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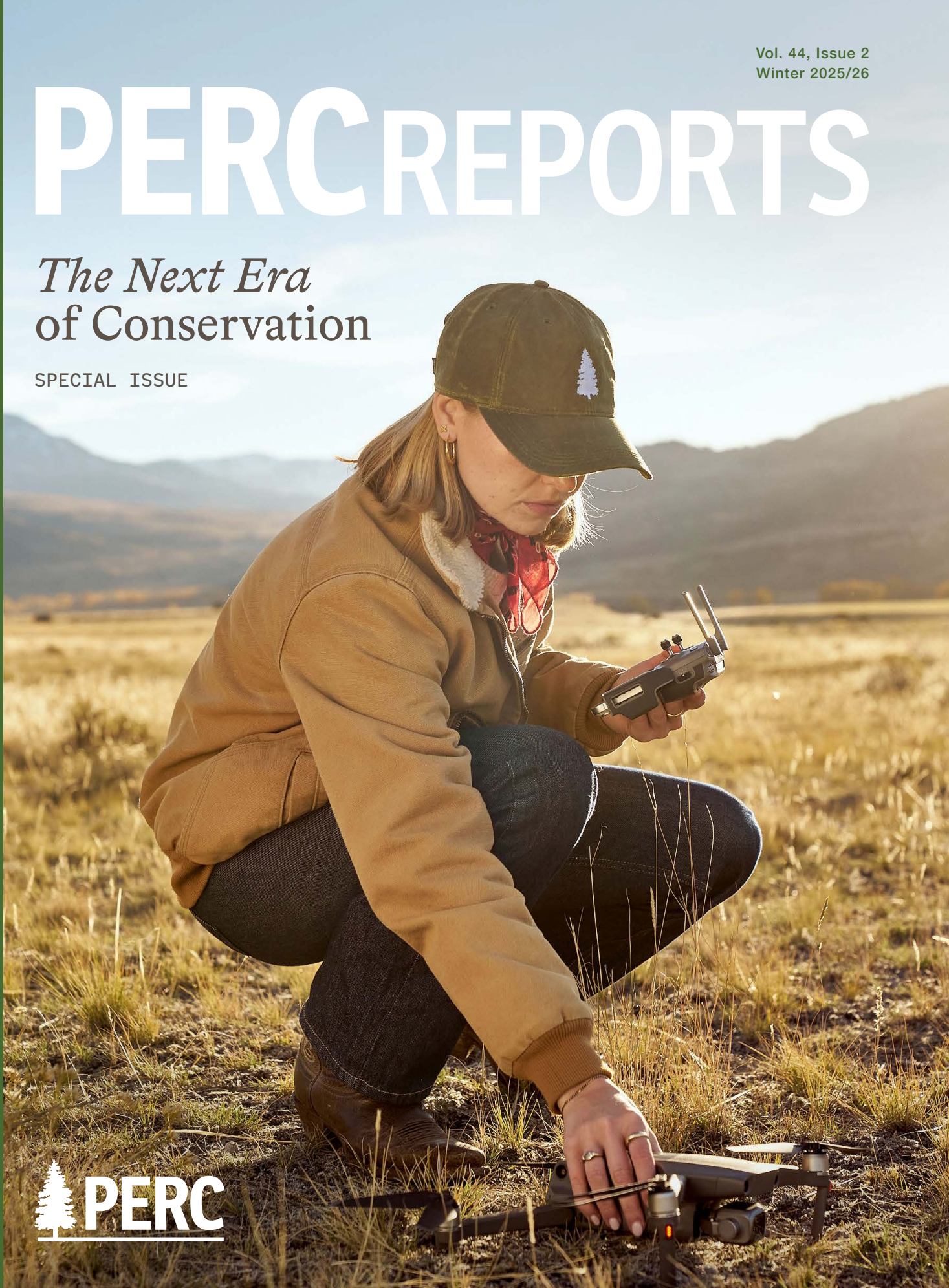
PERC REPORTS

The Next Era of Conservation

SPECIAL ISSUE



PERC

FROM THE EDITOR by Tate Watkins

My first exposure to PERC's approach to conservation came with 400 other freshmen in an Econ 101 lecture hall at Clemson University. Over a semester, long-time PERC Senior Fellow Daniel Benjamin introduced the class to how humans with "unlimited wants" behave when facing the reality of scarce resources—and how economic thinking could be harnessed to improve environmental quality. He showed us how tradable fishing rights can rebuild fish stocks while benefiting fishermen, how markets for ranched bison meat boost the species' genetic diversity and ranchers' bottom lines, and much more.

As a student, I was shaped by other Clemson professors with deep ties to PERC. I saw how Bruce Yandle used "bootleggers and Baptists" thinking to show how entrenched interests and moral pressure combine to shape many environmental regulations. I learned that where most people saw an "environmental externality"—air pollution from a factory, to take a classic example—the late Bobby McCormick saw an opportunity to define property rights to solve the problem. And I read PERC writings that opened my eyes to the logic and dignity of working with people, rather than trying to command them from on high, to conserve the scarce natural resources that they and others value.

These are ideas PERC has championed since its founding, and for much of that time, harnessing markets and property rights to promote environmental quality has given us a distinct shade of green in the conservation world. Today, however, these ideas are far more mainstream than they were 45 years ago.

The idea at the heart of this special issue of *PERC Reports* continues that evolution: the next era of conservation will be built on principles such as markets and property rights, partnerships and cooperation, and incentives and innovation. Rather than being defined by inert preservation that seeks to separate humans from nature, or by counterproductive regulation that grabs for stick instead of carrot, the next era will be defined by proactive conservation that works for people and the environment.

The issue grew out of a 2025 gathering in Jackson, Wyoming, where PERC convened conservation leaders to contemplate big ideas about the future. It opens with Brian Yablonski outlining a vision grounded not in command-and-control governance but in collaboration and incentives. Then, contributions from the gathering's participants, who represent a wide range of conservation organizations and bring their own perspectives on what comes next, help round out the issue. Lastly, several PERC contributors weigh in with their thoughts on a few important themes for the future of conservation, including speeding up, championing partnerships, and unleashing abundance.

Eras are only ever defined in hindsight. For now, we aim to help shape the next one using the principles PERC has advanced for more than four decades—and, in doing so, bring conservation's future ever closer to PERC's shade of green.

PERC

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The Property and Environment Research Center (PERC) is a nonprofit institute based in Bozeman, Montana, that creates innovative conservation solutions through markets and incentives.

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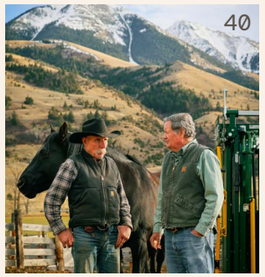
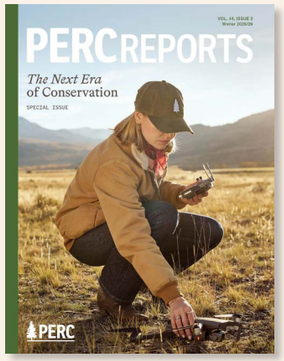




On the Cover:
Brigitte Harbers' research combines drone-based aerial surveys, AI-driven elk detection, and rancher-reported data to map elk distribution and brucellosis risk in Montana's Paradise Valley.

High-stakes land sale protects a natural giant. A proposed titanium mine near Georgia's Okefenokee Swamp came to an abrupt end this summer when The Conservation Fund purchased nearly 8,000 acres from Twin Pines Minerals for about $60 million. After years of permitting battles and public opposition, the mining company agreed to sell—transferring both land and mineral rights into conservation ownership. What had been slated for excavation will now remain intact and provide an enormous buffer along the refuge's eastern boundary. In the end, the property's fate turned not on regulatory rulings but on a closing date and a signed deed, preserving one of North America's last great blackwater swamps.

PERC's legal win shapes new endangered species reforms. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has proposed to overhaul parts of Endangered Species Act policy—including rescinding the controversial "blanket 4(d) rule" for threatened species, as well as broader changes to critical habitat designations, consultation standards, and other topics. The announcement follows PERC and the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation's successful joint litigation that challenged the agency's reliance on a one-size-fits-all 4(d) rule that ignored species-specific needs, undermining incentives for proactive stewardship. The proposed reforms would restore Congress's original intent: tailored, science-driven rules that reward conservation rather than punish it. As PERC's Vice President of Law and Policy Jonathan Wood noted: "Rescinding the illegal, unscientific, and ineffective blanket rule is a necessary course correction to strengthen species recovery and puts recovery back at the heart of the Endangered Species Act."

A berry boggy restoration. In southeastern Massachusetts, longtime cranberry growers are increasingly transitioning out of low-margin operations by selling or donating their bogs to conservation partners. As markets shift and equipment ages, many multi-generational farming families are choosing to retire their land rather than reinvest in costly upgrades. Those decisions are opening the door to a wave of wetland restorations: conservation groups negotiate directly with willing landowners, acquire bogs at fair value, and then remove dikes, reroute streams, and reestablish natural hydrology. Native brook trout have been reintroduced to some areas, part of a transformation of former farm infrastructure into functioning wetlands to places that, in some cases, have been in agriculture for two centuries.

Seeing where the snow leopards roam. In Ladakh, India, a new 2025 census of snow leopards reveals that most of the region's cats travel outside national parks, threading through village grazing lands and community-managed pastures. The study relied on hundreds of high-altitude camera traps and an AI-assisted system to filter images, which biologists then reviewed. The region's rangelands are governed locally, with councils deciding how herders rotate livestock across seasons. The new data are now influencing those decisions with several villages revising grazing agreements with conservation groups to leave seasonal corridors open, while others test compensation programs that offset lost forage days. The clearer the big cats' routes become, the easier it is to know where to focus on keeping paths intact.

For beavers, it's one dam thing after another. Two new studies highlight just how effective beavers are at creating rich, biodiverse wetlands—outperforming human-built ponds by a wide margin. Researchers found that beaver-engineered sites hosted twice as many hoverflies, nearly 50 percent more butterflies, and a broader diversity of bats than comparable human-made ponds or free-flowing streams. The findings add to a growing body of evidence that beavers are powerful, low-cost partners in watershed restoration, drought resilience, and habitat creation. As landowners and agencies seek scalable tools for ecological improvement, these ecological engineers continue to demonstrate that sometimes the best restoration strategy is simply giving nature room to work.

Underwater cables pick up killer chatter. Oceanographers are repurposing dormant fiber-optic cables off Washington's coast to listen for orcas. A new survey used acoustic sensors along the lines to log hundreds of vocalizations, mapping where whales travel as salmon runs shift and vessel patterns change. The real-time detail is already proving useful, giving coastal planners and offshore developers a clearer picture of when and where orcas are present—information that could make it easier to adjust activities that interfere with whales with far more precision than broad, season-long measures. Turning old telecom infrastructure into a listening post may help keep ships and orcas from overlapping when it matters most.

For more orca solutions, visit **perc.org/underwaternoise**

The Next Era of American Conservation

By Brian Yablonski

Brian Yablonski is the CEO of PERC. Before moving to Montana, Brian served as chairman of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC). His work on both coastal bird species conservation and a state constitutional amendment to provide property tax relief for private land conservation earned awards from Audubon and the Florida Wildlife Federation over his 14 years on the commission. Brian is currently on the board of the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership and a professional member of the Boone and Crockett Club, the nation's oldest wildlife conservation organization.

