the following policies emerged as the most commonly recognised enablers:

1. **30 by 30 environmental policy:** The U.S. commitment to conserve 30% of U.S. lands and waters by 2030, outlined in *Conserving and Restoring America the Beautiful* (2021), has empowered land trusts to enhance land and water conservation. This policy unlocked substantial funding streams, including the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) outlined below, and state-level initiatives, enabling land trusts to purchase and restore ecologically critical areas. Simplified regulatory processes, such as streamlined conservation easement approvals, have also reduced barriers to action.

   This policy has also fostered partnerships with Indigenous communities and First Nations emphasising traditional ecological knowledge and Indigenous sovereignty. Public outreach campaigns tied to the 30 by 30 goal has increased conservation awareness, drawing public and private funding towards biodiversity, climate and equity aligned projects.

2. **Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF):** Established in 1965, the LWCF is a long-term Federal Government Fund, established to fulfill a bipartisan commitment to safeguard natural areas, water resources and cultural heritage, and to provide recreation opportunities to all Americans (U.S. Department of the Interior, 2024). By supporting partnerships between federal, state, and local agencies, as well as non-profits, the fund has facilitated many of the projects undertaken by land trusts and organisations across the U.S, including land acquisition.

   More details on the Land and Water Fund are easily accessed through an FAQ developed by the Congressional Research Service (2022).

3. **Conservation easements and tax incentives:** Tax incentives for landowners who establish conservation easements have been instrumental in protecting private lands while retaining ownership. Historic programs like the Enhanced Easement Initiative encouraged landholders to preserve ecosystems, providing powerful financial incentives, thus contributing to large-scale conservation outcomes (Land Trust Alliance, 2016).

4. **The Farm Bill:** The Farm Bill, reauthorised every five years, is a cornerstone of U.S. agriculture, conservation and climate policies. It funds programs such as the conservation Reserve Program (CRP), Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), and Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP), supporting landowners in adopting sustainable practices (United States Government, 2024). For example, the CRP has retired over 22 million acres of farmland, enhancing biodiversity and water quality.

The funding allocations through the Farm Bill, for example the Conservation title accounts for US$58 billion in projected 10-year mandatory funding (FY2025- FY2034), make it one of the most historic investments for voluntary, incentive-based environmental initiatives in the U.S (Congressional Research Service, 2024).

While delivering major outcomes, accessibility for historically underserved producers remains a challenge. Stakeholders emphasised the Bill's ability to foster partnerships between government agencies, private landowners and conservation organisations, building shared responsibility for land stewardship.

5. **Inflation Reduction Act (IRA):** Signed into law in 2022, the IRA represents the largest federal climate investment in the U.S. history, allocating over US$369 billion over ten years (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2024). The IRA is aimed at combating climate change, reducing healthcare costs and improving tax equity.

   Key conservation initiatives supported by the IRA include (Congressional Research Service, 2023):

   a) Funding for reforestation, wetland restoration and sustainable agricultural practices that enhance carbon sequestration and deliver nature-based solutions.

   b) Agriculture and land stewardship through EQIP, CSP and RCPP.

   c) Funding for forest health initiatives, including fire risk reduction and urban forestry.

   d) Enhanced tax credits for private landowners engaging in renewable energy projects, reforestation and carbon offset initiatives.

   e) Support for underserved and Indigenous communities.

   The IRA has set an example internationally, demonstrating how government funding can accelerate conservation efforts and integrate them into broader climate and economic strategies. It highlights the importance of leveraging nature-based solutions to address climate change and biodiversity loss.

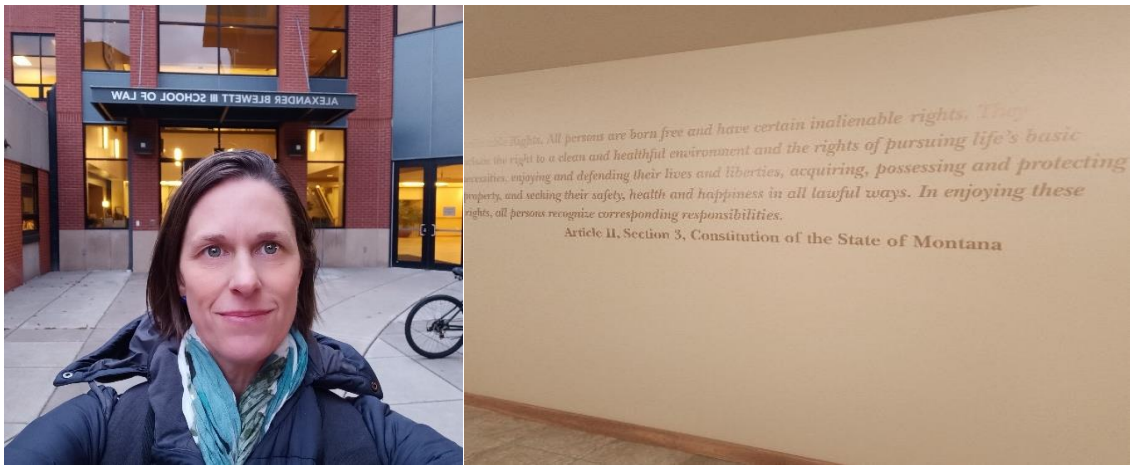
6. **Ballot initiatives:** Also known as ballot measures or referendums, are questions placed before voters on local or statewide ballots. The process gives people the ability to propose constitutional amendments or statutes (depending on the state) and collect signatures to place those proposals directly before voters (The Ballot Initiative Strategy Centre, 2025). Ballot initiatives can be used to get issues on the ballot to pass laws that help communities. Following the 2024 U.S. Election, The Nature Conservancy reported that thirteen of the state and local ballot initiatives related to climate and conservation that they had engaged in were approved by voters (The Nature Conservancy, 2024). These included blocking efforts to roll back climate and conservation policies and unlocking public funding measures.

7. **Carbon markets and climate solutions:** Policies supporting natural climate solutions, such as carbon sequestration in forests and wetlands have incentivised land trusts to engage in carbon markets. These markets provide revenue streams that fund large-scale conservation efforts.

8. **Readiness and Environmental Protection Integration Program (REPI):** The REPI program of the Department of Defence secures land adjacent to military bases to serve as buffers to development, enhance recreational access, protect at risk species and improve resistance to impacts from climate change and severe weather events (United States Government,

2023). Among other opportunities under the REPI Program, Military Services enter into cost-sharing agreements with state and local governments and conservation organisations to acquire land in fee or under easement, to prevent residential and commercial development around bases that could impact operational capabilities. Through Fiscal Year 2022, the program has leveraged US$1.2 billion in Defence funding with over US$1.13 billion in partner contributions – nearly a 1:1 match – protecting more than 1.18 million acres of land (United States Government, 2023).

9. **National Trails System Act:** The National Trails System Act, has enabled large-scale preservation of cultural and natural landscapes, and has underpinned the success of many of the land trust trails and public access programs. This policy fosters collaboration between land trusts and federal agencies to protect important trail corridors.
10. **State open space programs:** State-level programs, such as New Jersey's Green Acres Program, have supported land acquisition and restoration efforts. These programs often complement federal initiatives, providing additional funding and strategic guidance.
11. **Indigenous Land Rights Recognition:** Policy shifts, including some of those outlined above that recognise Indigenous land stewardship, such as through the Ramapo Munsee Land Alliance, have facilitated the return of ancestral lands. This supports cultural preservation and highlights the importance of traditional knowledge and practice in conservation strategies.



Visit to University of Montana where I spent time with Shawn Johnson and Travis Anklam from the Centre for Natural Resources and Environmental Policy.

Considerations for Australian policy development

While some of these legislative arrangements may not be applicable in the Australian context, three recommendations are outlined:

1. It is evidenced that major funding is required if we are to meet the 30 by 30 land and water conservation targets, and that acquisition for private or public conservation estate remains a critical strategy. Continue to advocate for a dedicated conservation fund, drawing on the successes of the LWCF, to support land acquisition, restoration and stewardship through partnerships with governments, private landholders and non-profits.
2. It is noted that there appears to be a greater diversity of government agencies contributing major funds to climate and biodiversity (e.g. Agriculture, Interior, Defense and Treasury). Continue to advocate that environmental protection programs should be more strongly integrated into broader climate and economic policies.

3. Conservation easements/covenants are a critical tool for expanding opportunities for private land conservation and stewardship. Further explore the diversity of conservation easement opportunities being delivered in the U.S. for their application in an Australian context and continue to advocate for tax incentives and regulatory support for landholders who voluntarily commit.

2b Funding and finance for conservation

Securing funding for conservation remains a persistent challenge, requiring innovative financial mechanisms, cross-sector collaborations, and diverse capital sources. While public funding remains critical, the conservation finance landscape is rapidly evolving. The growing role of private philanthropy, conservation finance networks, and market-based solutions is being shaped by the growing urgency of biodiversity loss, climate change and social equity concerns.

As articulated well by the Conservation Finance Network, centred out of the Yale Centre for Business and the Environment, "the conservation community recognises that traditional funding models can't keep pace with the need for conservation capital. At a time of modest public funding and limited philanthropic dollars, innovative funding and financing strategies hold great promise in narrowing the gap between the financial resources that are available, and the scale of the conservation need" (Yale Centre for Buinsess and the Environment, 2025).

The case studies outlined in previous sections give insights into how organisations have successfully used government funding to leverage new dollars; how incentives to landholders can unlock incredible conservation gains; and how emerging markets support and enable new conservation actors.

This chapter synthesises insights from discussions with conservation finance experts and organisations, Indigenous organisations, practitioners and landholders. It highlights key funding strategies, mechanisms, and partnerships that support sustainable conservation efforts - from large-scale public-private partnerships to Indigenous-led initiatives. By delving into case studies, exploring financial trends and systemic barriers, this section aims to provide some insights into the current and future state of conservation funding and finance in the U.S.; and reflect on opportunities for the Australian context.

Summary of challenges in conservation finance

1. **Political and economic volatility**: While recent years have seen increased government investment in the environment, long-term under-resourcing and shifting political priorities creates funding uncertainty. This instability and resource limitations complicates financial planning, and limits the ability for conservation organisations to put in place long-term strategies and necessary staffing, thus inhibiting biodiversity impact.
2. **Bureaucratic hurdles**: Federal and state funding mechanisms often involve complex and labour-intensive application processes and delayed reimbursements, making it difficult for smaller organizations to participate.
3. **Access to capital for under-resourced groups**: Smaller organisations and Indigenous groups face barriers to securing funding, particularly for pre-acquisition costs, legal fees and technical assessments needed to unlock conservation opportunities.
4. **Sustaining local engagement**: While community-led initiatives are highly effective, they often struggle with long-term funding and capacity-building. Ensuring resources and training for local conservation groups remains an ongoing challenge.