The next big gains in conservation will come not from more preservation and regulation, but from markets, incentives, and cooperation with private landowners

Gathered in a tiny cabin under the enormous shadow of the Grand Teton, a collection of conservation leaders sits around the hearth in mismatched and well-worn chairs and couches. The menagerie of seats might be the perfect metaphor for this diverse group of idealists.

The cabin belongs to a tiny giant of American conservation history: Mardy Murie. Affectionately called "the grandmother of the conservation movement," she was a naturalist and writer who, along with her wildlife biologist husband Olaus, dedicated her life to wilderness. For nearly 60 years, conservationists made pilgrimages to the log cabin seeking her inspiration and advice. It became the basecamp for a conservation movement.

Nestled on what used to be a private inholding within the boundaries of Grand Teton National Park, the shelter is now as it was decades ago. A photo with Mardy and John Denver sits on the mantle. The presidential medal of freedom lies somewhere nearby. Her bed is neatly made. The group of conservationists PERC has assembled is intentionally compact. Those in attendance were selected based on their ability to step back and think big while untethered by narrow fields of vision. We think Mardy would have liked them all.

Anchored by the environmental historian Douglas Brinkley, it includes a great-great grandson of Theodore Roosevelt, visionary CEOs of respected national conservation organizations, the national park's superintendent, a wildlife ecologist, and former conservation leaders from both Republican and Democratic administrations. We have come together for the seemingly impossible purpose: inspire the next great era of American conservation. The Murie cabin is the perfect setting to inspire the would-be inspirers.

> To audaciously set out to shape conservation's future, you must first know its history.

An American Notion of Conservation

To audaciously set out to shape conservation's future, you must first know its history. And it begins with a simple statement: Conservation is America's birthright. As we approach our nation's 250th anniversary, it's apparent that among the many concepts America has given the world, conservation ranks near the top. And American conservation was born out of an inferiority complex with Europe.

In the years after our founding, America struggled to find its identity. It was something that weighed on Thomas Jefferson in correspondence with Old World acquaintances. Europe was a place of culture and served as the custodian of Western civilization. It had castles and cathedrals, museums and artifacts, art galleries and masterpieces, fine cuisine and high fashion. America could claim nothing of the sort. It was a hodgepodge of former extractive colonies and remained relatively wild—an undiscovered frontier but for the Atlantic seaboard. Wealthy Americans travelled not as tourists within the United States but as innocents abroad, to Europe on immersive Grand Tours to Paris, Rome, and the like.

All of that changed with westward expansion. Beginning with Jefferson's Lewis and Clark expedition in 1804 and continuing through the establishment of Yellowstone as the world's first national park in 1872, our nation entered a distinct age of European-American discovery and settlement. The wonders of the natural world familiar to many Native American tribes revealed themselves to explorers and settlers—steaming geysers and thermal features, groves of redwoods and sequoias, lofty mountain peaks and momentous rock formations, grand canyons of unfathomable depths, coastal volcanoes, majestic waterfalls, raging rivers, and herds of buffalo and elk silhouetted across wide-open prairies. Our scenery sublime became the cultural asset America sought.

Suddenly, we had something that even Europeans coveted. We embraced the patriotism of place. And in response, sometimes too late, we created a new notion of conservation and developed tools to protect our newly emerging national legacy. With the glorification of the West and the showcasing of such dramatic scenery, historian Alfred Runte describes in *National Parks: The American Experience*, a shift in contemporary views: "The nation slowly grasped the opportunity until the words 'public' and 'protection' were no longer far apart. Just as Europe had retained custody of the artifacts of Western civilization, so the United States might sanctify its natural wonders."

Douglas Brinkley reminded us in Mardy's cabin that America has seen successive "waves of environmental progress"—or "eras" of conservation. Admittedly, eras can be hard to define, but scholars like Brinkley have provided us the construct of eras through which to view the evolution of conservation.

The first era of American conservation gained steam in the late 19th century—a time when the western frontier closed and a tragedy of the commons was developing on unclaimed federal rangelands and forests. Into this moment stepped a remarkable figure: President Theodore Roosevelt, who designated more than 230 million acres of this unclaimed land as national monuments, national parks, and national forests. A hunter and a naturalist, Roosevelt advocated for an expansive government response— as strong and robust as him—to protect America's most cherished landscapes. This Preservation Era focused on drawing lines on a map, sometimes on actual maps sprawled on the floor of the White House, and saying: "Here, nature is protected. Here, it will endure."

But by the middle of the 20th century, pollution had become the defining environmental crisis, and attempts to solve it ushered in a new era. In the wake of Rachel Carson's Silent Spring and the first Earth Day, the federal government passed a sweeping suite of new laws regulating air and water pollution, many of them in overwhelming bipartisan fashion. This new Regulatory Era brought the Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act, the National Environmental Policy Act, and the Endangered Species Act. This was another unprecedented expansion of federal power, led by large and sometimes new government agencies.

Like the tools of the previous era, the regulations were designed for specific problems of the times. As decades pass, tools age, and challenges evolve. Then, we are in a different era.

The Rusting of Old Tools

Fifty years later, how do we know that we are on the precipice of the next era? It seems eras emerge after a widening disconnect between the problems and the tools. Today, many leaders in the conservation community now acknowledge the need for novel solutions. Like those who gathered at the Murie cabin, they appreciate historic conservation efforts, yet they also recognize that we need to continuously learn and improve our tools for conservation. Rather than defending outdated processes, they create space for new ideas and possibilities.

> It seems eras emerge after a widening disconnect between the problems and the tools.

Consider the types of challenges leading us into the next era.

America's colorless private lands. Over the previous two eras, we have all but ignored the importance of private land stewardship. Almost any atlas of America can show you the discrepancy. The maps within are colorful mosaics, with national parks in brown, national forests in green, and state and tribal lands in their own hues. But private land is the white space in between—not worthy of a color. That must change.

Private lands are often the best-quality lands, the lands settled first, near water sources and on fertile soils. Rock and ice and desert were generally left in government hands. The story worth telling is this: Seventy-five percent of all wetlands in America are on private lands, as are 80 percent of grasslands and biodiversity hotspots. And two-thirds of all threatened and endangered species rely primarily on habitat found on private land.

What's more, while the federal government owns 640 million acres of land, privately owned ranches, farms, and forests comprise double that amount—1.3 billion acres. It is there where open space and habitat loss are in need of conservation. An average of 1.8 million acres of farmland becomes developed each year. This should spawn an outpouring of creativity, but to date it has not. It is time we give private land its own color on the map.

A public lands management disaster. On bedrock public lands, preservation has been championed over conservation. Under previous eras, hundreds of millions of acres of federal land were set aside and designated for preservation or for specific uses such as grazing, timber, and mineral development. But proper stewardship of those lands has often taken a back seat to the acquisition of more area or to a designation carousel of how to classify them.

This failure to manage our public lands properly has had severe ramifications. National parks face $23 billion in overdue maintenance, threatening the ecological integrity of iconic landscapes including the Grand Canyon and Yosemite. Similarly, misguided fire-suppression policies have turned America's national forests into wildfire hotspots. Roughly 80 million acres are in need of restoration—a backlog that leaves our forests littered with excess fuels, more vulnerable to insects and disease, and less resilient to drought and climate change. And on BLM lands, the failure to address overpopulated herds of wild horses and burros combined with the spread of invasives like cheatgrass are ruining rangeland habitat.

In the next era of conservation, the focus should be on conserving public lands, rather than just preserving them, through better, active management.

Too little and too much wildlife recovery. In previous eras, conservationists responded to the near decimation of wildlife by pulling some species, like bison, bald eagles, and grizzly bears, back from the brink of extinction. Earlier and enduring tools, including the establishment of game wardens and state fish and wildlife agencies, the outlawing of market hunting, and the Endangered Species Act and the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, worked to prevent harm to species but, in most cases, they have failed to motivate recovery efforts.

Of all the wildlife species listed under the Endangered Species Act over the past half-century, only 3 percent have recovered and been delisted. While the act provides strict regulations intended to keep species from going extinct, it offers little reward for recovering species to a healthy status. A landowner who helps a listed species recover is likely to be "repaid" only in the form of more oversight and regulation. Consequently, many endangered wildlife lie in a kind of purgatory, not quite blinking out of existence, but still quite a distance from recovery.

Today, an additional, newer challenge stems from select species' success and resulting abundance. While federally listed species stagnate in recovery efforts, hunters and anglers through their state wildlife commissions have championed game species, with remarkable results. Now, some states are overflowing with turkey, elk, deer, and the like, bringing a host of novel problems related to "muchness." Today, there are as many white-tailed deer in the United States as at the time of Lewis and Clark—over 30 million—with a declining pool of hunters to help control populations. Similarly, the spread of invasive species, from pythons in the Everglades to lionfish in the Caribbean, demonstrates the perils of "too many." What to do with too little and too much wildlife stand as real challenges in the next era.

The drying of the West. The western United States has always been an arid climate, a place where the old cowboy expression still holds true: Whiskey is for drinking, and water is for fighting. As urban populations grow and the impacts of climate change take hold, water scarcity is on the rise, while traditional tools for managing growing demands—from tapping new supplies to mandating reduced use—become less realistic and palatable. The upshot is more conflict. Iconic waterbodies like the Colorado River and the Great Salt Lake are imperiled, with some researchers warning that the latter could dry up in as little as five years.

The ossification of conservation. Perhaps the most toxic challenge of all is that we've lost our ability to collectively address and confront the big conservation challenges. The list of reasons is many: The weaponization of collective action. Partisanship. Litigation. Red tape. But perhaps the most dangerous of all is narrow thinking paired with unexamined fealty to the tools of the previous eras.

To hear many in the conservation community today, solutions are as simple as more government spending. Success today is measured by dollars secured through funding bills that often lack clear deliverables, benefits, or outcomes. Furthermore, trust in the federal government is at an all-time low, rendering less feasible the type of sweeping federal actions that characterized previous eras and are favored by old school conservationists today. To take on the challenges of the next era, we will need more expansive and creative thinking, something lacking in the bureaucracies and processes of Washington, D.C.

An Innovation Era

The view from where I sit is different. Leading a national conservation organization, geographically based on what remains of the frontier, and far away from the restrictive settings of metropolises like Washington, New York, and San Francisco, provides a distinct perspective. Our big sky is more than just descriptive; it is life with a soaring musical score. Something Roosevelt experienced in his time here.

Beyond Montana's raw natural beauty, this region is something of a petri dish that yields conservation innovations. PERC is close to the ranchers and farmers who feel the impact of our work. We are nearby and inspired by the world's first national park. The rivers in our region are the foundations of the great waterways of America. We exist in the heart of the largest intact temperate ecosystem on Earth. We live among grizzly bears, gray wolves, and the distant relatives of the great herds of buffalo that once roamed this country. And we have been discovered, with development on our doorstep, especially in the colorless, privately owned places on the map.

This unique perspective leads me to a chain of ideas that might be characterized as conservation's Innovation Era.

Private lands are the next frontier of conservation

These lands need a vivid color on the map. Encouraging their stewardship will require an expanded, flexible set of tools, much more than what we have today. For example, conservation easements, which compensate landowners for foregoing development in perpetuity, have been effective, but they have fostered a limited way of thinking about private land conservation over the last 50 years. Perpetual easements are appealing to conservationists, but they are not always the right answer for people living on the land. Perpetuity is a long time.