5. **Balancing conservation with economic development**: The tension between land conservation and economic growth persists. Redefining the value of conservation to our industry and economy is necessary but challenging. Models such as working forests and regenerative agriculture demonstrate potential solutions but require greater investment and policy support.
6. **Scaling conservation finance mechanisms**: Tools like carbon and biodiversity credits hold promise but face barriers including market inconsistencies, regulatory uncertainty and a need for stronger accountability measures.
7. **Strengthening regulatory frameworks**: Challenges remain in ensuring that corporate investments lead to meaningful ecological outcomes and prevent greenwashing. Enhancing transparency, accountability and regulatory frameworks that deliver long-term corporate commitments to conservation will be important for private sector investment to become a reliable pillar of conservation finance.
8. **Public awareness and political realities:** Biodiversity loss and environmental concerns often struggle for political attention, especially during economic downturns. Public awareness of the state of our environment is generally considered low and public engagement tends to spike during crises, highlighting the need for sustained awareness building efforts.

Shaping the future of conservation finance

Several key trends shaping the future of conservation finance came through:

- Blended finance models that combine public grants, private capital, and philanthropic funding are becoming more widespread, offering diverse and sustainable funding streams.
- Market-based approaches, like biodiversity credits and conservation linked investments are expanding opportunities for environmental protection, management and restoration. However, challenges remain in achieving standardisation, broad adoption and scalability.
- Corporate engagement is increasing, with businesses integrating conservation into ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) strategies and frameworks like TNFD are influencing how the private sector interacts with and invests in nature.
- Equity and accessibility for marginalised communities is an increasing priority, including to ensure their effective and equitable participation and benefit sharing.

The following sections explore these trends in greater detail.

The role of Public-Private Partnerships and blended finance

Public-private partnerships (PPPs) have emerged as a powerful tool for conservation funding, enabling governments, NGOs, and private entities to combine resources and expertise. These partnerships are playing an increasingly vital role in bridging financial gaps and enabling large-scale conservation efforts.

A key challenge in conservation finance remains generating reliable cash flows. Blended finance – such as using public funding to de-risk private investment - can offer a scalable solution. Philanthropy also plays a critical role, providing early stage funding and bridging gaps where market mechanisms fall short.

Conservation as an investment opportunity

Discussions with experts revealed that market-based finance is playing an increasingly significant role in biodiversity conservation and sustainable land management. Investors are recognising the value of ecosystem services and policy developments are shaping investment strategies.

Market-based solutions - including biodiversity credits, carbon markets, land transactions, conservation easements, and tax incentives – are expanding. Conservation and farm easements have become widely used tools for private land conservation. These mechanisms are proving essential in advancing 30 by 30 goals and sustainable land management in productive landscapes.

In productive landscapes, market-based conservation approaches were identified to be most effective when they integrate business viability, market access and long-term economic sustainability for landholders. Linking conservation finance with food system resilience and demonstrating the economic and ecological value of protected farmland were identified as key factors driving participation and impact.

The same drivers mobilising private sector funding for nature in Australia were evident across conservation finance networks in the U.S. Government and industry frameworks like the Taskforce on Nature-Related Financial Disclosures, natural capital initiatives and government policies like the Inflation Reduction Act were identified as important in influencing the private sector, industry and finance institutions considerations of their nature risks and dependencies and their investments in these. Such investments might be delivered through offset programs, sustainable supply chains or other conservation finance initiatives. Many groups I spoke with referenced the considerable engagement by larger conservation organisations seeking to mobilise this funding and strengthen frameworks.

Organisations like the Conservation Finance Network and The Conservation Fund, along with many of the global conservation organisations, are helping to facilitate private sector involvement by providing technical guidance, regulatory support, and financial modelling. Some organisations are acting as intermediaries, structuring land acquisitions, environmental mitigation and ecosystem restoration projects that align conservation with corporate sustainability goals.

Resources Legacy Fund (RLF) is a non-profit organisation that partners with philanthropy, advocates, government, academia and business to catalyse action for conservation, environmental equity and justice and climate solutions (Resources Legacy Fund, 2025). With deep expertise in matching private philanthropic contributions to public policy goals, RLF has become a trusted and well-connected player in the conservation finance space.

Stacey Olson, Program Manager at RLF, highlighted to me the organisation's ability to build diverse coalitions, navigate legislative campaigns and strategically align funding partners with policy opportunities. In California, RLF played a pivotal role in helping the California Natural Resources Agency advance the state's 30x30 biodiversity conservation initiative (Resources Legacy Fund, 2025). By catalysing early-stage funding, facilitating coalition-building, and ensuring sustained advocacy, RLF helped secure significant state conservation funding.

RLF's success demonstrates the power of leveraging philanthropic and public funding to catalyse the required capital for early stage work or to de-risk conservation activity. Stacey described that their ability to leverage flexible funding and finance has been instrumental in advancing large-scale conservation goals

While private sector engagement was identified as a potential opportunity to unlocking new funding streams, many stakeholders expressed scepticism about the pace of change. Systemic

barriers - including policy instability, the lack of scalable cash flows, and investor hesitation — continue to hinder large-scale conservation investment.

Funding and finance for Indigenous and community-led conservation

Indigenous communities face persistent barriers to accessing funding, as many funding models favour colonial structures or technology driven solutions over relational, community-based approaches. Pat Gonzales-Rogers, from Yale School of the Environment, highlighted the opportunity to restructure funding programs to ensure resources flow directly to Indigenous groups.

Many financial mechanisms require extensive pre-development work, which can be difficult to fund upfront. Foundations and government programs can help by supporting capacity building within Indigenous organisations. In some cases, partnership like those facilitated by the Resources Legacy Fund (RLF) has helped bridge gaps by providing early-stage funding for Tribal land acquisition and restoration, covering costs like appraisals, legal fees, and environmental analysis.

Beyond funding, the lack of access and ownership of land has created barriers to economic opportunities. Even when land rights are granted, subsurface rights (e.g. mineral rights) may be withheld, limiting economic opportunities and Indigenous control over resource use.

Conversations with various organisations and individuals underscored the need for policy reform and framework development that respects Indigenous sovereignty while ensuring equitable access to conservation funding. This intersection of justice, conservation and finance demands further attention.

Encouragingly, the projects and organisations I visited demonstrated a growing trend towards engaging underrepresented communities to overcome barriers to project finance. Examples include:

- Addressing the exclusion of land ownership to Tribes or people of colour, such as evidenced in the Ramapo Munsee Land Alliance and Chesapeake Bay case studies earlier in the report.
- Urban farming initiatives such as delivered by the The Conservation Fund (TCF) in Chicago, Atlanta and Norther Carolina, which help minority farmers buy, protect and profit from land (The Conservation Fund, 2025).
- A general shift in funding priorities, with more resources being directed to Indigenous people and marginalised communities, rather than exclusively to conservation organisations.

Several organisations I spoke with are exploring emerging market based and private sector funding, including biodiversity markets and emerging financial frameworks like the Taskforce on Nature-based Financial Disclosures (TNFD). However, at the community and landholder level, there was less evidence that these mechanisms were either accessible or wide-spread.

Frustrated with slow systemic progress, some conservation finance experts are amplifying local impact projects with tangible, measurable results, such as small-scale restoration efforts, sustainable farming and urban greening initiatives. These projects empower communities and can serve as models for broader conservation policies. However, they suggest that scaling these efforts remains a major challenge, particularly in attracting larger private sector investment or integrating with environmental markets.

Ultimately, these challenges and opportunities highlight the importance of local and regional networks in conservation. Whether through landowners sharing regenerative agriculture knowledge, local banks supporting sustainable farming, regional chambers of commerce engaging businesses, or the Land Trust Alliance driving scale and opportunity, these networks often drive more effective change than distant and emerging global frameworks, at least in the short term.

Diversifying funding through conservation finance capacity building

Traditional conservation funding has heavily relied on philanthropic donations and government grants. As outlined previously, as the funding gap for nature continues to grow, accessing new and diverse funding sources is becoming increasingly critical. At the same time, significantly more finance is needed to rapidly address the biodiversity and climate crises.

Throughout my study tour, conversations highlighted two key needs:

1. Diversifying conservation funding sources to reduce dependence on limited grants and donations; and
2. Building financial literacy and capacity within conservation organisations to understand and access new funding opportunities.

Building financial literacy for conservation: The Conservation Finance Network (CFN), based at the Yale Centre for Business and the Environment, has spent decades integrating financial literacy into conservation efforts. CFN helps NGOs navigate investment strategies, impact-driven financing and emerging financial instruments beyond traditional grants. The CFN's annul Conservation Finance Boot Camp and bi-annual Conservation Finance Roundtables provide training and resources to make conservation finance more accessible and actionable (The Conservation Finance Network, 2025). By connecting students, alumni, and professionals, CFN fosters knowledge sharing and capacity building, ensuring that conservation organisations can effectively engage with investors and financial markets.

As new funding mechanisms, such as environmental markets, continue to evolve, the demand for conservation finance capacity building is only expected to grow. Strengthening financial expertise within conservation groups will be key to unlocking sustainable, long-term funding solutions

Considerations for the Australian context:

Insights for growing and developing ALCA's conservation finance network and offerings:

- The bootcamp model: The Conservation Finance Boot Camp has been critical to making information available to people who are looking to use it in their work on a daily basis; the network evolved from this. Past students enjoy the connection and continue to contribute through the provision of case studies from their work or contributions to network newsletters. They benefit from deliberately identifying diverse speakers and contributors from many faculties including agriculture, defence, private sector and government.
- Delivering workshops for specific audiences has resulted in the development of new revenue streams, building organisational capacity.

- The unique partnership with Yale Centre for Business and Environment provides an opportunity to support both the network and program delivery, while providing valuable experiences for students. As a professional school, Yale serves as a bridge between research, practice, theory and application – helping to align academic insight with real-world impact. When these elements are effectively integrated, programs like the Conservation Finance Network can maximise their potential and drive meaningful change.
- There are opportunities to enhance the current connection between the Australian and U.S. Conservation Finance Networks for mutual benefit.
- My observation is that there is comparatively good awareness of, and engagement with, frameworks such as the TNFD and natural capital by local and regional organsiations across Australia. This may be due to Australian government leadership and investment into the development of these frameworks, combined with capacity building and knowledge sharing activities being delivered by groups like ALCA, NRM Regions Australia, Landcare Australia and industry groups. This supports the opportunity to continue to deliver and strengthen the existing work underway.