Additional tools like habitat and conservation water leasing, wildlife occupancy agreements, payment for presence programs, compensation funds, virtual fencing technology, and other emerging innovations need to be accelerated to expand the private lands toolbox. Relatedly, if you are a conservationist in the business of private land stewardship, you will need to embrace "property rights" and be able to say the term out loud. The flexibility and creativity that the future of conservation demands will be based on trust and the notion that those who own the land are more than just another "stakeholder." It is their land.

Similarly, when the history of this era is written, there will be a chapter on conservation ranching. It began decades ago when the entrepreneur Ted Turner invested considerable wealth in nearly two million acres of large landscapes with the goal of managing the lands not for development or extraction, but for conservation. The story of the wealth of America is also the story of the wealth of conservation. And Turner started a trend of high-net-worth individuals buying up vast acreage, amassing properties the size of national parks. Today, the holdings of the top 100 landowners in America are the size of the state of Florida. To many this is an affront, but most of these landowners are investing in conservation, expending resources on wildlife, water, and land management that government could never provide. The landscape is better for their stewardship. Will the better angels of conservation in our national DNA prevail over the forces of envy and hate?

Conservation must be more bottom up, not top down

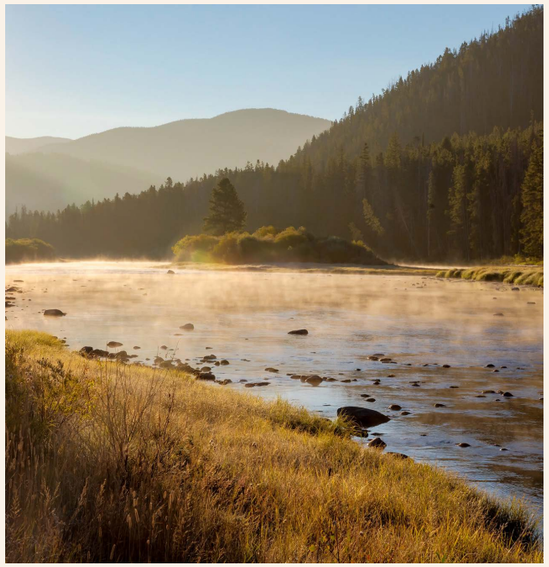
Locally led conservation efforts need to take the place of divisive designations or mandates from Washington. They will prove more durable. As the Austrian Nobel laureate in economics Fredrich Hayek observed, all knowledge is localized, particular to time and place, and when dispersed individuals are free to act on their knowledge, order emerges from the bottom up.

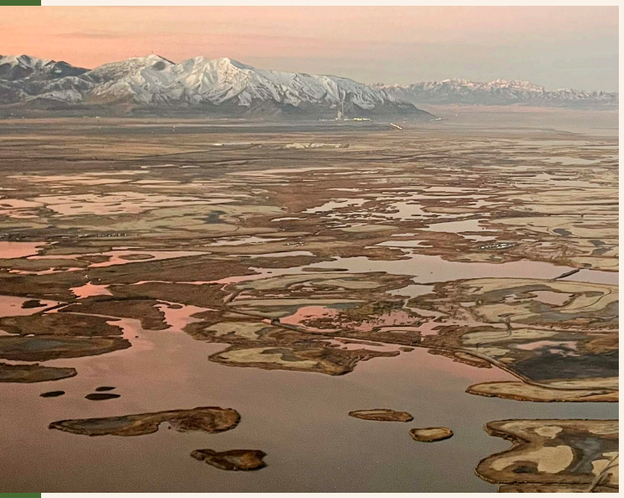
For conservation, that means solutions should bubble up from those closest to the problem or landscape. That might mean the members of a regional watershed group, or the superintendent of your closest national park. It's why so much of PERC's on-the-ground work starts with listening to ranchers rather than parachuting in like paternalistic missionaries to explain why our way is superior and proceeding to pile on restrictions and requirements that fall to the landowners to deal with. It's also why we support providing national parks superintendents with more authority to experiment and manage the $330 million in fee revenue they generate each year by serving visitors.

Speed up proactive conservation efforts, rather than slowing things down

Conservation means action. This applies especially to the goals of better managing our public lands and recovering wildlife. Tools of the previous era, like the National Environmental Policy Act and the Endangered Species Act, were established for inaction, to delay or derail projects that would harm ecosystems and animals. Today, those laws stymie numerous projects that would produce conservation benefits. Planning, process, and litigation are crushing the soul of much-needed conservation action. Today, because of environmental reviews and litigation, projects to restore our national forests and wildlife habitat can take up to nine years before work on the ground can even begin. These dynamics not only apply to restoration projects on public lands but also to fixing deferred maintenance in national parks and recovering wildlife on private lands.

For years, PERC has been trumpeting the need to speed up conservation. But there is now a name for it. A growing movement has coalesced around the concept of "abundance," inspired in part by the recent book under that title by Ezra Klein and Derek Thompson. It has united traditional Democrats frustrated that government is not working as it should with libertarian-oriented reformers frustrated by a malignant regulatory state. These strange bedfellows point to a path forward by asking the hard question: What works to actually deliver affordable housing, scientific breakthroughs, or clean energy? Conservation should be added to that list.





Incentives and markets will need to play a more prominent role in the next era

There is a growing recognition that conservation needs to work for people, not against them—as mandates often do. A leader of one of the largest environmental organizations in America wrote to me recently with an observation: "Solutions that last are those that benefit people's lives. We need to move beyond the concept that pain today for some potential future gain is workable. Humans don't respond well in that system, and change fails to stick." When conservation pays, conservation sticks. A tagline for PERC, and possibly for the next era, reads: Incentives matter for conservation. That should resonate as much as "It's the economy, stupid," did in the 1990s.

Incentives and markets align the interests of people with the needs of the environment. They reward rather than punish. The tools we deploy with ranchers coping with critters—wildlife occupancy agreements, payment for presence programs, disease compensation funds, and virtual fencing technology—all flip the script. They reward landowners for the public benefits they provide rather than punishing them for hosting wildlife on their property. This feels like a recipe for better endangered species recovery.

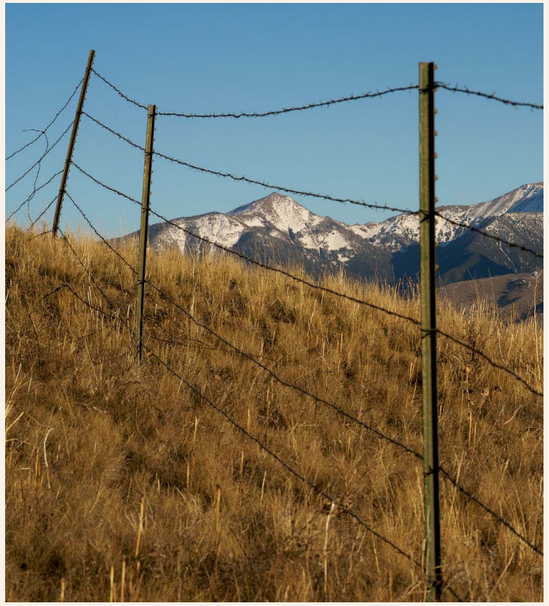
Voluntary exchange may also be the most promising way to restore the Great Salt Lake. PERC is part of an effort to help the state of Utah to develop a voluntary water leasing market, one that compensates farmers to reduce water use and allow more flows to reach the lake. Rather than mandating cuts, leasing recognizes farmers as essential partners. Coupled with new satellite technologies to measure and track conserved water, these arrangements will allow agriculture to remain viable while reviving one of the West's most recognized ecosystems.

Finally, a handful of other innovations—in technology, ambition, and philanthropy—will likely shape the next era of conservation

Today, thanks to GPS tracking and remote sensing, we know that many species of wildlife migrate through corridors that transect a tapestry of public and private landownership boundaries. A focus on conserving the fluidity and messiness of corridors, connectivity, and cross-boundary solutions will be just as relevant in our time as the creation of more geometric national parks and forests were in the time of T.R.

Moreover, setting big goals that can be achieved in an era's-worth of time is a worthy priority. Where are the conservation moonshots? Why can't we set a goal of recovering 10 percent of endangered wildlife rather than the dismal 3 percent of the last 50 years? Why can't we "de-fence the West" of 625,000 miles of barbed wire in a way that makes better economic sense for ranchers through virtual fencing?

Similarly, private philanthropy is a marketplace that must become more entrepreneurial in backing new tools, experiments, and innovations. Conservation philanthropists tend to circle the wagons around the safe, older tools of the past or the politically popular issues of the day. But such safe thinking perpetuates the disconnect between challenges and solutions, rather than encouraging invention. With more tolerance for risk, the philanthropic community can act as a player in conservation markets to catalyze conservation innovation.



From Static To Dynamic

The story of conservation in this country has never been static, but it feels static at this moment. Perhaps our reliance on federal, top-down problem solving for more than a century has run its course. Perhaps our feet are stuck in the cement of the previous eras. That said, there are signs of vitality.

The window of what is socially and politically possible is shifting. As the wildfire crisis in our forests explodes, there is growing bipartisan support to accelerate mechanical thinning and prescribed burning by cutting red tape and limiting litigation. Some conservation organizations are beginning to soften hardline stances on endangered species policy, enabling quiet conversations about how to improve actual recovery rates. Likewise, wildlife migration policy became a priority for the first Trump administration, then bucked the trend by continuing to be championed by the Biden administration rather than being unwound as many other policies were.

Finally, conservation groups once seen as regulatory and litigious adversaries of private landowners like ranchers and farmers are recognizing that development has become an even greater threat than extractive industries. Many of these groups have recalibrated and now seek to work with private landowners by harnessing incentives that enable these ranches and farms to operate in an economically viable way. Trust still needs to be built to bridge to more landowners, but many conservationists now see working lands as integral to their efforts.

These are all paradigm shifts that would make conservation more dynamic. For those of us who recently sat on the hallowed ground that is Mardy Murie's front porch, the message could not have been clearer: We stand at a hinge point in America's conservation story.

As inaugural participants in an ongoing dialogue about the next era of conservation, we may not have all the answers. But a good place to start would be an environmental reboot with several aims: 1) double down on private land stewardship with newer creative tools, 2) pivot from using evermore regulation to harnessing incentives, innovation, and markets that reward conservation, 3) lean into the local by bringing a bottom-up, rather than top-down, mentality to the challenges of today, and 4) recognize the need for reforms that deliver action and speed, especially when it comes to improving the management of our public lands and imperiled wildlife.

These approaches are not so much a departure from our heritage as they are a natural extension of it. Pillars on which the tools of the next era emerge. In that vein, next year we will return to the Murie cabin to continue the dialogue and further advance a vision for the next era of conservation. Fall at the Murie Ranch is unparalleled, and the locale never fails to inspire, as it did generations before us.

In October 2003, when Mardy Murie drew her final breath at age 101 inside of her home, she had just heard a description of the autumnal scene outside. Leaves at their peak color, fluttering to the ground like nature's confetti. A black bear in a tree next to the cabin gorging on serviceberries. The Grand Teton moody, moving in and out of the clouds. Now, her spirit seems to say: Fortunate are the few who can help write history even as we are living through it.