Insights

Addressing biodiversity loss and climate change requires both global financial solutions and locally driven conservation efforts. While frameworks like TNFD are considered by many to have great potential in driving increased funding to nature and private land conservation, significant impact is currently being driven by regional initiatives, cultural engagement, and community-led economic networks.

To fund conservation at scale, a diverse, integrated approach is needed—one that combines policy innovation, financial literacy, and strategic partnerships. Conservation finance is evolving, with blended finance, capacity building, and Indigenous leadership identified as important levers for change. As funding priorities shift, the sector must remain adaptive and innovative, ensuring financial tools and partnerships deliver real, lasting impact.

2c Winds of change

The timing of my study tour significantly influenced the mood and perspectives of individuals and organisations I engaged with. At the time, the environment sector was benefiting from four years of substantial investment aimed at combatting biodiversity loss and climate change. Relationships between NGOs and government agencies were described as collaborative and progressive, with optimism about scaling impact through increased government funding. Targets within global frameworks such as the Kunming Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework were considered ambitious yet achievable.

Prior to the election, there remained a sense of hope and optimism; tempered with realism and preparation. Organisations were articulating alternative strategies: including mobilizing funding to mitigation efforts, working more creatively and directly to increasing legal resources towards defence.

Following the election, the mood across the environment sector shifted. Despite the need to remain politically neutral, it was evident that the incoming administration's policies were not favourable towards environmental investment and regulation. Organisations experienced in navigating political changes were relatively prepared to adjust their narratives, tone and activities.

However, there was an acknowledgement that the forthcoming changes could have both dire and unpredictable impacts. They stood ready and determined to anticipate and to mitigate.

Attention was directed towards government officials, with many stakeholders from NGOs offering support and compassion as these officials faced potential job losses and significant agency restructures.

As I write (January 2025), the sweeping reforms enacted through executive orders (The Brookings Institution, 2025), the abrupt halting of ongoing initiatives (Lewis, 2025), and the removal of information from online platforms (Canon, 2025) is unfolding rapidly. While many in the private sector argue that sustained investment and momentum - especially in renewable energy - will provide a buffer against major disruption (Hewett, 2025), the scale and speed of these policy shifts are unlike anything seen in recent times, with ramifications likely extending beyond the United States.

In response to the rapid changes, some conservation organisations are actively mobilising non-government funding to fortify defensive strategies for the years ahead. The full extent of the flow-on effects remains uncertain, particularly in Australia, where the upcoming federal election will influence the direction of environmental policy and funding.

Amid these challenges, resilience, strategic resolve and a long-term perspective are seen essential for conservation organisations to sustain their impact under the current U.S. administration.

"Living in this moment is almost surreal, the dismantling of the federal government is having devastating impacts to our conservation work, to say the least. So many of my friends have or are about to lose their jobs. Partnerships are becoming even more important as NGOs are stepping in to close the gaps..." Reflection from a US colleague upon review of report in March 2025.

"... You note the changes here; they are significant and potentially far reaching. The actions in the conservation sphere are really just the tip of the iceberg. These are indeed dark times here." Reflection from a US colleague upon review of report in April 2025

"As our world gets scarier and the work of conservation more challenging, it is increasingly vital to stay connected to peers and partners advancing land stewardship across diverse contexts. I look forward to continuing to connect with and learn from you and other Australian Colleagues." Reflection from a US colleague upon review of report in April 2025

Bison crossing in Yellowstone National Park, Montana. Photo credit Gary Tabor

Section 3: Delivering impact through alliances

In an era of escalating environmental crises, the role of land conservation alliances in preserving biodiversity, mitigating climate change and fostering sustainable land use has never been more critical. Organisations such as the Alliance of Canadian Land Trusts (ACLT), the Land Trust Alliance (LTA) in the U.S. and Eurosite operating across Europe share common objectives and face similar challenges and opportunities as national or continental organisations. The Together Bay Area (TBA), operates at a regional level (San Franscisco Bay Area, California), but its structure, purpose and strategies are similar and delivered in such a way that inclusion for comparative purposes in this section is relevant.

These organisations have formalized membership structures and act as platforms for collaboration, capacity building and advocacy. These functions enhance the ability of member organisations to achieve shared conservation goals. Member-based alliances play a critical role in addressing environmental challenges by uniting diverse stakeholders, including land trusts, governments, NGOs and communities.

The International Land Conservation Network (ILCN) is a project of the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy. The ILCN connects civic and private organizations and people, across boundaries and around the world, to accelerate the protection and strengthen the management of land and natural resources. Drawing insights from the International Land Conservation Network Global Congress, 1:1 interviews, and group meetings, this section explores the shared challenges and opportunities that highlight the potential for collaboration and innovation across borders.

A key and widely applicable recommendation from this analysis is that **the Australian Land Conservation Alliance leverage the International Land Conservation Network as a platform to build stronger more formalized connections between established national private land conservation Alliances.** This would enable the Alliances to better understand and leverage their shared purpose and strategic goals. The remaining recommendations in this section are primarily directed at ALCA's management and board, with the aim of supporting and guiding organizational growth.