Nature's *Brain Trust*

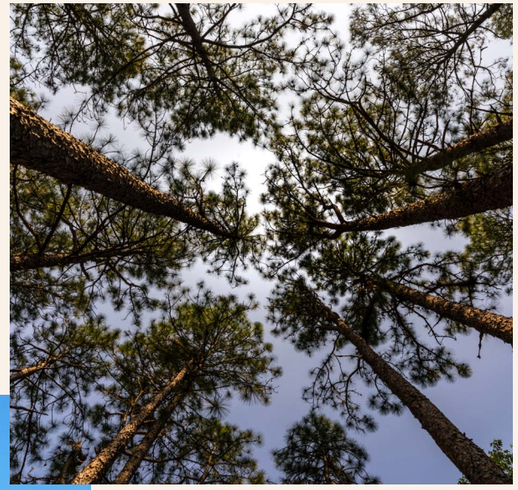
The “Next Era of Conservation” thought leader dialogue brought together an impressive and diverse group of conservation leaders representing nonprofits, academic institutions, advocacy organizations, and government agencies.

Participants collectively represented decades of combined experience working on everything from endangered species recovery and public lands management to private land stewardship and wildlife policy.

1. **Chip Jenkins**
   Superintendent, Grand Teton National Park
2. **Hannah Downey**
   Associate Vice President of Policy, PERC
3. **Robert Bonnie**
   Distinguished Scholar, Stone Center for Environmental Stewardship at the University of California, Berkeley
4. **Shoren Brown**
   Director, U.S. Nature Initiative
5. **Tony Wasley**
   President and CEO, Wildlife Management Institute
6. **Roel López**
   Director, Natural Resources Institute and Department of Rangeland, Wildlife, and Fisheries Management at Texas A&M University
7. **Brian Yablonski**
   CEO, PERC
8. **Greg Schildwachter, PhD**
   Founder, Watershed Results
9. **Collin O’Mara**
   CEO, National Wildlife Federation
10. **Douglas Brinkley**
    American historian and bestselling author; presidential historian, CNN; and Professor of History at Rice University
11. **Simon Roosevelt**
    Board Vice President of Conservation Policy, Boone and Crockett Club
12. **Rob Wallace**
    Former Assistant Secretary for Fish and Wildlife and Parks, U.S. Department of the Interior
13. **I Ling Thompson**
    CEO, Foundation for America’s Public Lands
14. **Tom Kiernan**
    President and CEO, American Rivers
15. **Rupert Munro**
    COO, PERC

Conservation Is a Process *Not a Percentage*

By Robert Bonnie



Robert Bonnie is a Scholar at University of California Berkeley's Stone Center for Environmental Stewardship and former Under Secretary for Farm Production and Conservation at the U.S. Department of Agriculture. He was previously a Rubenstein Fellow and an Executive in Residence at the Nicholas Institute for Environmental Policy Solutions at Duke University working on conservation and environmental issues in rural America. Bonnie has also served as Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment and as Vice President for Land Conservation at Environmental Defense Fund, where he focused on developing incentives to reward stewardship on private lands.

Conservation is inherently local. Whether it involves conserving family farms through land trusts, restoring habitat across public lands, or sustaining multi-state ecosystems such as the Chesapeake Bay, building consensus across local, state, and federal partners is often critical to success and durability. What's more, the threats to be addressed in each locality and ecosystem are different—whether they be development, habitat loss, invasive species, or altered fire regimes.

Because conservation is so local and so varied, national policy goals are difficult to define. Still, when 30x30 was launched in the run-up to the 2020 presidential election, many conservation groups—with support from green funders—embraced it. The message of 30x30 is simple: protect 30 percent of lands by 2030. Yet it is also inherently flawed.

First, why 30 percent? It's hard to make the case that 30 percent is anything other than an arbitrary goal. Look no farther than the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem. Seventy percent of the land that comprises the ecosystem is in federal ownership. Yet conserving Yellowstone's vital elk, mule deer, and pronghorn migration corridors will largely depend on conserving swaths of the ecosystem in private or tribal ownership. In Greater Yellowstone, 30 percent is far too unambitious.

By contrast, 30 percent is unrealistically high in the longleaf pine forests of the southern coastal plain. Once covering some 90 million acres, longleaf today can be found on just over five million acres. As a practical matter, conserving longleaf pine savannas and their rich biodiversity will have to be accomplished on far less than 30 percent of the former ecosystem.

Setting a numeric target for conservation has some attraction to motivate policymakers, but there is no magic in setting the benchmark at three-out-of-ten in particular—other than the fact that choosing it a decade or so in advance of the year 2030 makes for pithy marketing.

There's a much more difficult challenge for 30x30: What counts as being "conserved"? We generally are concerned with two questions in conservation: (1) whether the land is protected from development, and (2) whether the land is managed to provide significant conservation benefits. Yet the advocacy around 30x30 in the United States has fixated on a fairly narrow interpretation of the first question and has largely avoided the second one.

As to whether land is protected, 30x30 advocates have been devoted to increasing protected areas on federal lands through monument designations under the Antiquities Act and other means. Given such lands are already in federal ownership, aren't they already conserved? And if they aren't, then by extension many of the lands acquired by federal land management agencies through the Land and Water Conservation Fund don't count for purposes of 30x30. That's a strange outcome for such a critical program.

> Conservation needs an agenda that incentivizes and rewards local and regional collaboration

As to whether land provides real conservation benefits, proponents of 30x30 have generally ignored, for instance, lobbying Congress for additional land management funding for federal agencies. Habitat restoration is expensive, and there are plenty of federal lands in need of treatment. Does a roadless area that is highly degraded due to decades of fire suppression, or a monument designated on cheatgrass-dominated BLM lands, still count toward 30x30?

The issues get even trickier when we turn to private lands, which comprise over 70 percent of the lower 48 states. The vast majority of those lands will remain in private ownership. Conservation of these working lands requires integrating wildlife conservation and other goals into farm, ranch, and forestry operations. Do multiple-use private lands count toward 30x30? Is a conservation easement necessary? What about lands enrolled in a 15-year conservation lease? Should we require habitat management? And how do we answer these questions in a way that encourages the participation of private landowners and tribes?

Having spent four years in the Biden administration overseeing two conservation agencies at USDA, I can tell you that the Agriculture and Interior Departments, along with White House staff, struggled to answer these questions.

The truth is that conservation isn't like a simple on/off light switch—with some lands in and some lands out. Conservation is more like a dimmer switch—with the value of lands changing over time based on their protective status and health. Conservation isn't an end state—it's a process that requires perpetual stewardship.

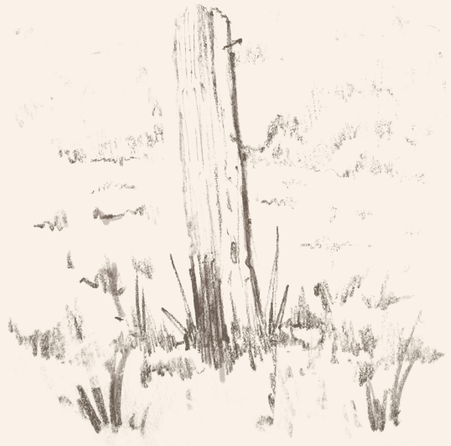
As we look to the future of conservation, setting goals to drive action is important. While a short essay is not the place to suggest a comprehensive replacement for 30x30, any such goal must recognize the importance of working across large complex landscapes with numerous and diverse stakeholders. It must also recognize that conservation isn't defined simply by protective status, nor is conservation costless to pursue.

Protections without resources to restore and steward habitat will fall short.

At the end of the day, conservation needs an agenda that incentivizes and rewards local and regional collaboration and that provides federal resources and agency infrastructure to encourage ongoing stewardship. Only then will a conservation agenda have broad, bipartisan support—and the potential to be truly durable.

From Protection *to Participation*

By Roel R. López



Roel R. López is a professor in the Texas A&M University Department of Rangeland, Wildlife, and Fisheries Management and serves as director for the Texas A&M Natural Resources Institute. Dr. Lopez provides leadership in the field of wildlife ecology and natural resource management. He works with internal and external stakeholders on research and extension programs and develops and leads interdisciplinary teams to address natural resource challenges.

Conservation in America has evolved over the last century. In the beginning, it was about protecting land and wildlife from overharvest. We created parks, saved species, and eventually passed strong environmental laws. Those efforts built the foundation we stand on today. But as we look forward, the next era of conservation will be defined not only by what we protect, but also how and with whom.

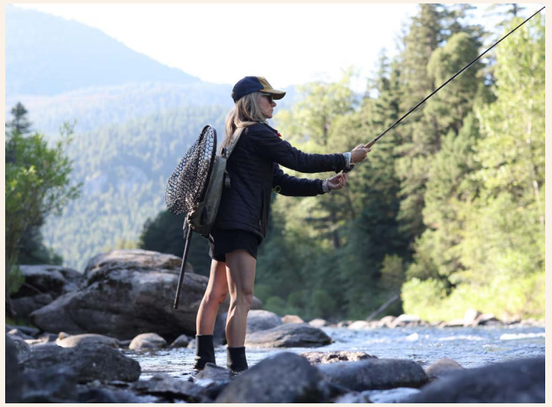
Conservation is no longer just about boundaries and restrictions — it's about collaboration, innovation, and participation. Our landscapes and waters are changing fast, shaped by climatic shifts, growing populations, and new economic pressures. To meet these challenges, conservation must be more adaptive, local, and inclusive than ever before.

Beyond Boundaries

Traditional conservation focused on fixed parks or individual species. That worked for many years, but nature doesn't remain static. Species move, rivers shift, and coastlines change. Protecting nature now means focusing on ecosystem functions and connections, not just drawing lines on a map.

Instead of trying to freeze nature in time, we should help it keep working. Projects that restore water flow in the Everglades or link wildlife corridors across the Great Plains illustrate this new approach, where the goal isn't to protect every acre but instead to keep life moving.

The next era will rely less on top-down federal programs and more on local and private leadership. With decreasing federal budgets, progress is likely to happen faster when local communities lead the way. Across the country, watershed groups are improving water quality, ranchers are restoring habitat for wildlife, and tribal nations are reviving traditional management practices. Lasting conservation comes from those who live and work on the land. The next era of conservation is a return to the civic spirit of early conservation where stewardship was driven by local engagement, not bureaucracy.



Integration of Technology and Markets

Technological innovations and market incentives are changing what's possible in conservation. Drones, satellite data, and artificial intelligence are now used to map habitat, track wildlife, and plan restoration projects. At the same time, market-based tools are making conservation a shared investment. Easements, mitigation banks, and ecosystem service markets for carbon and water let landowners and businesses take part in conservation.

When conservation creates value for everyone, it becomes more durable. Together, these tools are blurring the lines between conservation science, business, and community action. They show that innovation and investment can go hand in hand, expanding conservation beyond the realm of government programs into the everyday decisions of landowners, companies, and citizens alike.

Participation Equals Conservation

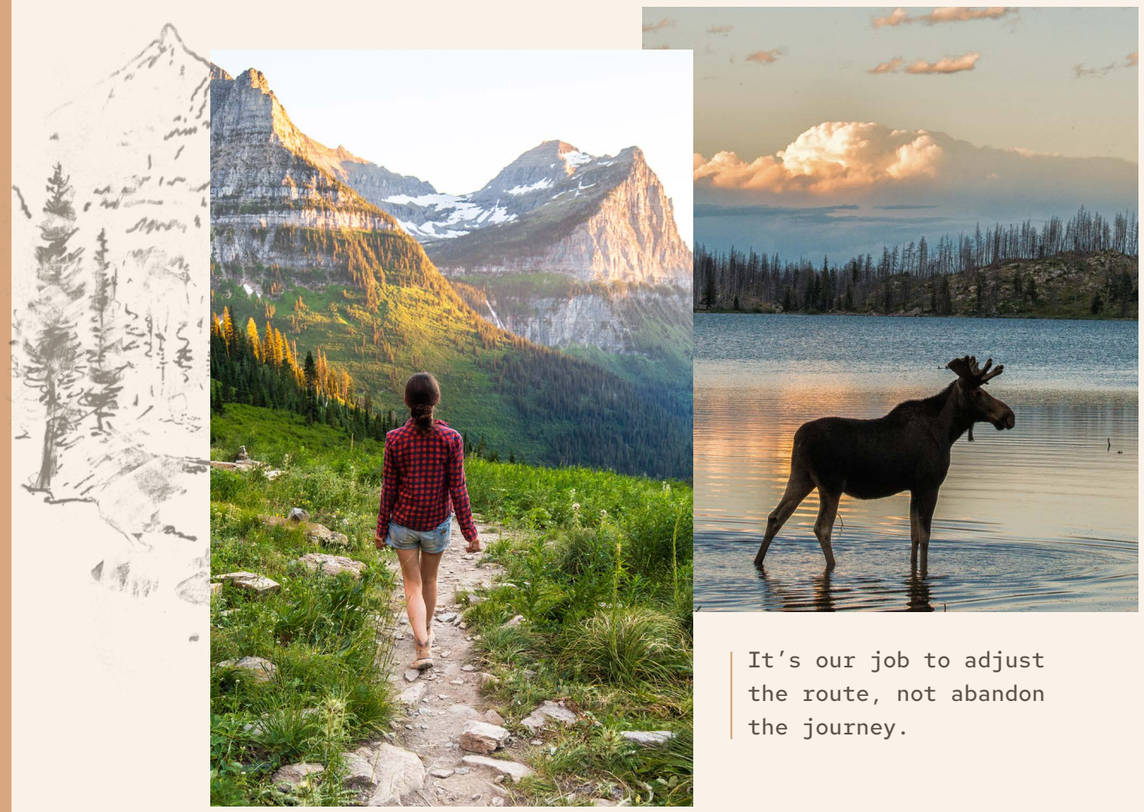
Conservation must welcome everyone with a stake in the land. Hunters, anglers, farmers, ranchers, and outdoor enthusiasts each bring unique experiences and passion to the conversation. When we focus on shared goals such as healthy land, clean water, and abundant wildlife, we can work together instead of apart.

Approaches that blend private working lands with conservation outcomes will define the next era of conservation. The future of conservation will depend more on partnerships than protected acres. It must be flexible, creative, and built on collaboration between people, markets, and technology. Most of all, it will depend on participation where people see themselves as active stewards, not bystanders.

We have good reasons for being optimistic. Our science is strong, and public awareness is growing. The best opportunities now lie in connecting people and nature, not separating them. That's the next era of conservation — where people and nature thrive together because we choose to manage them as one.

Conservation's Future Is *Rooted in Its Past*

By Tony Wasley



> It's our job to adjust the route, not abandon the journey.

Tony Wasley is President and CEO of the Wildlife Management Institute. He has spent longer than he readily admits doing conservation work, spends more time than he ever imagined reading about its foundations, and in pursuit of a better future for conservation he serves on the American Wildlife Conservation Partners, Council to Advance Hunting and Shooting Sports, and the USGS Cooperative Research Units, National Cooperators' Coalition. Wasley is a professional member of the Boone and Crockett Club and The Wildlife Society. He previously served as Director of the Nevada Department of Wildlife, chaired the North American Wetland Conservation Council, and was President of the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies.

The next era of conservation is one in which the venture of conserving resources is a forethought, not a simple pursuit undertaken only when convenient, as work done on a full stomach. The next era is one in which conservation enjoys relevance in society for the goods and services it yields, for the foods it helps produce, and for the activities it enhances. Due to its societal relevance, conservation in the future will include funding models and approaches that sufficiently meet the funding needs of species and citizens alike.

Conservation's future must include significant collaboration with strong partnerships, co-producing outcomes that are achieved at meaningful scales and that are durable, lasting for long periods on the landscape, and built with the notion of sustainability in mind.

What a luxury it is to imagine the future of conservation and contemplate the next era of conservation. It's a luxury both due to the opportunity to consider how we humans might change our approaches and thus the results of our conservation efforts, and it's also a luxury that we as beings are gifted with the power to imagine. Imagination is considered a uniquely human experience due to its role in innovation, empathy, and complex problem-solving, and the specific evolutionary path that led to its sophisticated capabilities in humans.

So often, as we imagine future scenarios or when we are granted opportunities to reconsider tools, approaches, and innovations, we place an unnecessary burden of original thoughts and ideas on our thinking. We often assume there must be a novel, not yet tried, approach that, if adopted, could yield better outcomes and perhaps in more efficient ways.

In *Steal Like an Artist*, author Austin Kleon argues that the pressure to be completely original is an unnecessary and crippling burden. He posits that no idea is 100 percent original and that all creative work is a remix of existing ideas and influences. By embracing this concept, creators can "steal" from a wide variety of sources, combining them in new and unique ways that reflect their own perspectives.

The process of reimagining conservation's next era is not immune to the crippling burden of originality we impose upon our thinking. If there ever was a time to reflect on conservation's roots and the principles that were crafted to guide it, that time is now. The foundations of the institution of conservation are not static structures. They are more like a trail system, built by those who walked before us. Conservation's journey is more akin to a set of waypoints, milestones, or trail blazes. It's our job to adjust the route, not abandon the journey. The path forward calls for a broader conservation vision of one that values whole landscapes and the people who work and live on them. It means building policies that serve both wildlife and the communities that have long stewarded our shared natural resources.

As we reflect on the relatively short history of modern colonial conservation, thousands of years of related Indigenous paradigms and approaches notwithstanding, it's easy to identify key elements that formed its foundation. Among these are pivotal pieces of legislation, such as the Lacey Act of 1900 and the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1913, which have played a crucial role in shaping our work. Some philosophies and paradigms are foundational to our work, notions like the Fair Chase Ethic of 1888, Theodore Roosevelt's "Conservation as a National Duty" speech in 1908, and of course the Leopold Land Ethic. There are also foundational elements of conservation in the 1930 American Game Policy, the 1973 North American Wildlife Policy, and the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation.

Common themes consistently found throughout conservation's historical documents include a desire for additional funding and struggles with the low social relevance of conservation. Any imagined future for conservation would do well to include effective funding models as well as effective ways to better connect people to the landscapes. Additionally, the enterprise of conservation is often portrayed as mutually exclusive with economic enterprises. Pitting these two against one another will continue to divide and promote blame and create adversaries of factions with more to gain from allegiance than from hostility.

Ultimately, the nature of the challenge before us is to define our future through the distillation of relevant and meaningful elements scattered in time and space, include contemporary approaches like collaboration and integration, and create novel tools and approaches like innovative funding models and unique partnerships. Despite our failings, we do not need to redefine the foundational elements of conservation—we simply need to reimagine the ways in which they are implemented. We need to reflect from our past, draw from our present, and innovatively reckon with our future to craft a broader conservation vision, a vision that is anchored in concepts like sustainability, collaboration, public trust, and durability, among others.

Mardy and Olaus Murie

Wilderness' Front Porch

A QUIET OUTPOST HAS BEEN SHAPING CONSERVATION FOR GENERATIONS

In the shadow of Wyoming's Grand Teton National Park, where the mountains rise like an abrupt revelation, the Murie Ranch sits in a peaceful meadow of sagebrush and sticky geranium. The air carries the whistle of wind through lodgepole pines, and on certain autumn mornings, the bugle of a distant elk brings wandering minds and footsteps alike to a stop. It's a place that feels both grounded and aspirational, a patch where conservation's past and future share the same wooden porch.

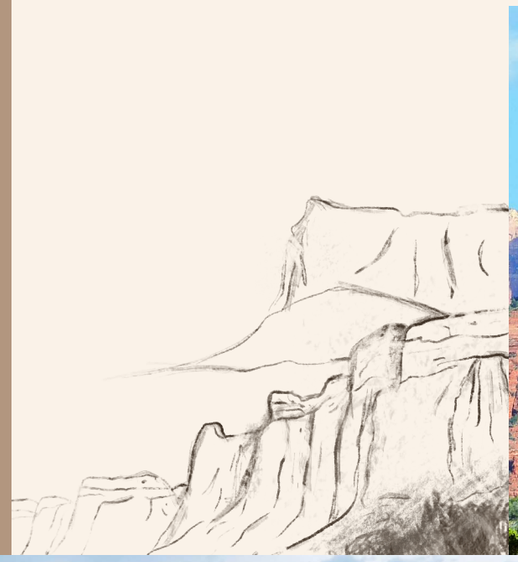
This fall, as PERC convened leaders to imagine the next half-century of stewardship, the ranch offered more than a backdrop. It offered continuity. The small cluster of cabins, worn smooth by decades of comings and goings, tell a story of people who believed that ideas sharpen best in the company of wildness. The Muries—Olaus and Mardy, and Adolph and Louise—made this enclave their home beginning in 1945, transforming what had been a dude ranch into a sanctuary for ecological research and spirited debate.

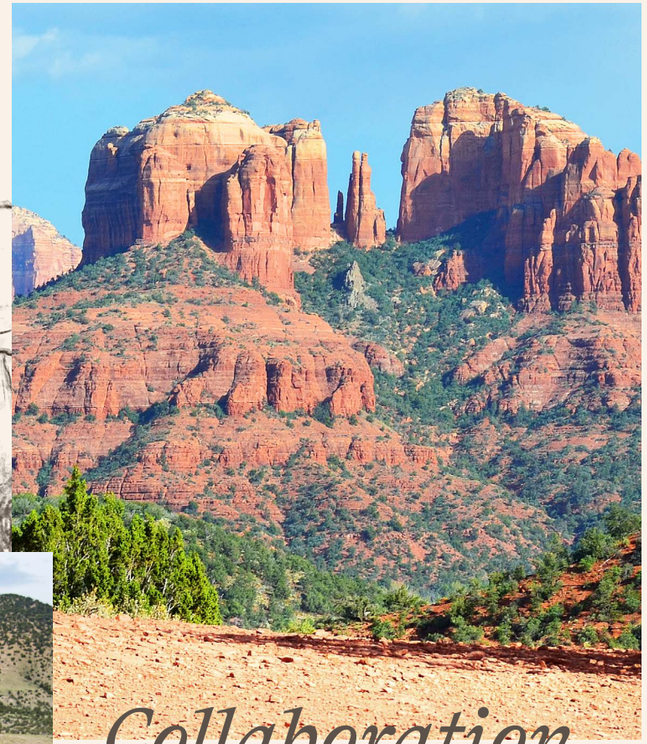
Long before the ranch became a National Historic Landmark, it was an incubator of conviction. The Wilderness Act of 1964 took shape on its porch, where drafts of the prolific yet imperfect legislation were refined over coffee and conversation. Here, advocates rallied to protect millions of acres in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, and presidents, students, and scientists arrived to test their thinking against the clarity of the mountains. What defined the Muries was not grandstanding, but a kind of deliberate humility. They believed that wilderness was best safeguarded by those willing to listen as intently as they spoke.