Photos taken at the International Land Conservation Network Global Congress, Quebec, Oct 2025. Left: The ILCN Steering Committee and Regional Representatives. Middle: Presentation by Global Land Trust Alliances and Networks, including Jody Gunn (ALCA). Photo Credit NCC/ILCN. Right: Jim Levitt at the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy.

Purpose and mission

The purpose and mission of conservation alliances guide their strategies and impact. Each organization tailors its mission to its geographic, cultural and ecological contexts. For instance:

- **LTA:** Focuses on saving places people need and love, emphasizing climate change, health, wellbeing, and equitable access to nature.
- **Eurosite:** Aims to develop a community of European land conservation practitioners, promoting the stewardship of nature through networking and shared expertise.
- **ACLT:** Strives to empower local and regional land trusts of Canada, advancing national conservation goals such as biodiversity protection and climate resilience.
- **TBA:** Aims to be a champion of and a regional voice for the resilient lands and watersheds that are integral to a thriving Bay Area and all people who live here.

These missions underline a common theme: aligning conservation goals with human well-being and community resilience. While ALCA's emphasis on diversity, inclusive approaches and First Nations leadership reflects this trend, there is an opportunity to further integrate and amplify concepts like equitable access and socio-economic benefits. Doing so would help ALCA connect more effectively with a broader range of stakeholders.

Strategies for delivering purpose

Land conservation alliances use a variety of strategies to fulfill their missions, with common approaches including advocacy, standard setting, capacity building, and communications (Land Trust Alliance, 2018), (Eurosite, 2021). However, not all alliances implemented these strategies to the same extent or in equal measure. Below are the key strategies that emerged.

1. **Policy advocacy and funding.** Advocacy is a cornerstone for most alliances. LTA's federal efforts illustrate the power of a unified voice and building trust and influence in securing funding and shaping policy. For example, the LTA's work with tax incentives and programs like the Farm Bill underscores the importance of clear, coordinated policy agendas. However, not all alliances focus on direct policy advocacy. Eurosite, for example, supports its members in understanding and implementing policy, but does not engage directly in policy development or advocacy. On the other hand, ACLT, TBA and ALCA have robust policy programs and platforms. Key tactics for delivering effective policy and advocacy include:
    a) leveraging the collective voice to influence policy outcomes while respecting the jurisdictional boundaries of members;
    b) establishing strong relationships with government agencies; and
    c) demonstrating accountability through measurable conservation outcomes.
2. **Standard setting and practice guidance.** The LTA has established a strong benchmark for standards and accreditation programs, enhancing professionalism and mitigating risks across the sector they represent. Similarly, ACLT benefits from adopting these standards, showcasing the value of transferable frameworks. While ALCA and Eurosite are not yet in a position to mandate standards, both organisations are prioritizing developing practical resources, good practice guidelines or policy notes. As they continue to build sector guidance, these organisations could expand and promote their resource centres more effectively to build member capacity and foster sector-wide consistency.

3. **Capacity building and networking.** Capacity building is central to the strategic focus of all the alliances. Eurosite and TBA facilitate thematic working groups, while ACLT focuses on partnerships and education, demonstrating the diversity of approaches to empowering members. Convening stakeholders and facilitating knowledge exchange remain key strategies for fostering collaboration and innovation; whether through tailored workshops or sector/cross-sector events like conferences. Some organisations also offer advanced leadership or early career development programs to further strengthen member capabilities.
4. **Communicating sector impact.** Land conservation alliances play a critical role in demonstrating how conservation positively impacts the environment, economy and society. Effective communication helps build broad support for the protection, management and restoration of lands and watersheds, and supports relevant policy changes. For many alliances, communication is also essential for engaging the public and their members.

   ALCA's communications goal - Transforming the way the private land conservation sector is viewed, valued and delivers impact for a healthy and resilient Australia - resonated strongly with other alliances. The LTA has excelled in connecting conservation to human needs, using narratives around health, resilience and access to engage broader audiences. Similarly, Eurosite and TBA have effectively communicated the diversity of their members, benefiting their strategic delivery.

   Common methods used by the alliances in their communications platforms include:

   a) **Data and evidence** - Using data to demonstrate the tangible impact of their efforts and those of their members.

   b) **Storytelling** – Highlighting case studies, success stories and testimonials, to put people at the centre of their work and make it relatable.

   c) **Collaboration and partnerships:** Many alliances emphasise the importance of partnerships with governments, businesses and Indigenous communities to achieve conservation goals.

   d) **Advocacy.** A central function of communications is to support policy advocacy efforts aimed at addressing local and global environmental challenges.

Business models and strategic approaches – lessons learned

Through discussions with the alliances, both individually and collectively, as well as reviewing their strategic plans and impact reports, the following presents a range of business or strategic approaches employed by Alliances that provide insights for adoption and adaptation:

1. **Accreditation for trustworthiness**

   LTA's accreditation program ensures that member organizations adhere to high standards of conservation practices and financial accountability. This approach builds trust with funders, landowners, and the broader public. While ALCA may not consider all elements of their accreditation program relevant in the Australian context, ALCA could consider developing and implementing quality assurance frameworks, policy statements or practice standards and guidelines to enhance credibility and maintain high standards among its members and across the sector.

2. **Diverse revenue streams**

   LTA's reliance on membership fees, training programs, and conferences reduces dependency on external grants. By offering value-added services such as training and accreditation or fee for service activities, ALCA could explore additional revenue sources to achieve financial sustainability.