Olaus sketched wildlife in his studio, using art as a scientific instrument. Mardy, who would later receive the Presidential Medal of Freedom, helped shift the national conversation toward valuing intact ecosystems rather than fragmented ones. Their work shaped the direction of conservation science, but it also shaped a culture—one that prized curiosity, collaboration, and a sense of place.

Today, the ranch is part of the Teton Science Schools campus, where its essence remains unchanged. Elk still wander between the cabins. Black bears still raid berry patches with unapologetic enthusiasm. And people still gather to ask big questions about the future of wild places.

At the Murie Ranch, history isn't preserved under glass. It breathes. It nudges. It invites. And for those who arrive seeking direction, it offers a silent challenge from history: imagine boldly, act humbly, and let the land guide the way.





Collaboration Can Break the Conservation Stalemate

By Simon Roosevelt

Simon Roosevelt is a Regular Member and Vice President of Conservation Policy of the Boone and Crockett Club. He is a member of the Camp Fire Club of America and of the President's Advisory Council of the National Wildlife Federation. Roosevelt has served as Chairman of the Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation, and of the Scenic Hudson Land Trust, and he is a founder of American Conservation Projects, the Conservation Roundtable, and the Friends of the Elkhorn Ranch. He is an avid hunter and conservationist whose interests have involved him in a wide variety of conservation and environmental projects on several continents.

Every era of conservation took its defining characteristic from an innovation that met a need. The need now is for durable decisions able to withstand competing perspectives and the pendulum of politics. Conservation today is fully fledged with ideas. Naturally, they conflict, and the arguments have created the stalemate in which little is tried and little progress is made.

Conservation now struggles with concerns from forests and wildlife to water and wilderness, to litter and other pollution as big as the atmosphere, and even to communities of people living where ecological woes fall disproportionately. There is no niche or facet of ecology lacking opinions and desires. Yet disputes over what to do, or not do, outnumber actions.

Today's challenge is turning enthusiasm into motion. Not toward ideal progress, which is bigger than government, philanthropy, NGOs, and business acting alone or in combination, but toward realistic progress from cooperation and co-operation: i.e., people working together directly and independently under rules.

We should not hope for grand unity, as occurred in the FDR era of conservation. In 1936, with FDR's support, the recent Chief of the U.S. Biological Survey Ding Darling presided over a national conference of hunters, anglers, gardeners, farmers, biologists, and youth groups. Many represented local or statewide clubs and groups. Within a couple of years, the National Wildlife Federation formed to organize a national lobby for this legion of clubs.

Then, the need was still for more attention to conservation, less so for direction. Today conservation reaches far beyond wildlife, and ideologies are far more diverse. We need the diversity of passion, knowledge, and opinions to resolve into decisions.

If in our clash of ideas is the sound of freedom, as Lady Bird Johnson is to have said, it rings with fury more than substance. Conservation clamors with competing priorities, and where common causes may be found, contradictory strategies confound them. The competition is more detrimental than complementary as the camps counteract each other. A prominent example is the battle over burning forests: forest restoration to some is a chainsaw massacre to others.

The next innovation should channel conservation's rambunctious enthusiasm, and a point of entry is the dominant strand of conservation history by which technical agencies have become central planners and decision makers. T.R.'s (and certainly Pinchot's) policy allocated resources entirely by the scientific calculation of government experts. In 1950, Samuel Hays described it as "The Gospel of Efficiency." Its flaws appeared in several ways long before Rachel Carson studied pesticides; the experimental removal of predators from the Kaibab Plateau began shortly after T.R. established the Grand Canyon National Game Preserve in 1906. A check on administrative discretion appeared in 1946, with the enactment of the Administrative Procedure Act, which required notice and comment on regulations. Public comment began to dominate conservation with the enactment of the National Environmental Policy Act in 1970.

The main function of public comment now—actually, not intentionally—is to reserve for commenters the standing to sue over decisions they don't like. A class of organizations has emerged that does nothing but sue. Even the intent of a comment period is dubious: Availing an agency of informative outside views is sensible but no match for the determination of an agency to do what it has already decided—or has been told to do. Thus, it is mainly a shadow vote. Expert decision making is only distantly accountable to the value judgments among options for achieving the same objective.

"Collaboration" is a more recent reaction having innovative potential. Starting in the 1980s, concerns about the spotted owl, the Blackfoot River watershed, and the Malpai Borderlands brought citizens together to deliberate. Some reached agreements, solved problems, and realized opportunities. But collaboration has no official place in conservation policy. A place for collaboration would mark a new era.

There are at least two ways to institutionalize collaboration. Collaborative groups could petition for action, and agencies could recognize collaborative alternatives to official proposals. Collaborative solutions that meet lawful purposes and needs could receive preferential consideration for expeditious approval. Objectors could be required to participate meaningfully to gain standing to sue.

Defining the next era of conservation by how we relate to each other is no distraction from wildness. Instead, it is, to borrow from T.S. Eliot, a return to our beginnings where we know them for the first time.

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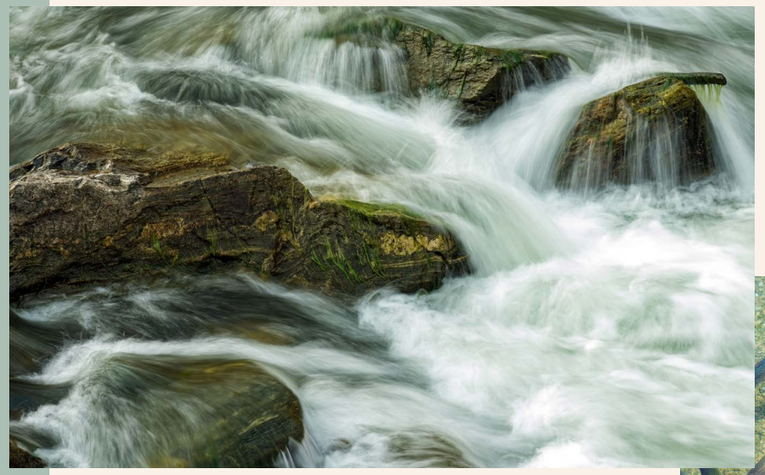
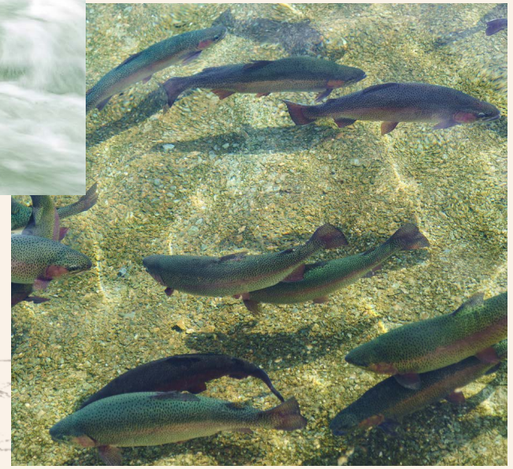
Water as the *Lifeblood of Conservation*

By Tom Kiernan



> We must embrace locally connected solutions.



Tom Kiernan is President and CEO of American Rivers, where he is leading a national effort to ensure every river is clean and healthy for people and wildlife. Since joining the organization in 2021, he has advanced ambitious goals, including the protection of one million miles of rivers by 2030. A respected national conservation leader, Tom has spent more than three decades building bipartisan support for land, water, and climate solutions.

One day last June, the border of the United States and Mexico was a place of bipartisan agreement and connection. What sparked this rare unity? Water.

I joined EPA Administrator Lee Zeldin and other local and state officials for a roundtable discussion about how to solve chronic pollution in the Tijuana River, which starts in Mexico and flows through southern San Diego County into the Pacific. As raw sewage and trash enter the ocean, the polluted water becomes airborne as sea spray, sickening residents throughout the region. All agreed that the status quo of a sewage-choked river causing illness among residents — as well as Navy Seals, who train nearby — is unacceptable. A few months following the meeting, Administrator Zeldin announced an agreement with Mexico, supported by local leaders and water advocates, to address the pollution crisis.

This is an excellent example of how we must approach the next era of conservation. We must be focused on shared values – in this case, health and safety. We must embrace locally connected solutions. And we must build a more inclusive movement, bridging cultural divides and integrating perspectives from the left and the right, rural and urban communities, businesses, Tribal Nations, and those most impacted by pollution.

Water is the best issue on which to build a new, proactive agenda for conservation. To borrow a phrase from John Haydock, business leader and supporter of American Rivers: "Our common ground is wet."

We all need clean, safe, reliable water — for drinking, crop irrigation, industry, transportation, and energy production. Our rivers and streams are vital to our outdoor heritage, supporting beloved hunting and fishing traditions and a $1.2 trillion outdoor recreation economy.

This is an urgent moment for water. Rivers and water supplies across the country are threatened by stormwater pollution, overuse, and the floods and droughts that are coming with increasingly extreme weather. Our families, communities, and businesses shoulder the consequences, facing illness, rising costs, uncertainty, and property damage.

Research conducted by the American Rivers Action Fund shows that voters across the political spectrum overwhelmingly support clean water protections. It is our job to turn this broad, bipartisan support into widespread action. I recently stood with Rep. Jeff Van Drew (R-N.J.) at Lake Lenape Dam on New Jersey's Great Egg Harbor River, in support of his bill that will update critical infrastructure, improve public safety at dams, and revitalize river health. And in Montana, American Rivers is working with Rep. Ryan Zinke (R-Mont.) to champion federal protections for the Madison and Gallatin Rivers, supported by anglers, public lands advocates, and local businesses.

While we need bold legal and regulatory action, we also need more market- and incentive-based solutions for clean water. In North Carolina's Upper Neuse River Basin, we are building a new way of regulating clean water supplies based on a watershed management strategy that pools funds from regulated entities, then uses those funds to implement projects that return value to the community and river health. So far, $13.2 million has been invested in more than 100 projects.

American Rivers is also helping cities like Grand Rapids, Michigan, and towns across the Great Lakes develop and deploy innovative funding strategies to address stormwater runoff pollution that causes fish kills, sewage overflows, and beach closures.

Stormwater credit banks and trading programs provide compliance flexibility while bringing private capital and property into the mix of solutions. Optimized grant programs can target priority outcomes and align with other funding sources. Public-private partnerships and pay-for-performance contracting models can bring private sector financing to bear. "Green bonds" match environmental and community benefits to public expenditures.

These solutions also open the possibility of developing projects on private property. When private property owners can contribute to, and benefit from, municipal green stormwater infrastructure programs, limited public funding and resources can be leveraged to create multiple benefits for the environment and communities alike.

I am optimistic. Because just as many single water droplets form a mighty river, examples like these are collectively demonstrating that water is the lifeblood of the next era of the conservation movement.

At American Rivers, we believe every river in our country should be clean and healthy for people and wildlife. By prioritizing locally connected water solutions in this next era of conservation, we will not only safeguard the life-giving power of our rivers — we will build a more inclusive, bipartisan, effective conservation movement that strengthens our nation and leaves a proud legacy for future generations.

Past Is Prologue in Wyoming and Beyond

By Rob Wallace

The desire to protect the health of public lands is in the DNA of a vast majority of citizens in the West.

Rob Wallace is former Assistant Secretary of the Interior for Fish and Wildlife and Parks. A native of Evanston, Wyoming, his conservation experience stretches back more than half a century. Wallace has served as head of congressional affairs for the National Park Service, worked on Capitol Hill, and led government affairs operations in the private sector.

When thinking about the future of conservation, I find myself looking to the past—especially the role my state, Wyoming, has had in building a solid foundation.

The history of the world's first national park, Yellowstone, is well known, as is the kind of public-private partnership pioneered by John D. Rockefeller, Jr., in the creation of Grand Teton National Park. Between those events, President Theodore Roosevelt designated Devils Tower as the world's first national monument. Later, the 1964 Wilderness Act was drafted on the front porch of the Murie Ranch in Moose, Wyoming.

But it wasn't just federal actions that made a difference. Over the years, Wyoming has been a leader in enacting landmark legislation addressing mine land reclamation, air quality, plant siting, game management, and minimum stream flow, among others.

I first took an interest in these issues more than 50 years ago as a seasonal national park ranger in the Tetons. In the following years, so much has evolved in the way we look at wildlife and wildland management, and this steady progress gives me hope about the journey ahead.

Back then, federal agencies, state agencies, tribes, and private landowners saw themselves as competitors, not partners. Grizzly bears, bald and golden eagles, gray wolves, black-footed ferrets, and whooping cranes were either endangered or thought to be extinct in Wyoming. The role of the Smokey the Bear fire management policy was under serious review, and invasive lake trout were just establishing themselves in Yellowstone Lake where they would soon threaten the native cutthroat population.

Today, most of these at-risk wildlife populations are healthy and growing. Eradication efforts to remove the lake trout from Yellowstone Lake are succeeding, and fire managers have drawn valuable lessons from the 1988 Yellowstone fires. Landowners, state and federal land managers, and tribes deserve credit for the great strides they've made in working together. A close look at the map of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem shows why that kind of cooperation is imperative. That land mass encompassing parts of Wyoming, Idaho, and Montana totals roughly 22 million acres, or an area the size of Indiana. Of that total, nearly a third is private. That math screams out for the need for coordination.

Examples of what can be accomplished through cooperative conservation include wildlife friendly fences and highway crossings, coordinated efforts to protect streams and lakes from quagga and zebra mussels, area-wide coordination to fight cheatgrass and other invasive plants, and a pressing urgency to maintain historic migratory routes for elk and other ungulates between winter and summer ranges. While successes in these areas have been helped by federal and state policies, the secret sauce was added when citizens on the ground realized there were problems and joined together as true partners.

Evidence suggests that the desire to protect the health of public lands is in the DNA of a vast majority of citizens in the West. Sometimes it takes a crisis, and sometimes an opportunity, to ignite that passion, but it's there. Last year, over 10,000 citizens from around Wyoming successfully petitioned elected officials to sell a state section of land, known as the Kelly Parcel, to Grand Teton National Park instead of auctioning it off for private use to the highest bidder. Months ago, a nationwide backlash erupted over a proposal in Congress to sell off public lands in 11 states. Thanks to the loud pushback from citizens of all political stripes, the proposal melted away.

I wish I had that crystal ball to predict where we are headed, but if past is prologue, we're moving in the right direction.

Ending the Era of Precaution

By Greg Schildwachter, PhD

Greg Schildwachter, PhD, is a professional conservationist advising clients on policy, leadership and strategy, and philanthropy in conservation. He began his career as a wildlife biologist and is experienced in issues of local, state, and federal scale and familiar with many communities and habitats across the United States. During his 30-year career, Schildwachter has worked in private sector and state and federal government positions on conservation issues ranging from forests to wetlands, endangered species to invasive ones, grasslands to ocean life, and beyond.

Past eras of conservation are thrilling in hindsight. One U.S. president made conservation a national priority, called it a national duty, and stood it on a base of professional agencies and vast public lands. Another president expanded government action. An environmental awakening expanded conservation beyond forests and wildlife to air and water. These eras—each spanning decades—met needs with fundamental changes in laws, agencies, land and water classifications, and personal behaviors.

The current era, now roughly 50 years old, has been quiet by comparison. Since the mid-1970s, excepting a few major amendments and the blossoming of advocacy organizations in number and practices, conservation has settled into incremental changes and layers of judicial case law. The legal contests generally pit resentment of regulations against idealism for protection.

What has realistically been gained or lost since the '70s are fluctuations in budget lines, listed species, and acreages and purposes of reserved lands and waters. Even the biggest achievements—among them the first conservation title of the Farm Bill in 1985 and the 2020 permanent mandatory spending of $900 million per year for the Land and Water Conservation Fund—were plays from pre-1970 playbooks. Our era has varied without changing fundamentally.

This era of minding dials and levers tolls with loud warnings.

First, aside from pollution problems in air and water, which are measured closely and show progress, there is little evidence of progress in stewardship of land and wildlife. Second, without the guidance of evidence, the adjusting of budgets, management plans, and area designations has devolved into a contest of virtue and vice in which each contestant claims the virtue. Third, in this moral contest, contrived principles—"bedrock environmental laws" vs. "regulatory overreach"—strangle policy debates. (A case in point: the Endangered Species Act has not been amended since 1988.) Fourth, the well-meaning public responds to these artificial principles by funding dueling campaigns that lock into stalemates. For uncharacteristic wildfire there is more strategy than execution, and for climate change, more rhetoric than durable policy, and for species, a symbolic squabble about the length of the endangered lists.

Conservation ought to have settled into workmanlike operation by now, but this era is not perfecting conservation; it is distorting it. The word "conservation" has morphed into "protection"—as an alternative to "development." This has deranged T.R.'s great achievement in coining conservation as a discipline for meeting human needs with both: "Conservation means development as much as it does protection." And relegating "development" to the production of commodities disregards its broader meaning of anything done to reclaim beauty from diseased forests, invaded grasslands, and depopulated wildlife communities, which we do because, as Muir said: "Everybody needs beauty as well as bread."

Favoring one need over others disregards the interconnections among them. Often "balance" is proposed, which is telling but wrong. Balance is a resort from political turmoil, a myth of ecology, and no guide to ecosystem management. Protection and intervention are methods, not political platforms.

> The word "conservation" has morphed into "protection"—as an alternative to "development."

The next era of conservation should resurrect stewardship: intervention and restraint in prescribed measures. The present era assumes action is dangerous. The National Environmental Policy Act of 1970 requires, in the reading of a court, a "searching and careful" review. As this dictum eroded into the slogan "hard look," idle precaution overtook "enhancement" in the act's purpose. Precaution began with good, but blinkered, reason. The Endangered Species Act of 1973 and Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 are central examples. Both assuaged the consequences of unwitting action: pollution and habitat loss; single-minded engineering of clearcuts in the Bitterroot and Monongahela National Forests. Neither redressed harm with positive action.

In fear of what could go wrong, present policies front-load decisions by documenting risks, emphasizing causes for objection, and costing millions in the "negative exercise of abstinence and caution" that might be used for the "positive exercise of skill and insight" (Leopold). Tinkering with this — by limiting the duration and page-count of environmental analyses — will not do.

The Aspen Institute recently published a starting point, led by a bipartisan pair of former White House Council on Environmental Quality chairs: Kathleen McGinty (Clinton) and James Connaughton (Bush 43). They recommended that projects advancing a national priority be separated into classes for immediate and accelerated environmental approvals. They recognized this would not ease the difficulty of setting national priorities—theirs was achieving net-zero emissions by 2050—or earning community support for projects. But consensus about priorities and projects will become more likely when people can weigh a real chance to gain against the perceived safety of the status quo.

Stewardship recalls what is still known of gardening but has been forgotten about larger ecosystems. Working within it and guarding its growth is a surer guide than planning to.

The Power of the People in the Future of Our Public Lands

By I Ling Thompson

I Ling Thompson is CEO of the Foundation for America's Public Lands, the congressionally chartered charitable partner of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). With more than two decades of experience leading conservation and outdoor recreation organizations, she guides the foundation's work to strengthen awareness, access, and care for America's public lands and waters. When not in the office, she's usually in the dirt exploring BLM public lands somewhere in the West with her husband and their two dogs.

The United States has conserved and maintains an exceptional public lands system of 640 million acres, roughly one in four acres of the country. Often, the public views public lands through the lens of national parks. Our national system of public lands and waters, however, are more than pristine places — they are hardworking landscapes that play a crucial role in healthy wildlife populations, in the economic and community well-being of our nation, in telling meaningful stories about our heritage and way of life, and in the ability of all Americans to explore and enjoy this great nation.

However, the conditions that originally shaped the vision of early conservation leaders have dramatically shifted. America is growing and needs more food and energy to power our daily lives. More people than ever are exploring the outdoors, but that enthusiasm brings new challenges. Without greater investment, we risk loving these places to death. Wildlife struggle to move across fragmented landscapes, unaware of jurisdictional boundaries. Wildfires burn more often, longer, and hotter, disrupting businesses and putting communities and producers at risk. Rivers that once ran steady are now dry before summer's end.

The question is no longer how much more land we can protect, but how do we help the lands we already steward endure and thrive? With federal land management agencies facing deep cuts, we need new models that recognize the need for increased stewardship of public lands and waters. I often say that "forever" is a long time — and it's expensive. Government processes and paper policies aren't enough. Our future depends on engaging the everyday people and communities to share in the stewardship of some of our nation's most precious shared resources.

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) is the largest public lands manager in the country and welcomes over 80 million visitors every year. The agency's multi-use mission is the embodiment of conservation. It balances uses like energy development, livestock grazing, mining, outdoor recreation, wildlife habitat, and timber harvesting for current and future generations. The Foundation for America's Public Lands was created to serve as the BLM's congressionally chartered charitable partner, one that acts as the agency's convener and fundraising catalyst.

When I joined the Foundation for America's Public Lands as its first CEO two years ago, I found myself at the center of an exciting, undiscovered piece of the conservation puzzle: finding ways to invite all Americans in as stewards of the landscapes they love.

Our Greatest Untapped Resource

Since joining the foundation, I've seen firsthand that the greatest untapped resource isn't policies or technology. It's people. Across the country, rural residents, outdoor enthusiasts, ranchers, scientists, and dedicated volunteers have been and continue to care for our public lands.

We should look to those who have cared for these lands the longest. For example, generations of ranchers and rural communities hold a deep understanding of the landscapes where they live and work. And Indigenous Nations hold generations of knowledge about fire, water, and wildlife that modern systems are only beginning to relearn. We have an opportunity to bring these voices to the center — not as secondary participants, but as partners and leaders.

Let's expand the definition of stewardship and invite more Americans to step out of their offices and into the dirt. When people feel an emotional sense of ownership for a place, they act. They protect what they know. If we can inspire more members of the public to see themselves as stewards, not just visitors, we can build a future where the public is willing to fund the lands they love.

Cultivating a Nation of Stewards

Americans love their public lands, and that passion was on full display when proposals to sell off public lands surfaced recently. Americans across the political spectrum spoke with one voice — these places matter.

That moment put an unexpected spotlight on the BLM, an agency that has long operated with limited visibility, modest budgets, and a complex public perception shaped by its multiple-use mission. Standing alongside the more familiar National Park Service and Forest Service, the BLM and the lands it manages are finally beginning to be recognized for what they are: the backbone of world-class recreation, vital wildlife habitats, and thriving local economies.

If we truly believe public lands and waters matter, we must all take part in their future and embrace funding stewardship of them. The next generation of conservation is one that doesn't exclusively depend on D.C. budgets but on a nation of stewards who, inspired by local communities and dramatic landscapes, want to invest in their public lands.