3. **Leveraging cross-border collaboration**

   Eurosite's ability to coordinate conservation efforts across European nations highlights the importance of fostering regional and international partnerships. ALCA could consider strengthening ties with global conservation organisations or developing new ties with neighbouring conservation organizations in the Asia-Pacific region to tackle shared challenges such as innovative finance, migratory species protection or climate adaptation.

4. **Integrating science and technology**

   Eurosite's use of geospatial technologies and satellite imagery for habitat monitoring provides a model for incorporating cutting-edge tools into conservation efforts. ALCA could explore partnerships with technology providers and research institutions to enhance data collection and evidence-based decision-making where relevant for collective impact or to contribute to global and national dialogues on nature data and metrics.

5. **Community-led conservation**

   ACLT emphasizes empowering local land trusts to act as leaders in their regions. This decentralized approach enables tailored solutions to specific environmental and community challenges. ALCA could amplify its efforts to mobilise and platform its members and support them in taking leadership roles within their communities, fostering grassroots engagement and innovation.

6. **Incorporating Indigenous leadership**

   ACLT's recognition of the role of Indigenous peoples in conservation aligns with ALCA's commitment to First Nations leadership. By further embedding Indigenous knowledge and governance structures into conservation practices, ALCA can work with its Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members and partners to strengthen cultural and ecological outcomes.

7. **Focusing on long-term stewardship**

   ACLT addresses the challenge of the land trust sector's funding ongoing stewardship activities, ensuring that protected lands remain ecologically viable. ALCA could specifically investigate and advocate for direct funding and innovative financing mechanisms that secure resources for long-term conservation management.

8. **Regional focus with diverse stakeholders**

   TBA effectively integrates urban, suburban and rural landscapes into its strategies, engaging a wide range of stakeholders, from local governments to tribal entities and private landowners. As ALCA expands, it could consider effective models for addressing the diverse ecological and socio-economic challenges across Australia, exploring ways for tailored solutions to be developed and communicated for specific landscapes and communities.

9. **Thematic working groups**

   TBA's model of forming sub-groups, such as climate resilience working groups, allows focused collaboration on specific issues. ALCA could expand its current working group offerings, creating thematic groups to address pressing topics, while leveraging members' expertise.

10. **Cross-sector collaborations**

    TBA demonstrates strong partnerships with businesses, philanthropic organisations and other sectors. ALCA could deepen its engagement with non-traditional partners, for example aligning conservation with economic development and corporate sustainability goals.

Measuring impact and success

Effective conservation alliances track their impact to ensure they meet their objectives. LTA's metrics, such as acres conserved, and funds leveraged, provide clear evidence of success relevant to their members and to policy makers. Similarly, Eurosite's goals for network expansion and thematic focus areas reflect its commitment to measurable outcomes. The ACLT has developed a strong theory of change, articulating how their activities lead to broader conservation and community benefits.

While the alliances measure impact and success in varying ways; all agreed that **further coordination and strategic dialogue around this area would benefit the organisations individually and collectively.**

Summary of recommendations for ALCA

1. **Leverage collective voice:** Like LTA, ALCA could strengthen its efforts in uniting members to influence policy and secure funding. Building a strong advocacy platform, backed by data and success stories, will increase ALCA's impact at national and regional levels.
2. **Enhance standards and resources:** Developing and promoting practical guidelines and best practices can strengthen member capacity. Drawing inspiration from LTA's accreditation model, ALCA could explore voluntary standards or sector guidance to promote consistency and excellence.
3. **Foster collaboration and knowledge sharing:** Expanding networking opportunities through regular convenings, thematic working groups, and partnerships can enhance ALCA's role as a hub for innovation and collaboration.
4. **Communicate for impact:** Adopting a narrative that connects conservation to human health, cultural values, and economic benefits can help ALCA build broader support.
5. **Measure and demonstrate success:** Refine and develop clear metrics and a theory of change to help articulate ALCA's impact and secure ongoing support from stakeholders.

These recommendations highlight actionable steps ALCA can adopt to strengthen its operations and broaden its impact while fostering greater collaboration and inclusivity within the conservation sector.

Insights

Global conservation alliances demonstrate the power of collaboration in addressing pressing environmental challenges. By learning from the successes and strategies of organizations like LTA, ACLT, TBA and Eurosite, ALCA can further develop its approach to delivering value to its members and advancing land and water conservation in Australia. With a strong focus on advocacy, capacity building, collaboration, and communication, ALCA remains well-positioned to lead transformative change for a healthy and resilient Australia.

Boston in the fall during a visit to the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy

Incredibly inspiring to meet, left to right: Annie Burke of Together Bay Area , Tilmann Disselhoff of Eurosite, Renata Woodward of the Alliance of Canadian Land Trusts, and Jennifer Miller Herzog and Renee Kivikko of the Land Trust Alliance.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This Churchill Fellowship provided a unique opportunity to explore insights and learnings that benefit Australia's peak body for conservation and land management organisations; inform the conservation and land management sector of best practice; and provide lessons learnt that could improve the condition and resilience of the state of Australia's natural environment for the benefit of all Australians. For this reason, the objectives as set out for this Fellowship have been achieved.

Specifically, the Fellowship successfully met the following objectives:

- Understanding diverse conservation models – Site visits and interviews provided insight into different land conservation, stewardship, and funding approaches relevant to Australia.
- Identifying key enablers for scaling conservation success – Lessons from established land trusts, alliances, and policy mechanisms provided clear strategies for scaling conservation efforts in Australia.
- Building knowledge on alliance and sector capacity building – The report offers specific recommendations to strengthen the ALCA and similar organisations.

While the learnings were extensive, from a personal and professional perspective, key lessons include:

1. **Diverse and sustainable financing** – A key challenge for conservation organisations is long-term financial sustainability. There is a need for diverse revenue streams beyond government grants and building capacity of the sector to understand and access funding opportunities.
2. **Empowering local and Indigenous leadership** – While government and industry leadership and emerging global and national frameworks provide potential for impact, effective conservation outcomes depend on strong Indigenous and community-led leadership. Embracing Indigenous leadership and knowledge demonstrates enhanced ecological and cultural outcomes.
3. **Collaborative landscape-scale efforts and conservation networks** - Provide scalable, community driven models for safeguarding private lands, amplifying First Nations leadership, and ensuring long-term landscape resilience. Australia should recognize and celebrate its existing networks such as Landcare Australia, NRM Regions Australia and ALCA.
4. **Cross sector collaboration is essential** – In a rapidly changing world, successful models have been shown to integrate partnerships across government, businesses, First Nations communities, NGOs, landholders, and philanthropy.
5. **Strategic communication increases impact** – Aligning conservation narratives with social, economic and cultural values strengthens public and policy support. Effective community engagement strengthens impact at the local level.
6. **Measuring success is critical** – Developing clear impact metrics strengthens accountability and funding opportunities.

While there are many detailed reflections and recommendations throughout the report, the following are brought forward as high-level most relevant in the current context.

Recommendations for ALCA:

As part of ALCA's strategic plan review, by end 2025:

1. Determine the role that ALCA might play in developing voluntary standards or best-practice guidelines.
    - Consider the development of a process to co-design best practice guidance for conservation governance, partnerships and finance models for Indigenous-led conservation.
    - Strengthen ALCA's policy agenda to more strongly integrate environmental protection programs into broader climate and economic policies; expand financial mechanisms and tax incentives that reward conservation actions including voluntary protection; and ensure a dedicated conservation fund remains a key ask.
    - Strengthen ALCA's communications strategy to better link conservation to human and economic well-being, drawing on the communications platforms of advanced alliances such as the Land Trust Alliance.
    - Design improved offerings and increased engagement for ALCA's conservation finance network, building in stronger connections to the Conservation Finance Network in the U.S. to improve capacity for NGOs to access diverse funding opportunities.
2. Develop sector-wide impact metrics and an ALCA-focused reporting framework to enhance accountability and funding access.
3. Immediately formalize a network of established Alliances, including the Land Trust Alliance, Alliance of Canadian Land Trusts, Eurosite and ALCA as a start, working with the International Land Conservation Network as required.

Recommendations for Australia:

1. Expand conservation covenant programs: Strengthen legal and financial mechanisms to incentivise private land conservation through voluntary agreements.
2. Support Indigenous-led conservation: Increase direct funding and capacity-building initiatives for Indigenous-led conservation programs.
3. Enhance collaboration through conservation networks: Strengthen networks and conservation alliances to coordinate efforts across landscapes and ecosystems.
4. Diversify conservation finance mechanisms: Explore and build capacity for new funding models, including blended finance approaches, philanthropic investments, and biodiversity credits.
5. Improve wildlife connectivity infrastructure: Advocate for dedicated funding and policy support for wildlife crossings and habitat corridors.

Finally, I reflected often during my study tour, that the impact of conservation, Indigenous and land management organisations and their various partnerships is advanced in Australia and should be celebrated. I was impressed with how connected Australian organisations and landholders are to emerging initiatives; and believe organisations and networks like ALCA, NRM Regions Australia and Landcare Australia have contributed to the comparative sector-wide knowledge and capacity, including at local and regional levels.

Dissemination and implementation

To maximise the impact of this Churchill Fellowship, for my organisation, sector and the broader community, the following present opportunities for wider dissemination:

1. Stakeholder briefings and presentations – share findings with ALCA members, sector, government agencies and sector partners accordingly. This could be done through targeted synthesis reports or periodic webinars bringing forward identified case studies.
2. Publish key insights in sector publications, policy briefings and media articles to inform a wider audience. This could include ALCA newsletters; incorporation into future Policy Notes; or targeted media outreach for key high impact lessons or outputs.
3. Host a sector wide podcast series, that brings together stakeholders from common themes for a series of discussions highlighting key opportunities and challenges for the areas explored in this report.
4. Conference programs – The International Land Conservation Network Global Congress being hosted by ALCA in 2027 presents a unique opportunity to showcase Australia's leadership in private land conservation, leverage global expertise to progress key policy initiatives such as 30 x 30, and to build stronger regional partnerships. ALCA could present at other relevant conferences on key topics from this report in the meantime, including bringing US colleagues to its annual conference.
5. Strengthen knowledge exchange with international partners – continue to strengthen ties between ALCA and global networks by offering to share learnings from this report to broader global audiences.

By implementing these steps, Australia can enhance the impact of the conservation and land management sector, strengthen financial sustainability, and expand the role of alliances, networks and organisations delivering effective, long-term outcomes for a resilient Australia.

Yellowstone National Park

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