We have built the house of public lands; now we must ensure it stands strong for generations to come. The next era of conservation will be shaped not only by policy but by the people — those who give their time, voices, and resources to keep these lands open, healthy, and thriving. Together, we can build a future where every American feels ownership, pride, and purpose in caring for the places that define us all.

Late summer sage blooms at Montana’s J Bar L Ranch

Stewards of the Open Ranges

Across America’s private lands, those who live closest to the wild both enjoy the beauty of it and carry the burden of sharing it. They also hold the key to its future.

Photography By Lindsay Coe

Across America’s valleys, foothills, and open plains, private lands form the quiet majority of our landscape. These working lands feed communities, sustain families, and, often unseen, provide some of the nation’s most vital wildlife habitat.

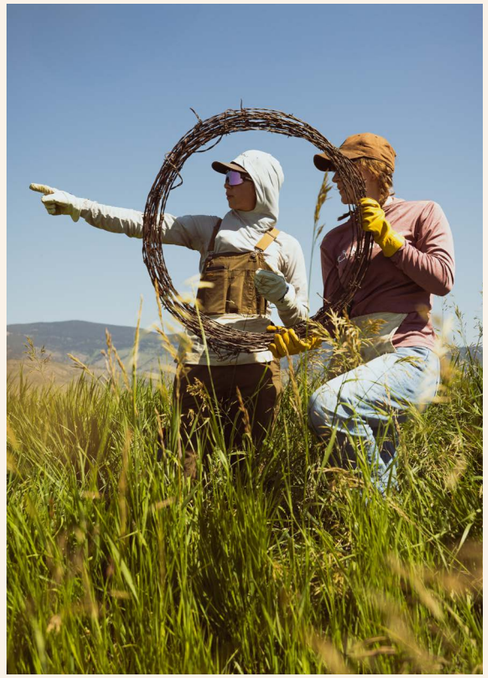
For those who live this life, sharing space with wildlife is both a privilege and a challenge—elk flatten fences, wolves take livestock, and beavers flood pastures. The wildlife that conservationists revere can bring real costs to those who steward the land every day. The next era of conservation depends on bridging this gap, turning wildlife into an asset rather than a liability, and uniting those who love the land with those who love the wild.

The photos that follow were taken on ranches that partner with PERC to advance collaborative conservation, showcasing the people, places, and wild spirit that define the American West.

Rancher Alvin Pierce and PERC's Whitney Tilt horsing around

Rancher Jim Durgan

The careful art of
coiling barbed wire



Rancher Druska Kinkie and PERC's
Brian Yablonski love working lands

Life on the land remains
labor-intensive

Ranch dogs are
always welcome

Enjoying the fruits of his labor

Fresh picks from a
century-old orchard

The skies in Montana’s Centennial Valley put on a show at the J Bar L Ranch

Horses are kin

Ranchers are optimists
by nature

Hard to beat a ranch
visit for team PERC

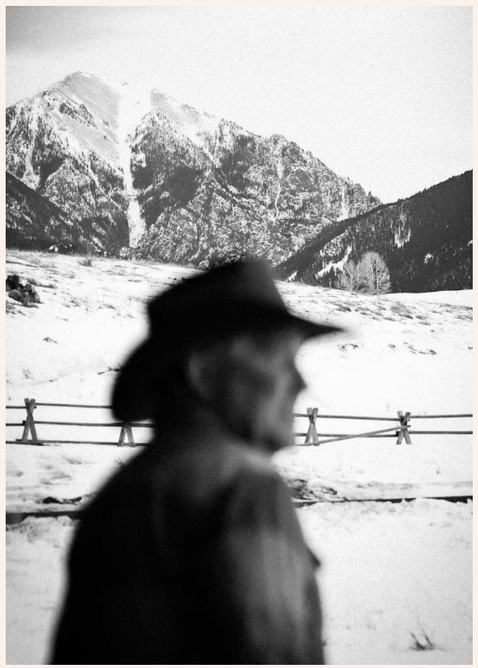
PERC's Katie Doyle sets
virtual fence collars

Carpooling across Wyoming's
Pitchfork Ranch

Removing fences in
Paradise Valley

A stormy sunset in Centennial Valley

Cold days, heartwarming views



Replacing barbed wire with wildlife-friendly fencing

Lindsay Coe is the digital content producer at PERC.

The Need *for Speed*

By Hannah Downey

Outdated laws, litigation delays, and bureaucratic red tape are slowing vital conservation work—especially in America's fuel-choked forests

Hannah Downey is the associate vice president of policy at PERC, leading policy strategy and government affairs efforts to implement key policy reforms based on PERC's groundbreaking research. She has applied her passion for the outdoors to advance lasting conservation wins since joining PERC in 2015. Hannah has testified before Congress and works closely with policymakers at the federal and state levels on conservation issues, and her work has been featured in media outlets including The Wall Street Journal and The Hill.

Today we face daunting conservation challenges that range from a western wildfire crisis, endangered species inertia, abandoned mine perils, habitat fragmentation, and invasive species spread. But if we take our foot off of the brake and find the accelerator, we'll achieve conservation success.

Previous eras of conservation have focused on slowing down or halting environmental harms. Regulations and designations generally aimed to stop "something bad," taking reactive approaches to problems like widespread air pollution and rampant deforestation. Looking forward, conservation policies must speed up and remove barriers to proactively doing "something good."

A critical issue that illustrates the need for speed is forest restoration. Hitting the brakes has turned our forests into tinderboxes. For decades, policies championed suppressing virtually all fire and limiting active management of vegetation. We now reap an accumulation of wildfire fuel in forests ready to burn at a catastrophic severity and scale. Fire has scorched an area larger than Nevada over the past decade, and more than 60 million acres of U.S. Forest Service land remain at high or very high risk of wildfire. Blazes in recent years have destroyed not only western forests but have even threatened places like Los Angeles, Hawaii, and Long Island.

The good news is that we know how to fix the problem. Taking action to remove excess fuels through mechanical thinning and prescribed fire have been found to reduce wildfire severity up to 72 percent. Given that so many of our forests remain in an unhealthy state and at risk of wildfire, we should be dramatically increasing the pace and scale of this forest restoration work.

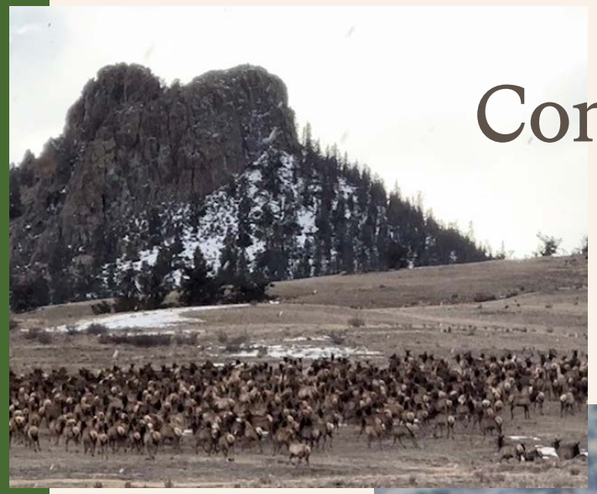
The bad news is that our institutions have made it nearly impossible to do that vital work in the doses needed. Laws and policies from previous environmental eras such as the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and the Endangered Species Act—coupled with tanglesome litigation—have created formidable barriers. PERC researchers have found that burdensome environmental review processes combined with litigation can delay forest restoration projects by about a decade. Furthermore, the disastrous *Cottonwood* federal appellate court decision of 2015 created a duplicative level of consultation over endangered species in some regions, which the Forest Service estimates will consume years of delays and millions of dollars—time and money we don't have to waste.

The ill-fated Pumice Project in the Klamath National Forest demonstrates the danger of slowing down rather than speeding up. In 2011, the Forest Service initiated the project to reduce wildfire risk, but environmental advocacy groups challenged the project, alleging that it would harm the threatened northern spotted owl. The litigation delayed the project for a decade. In the meantime, the Antelope Fire ignited before any restoration work could begin, destroying the owl habitat that the legal opponents claimed to be protecting.

For conservation to succeed, the next era must focus on speeding up by cutting through the red tape and bureaucratic delays that plague forest restoration projects and other environmental efforts. These are the sorts of ideas PERC has been researching and advocating for decades. Improvements to law and policy are drastically needed to make NEPA more efficient, expand categorical exclusions to environmental reviews, fix *Cottonwood* to remove duplicate levels of consultation, expedite litigation challenges, remove prescribed burns from state air pollution emissions calculations, and make it easier for state, tribal, and private entities to conduct restoration work on federal forests.

All of these reforms can help speed up the work that we know must be done to improve forest health. Thankfully, many of these aims are in the bipartisan Fix Our Forests Act that is rapidly advancing through Congress—with PERC's support—a sign that America is recognizing the need to embrace a new era and approach to conservation.

Forests are just one setting that demonstrates how slamming the brakes has failed conservation. It's time to hit the gas so that we can speed up, not slow down, proactive restoration of our land, water, and wildlife.



Conservation from *the Ground Up*

By Rupert Munro

On a Colorado ranch, an elk-migration pact shows how voluntary partnerships and private landowners will propel American conservation

Rupert Munro is the Chief Operating Officer at PERC, working with the Center's investors to strengthen and grow our impact across the country in his role leading PERC's fundraising efforts as well as overseeing all finance and business operations. Prior to joining PERC, Rupert served as the Director of Development for the Bill of Rights Institute, where he spent five years promoting the principles of the American founding.

With the sun starting to paint shadows across the front range, I rode side-by-side in an ATV with Dave Gottenborg as he gave me a tour of his high-country ranch in central Colorado. The mosquitoes were thick on my legs as we crossed the stunning working landscape, with Dave pointing out the projects he's installing and recounting the history of his operation. He's the PERC partner who spurred Colorado's first elk migration agreement.

It only takes a second to realize that Dave is a true steward of this landscape—defined by his no-nonsense approach to getting things done and his unquestionable passion for his herd and the landscape that sustains it. He's the salt of the earth rancher you'd expect from central casting.

But in this alpine wonderland, pressure is growing on Dave.

Elk, once dispersed throughout the region, now find his property an island of calm—animals pushed onto his land by the growing pressure of outdoor recreation on surrounding public forests. Mountain bikers, hikers, and campers increasingly fill those adjacent lands, and with each passing year more elk seek refuge where disturbances are few and stewardship is intentional. On Dave's ranch, that refuge exists because of a simple but powerful idea: Conservation works best when it starts with the people who know the land best.

PERC's migration agreement with the Gottenborg family is a model of the next era of conservation. Rather than relying on top-down mandates, it leans into a bottom-up partnership—compensating landowners for hosting habitat, keeping migration corridors open, and allowing wildlife to move across private lands that have become essential safe havens. Quiet, incremental successes like this rarely make headlines, but they form the backbone of what conservation will become in the coming decades.

For much of the past century, conservation triumphs were framed as federal achievements: sweeping legislation, vast public-land designations, or nationwide species recovery plans. Big on pomp, light on outcomes. But the next 50 years will look different. They will be shaped from the ground up, driven by private landowners, tribal communities, and local stewards whose daily choices cumulatively determine the fate of far more wildlife habitat than any national monument ever will.

More than half of all imperiled species depend on private land. Migration pathways cross working ranches. Rivers flow through backyards and tribal territories. And the men and women who steward these places are not obstacles to ecological success—they are indispensable partners.

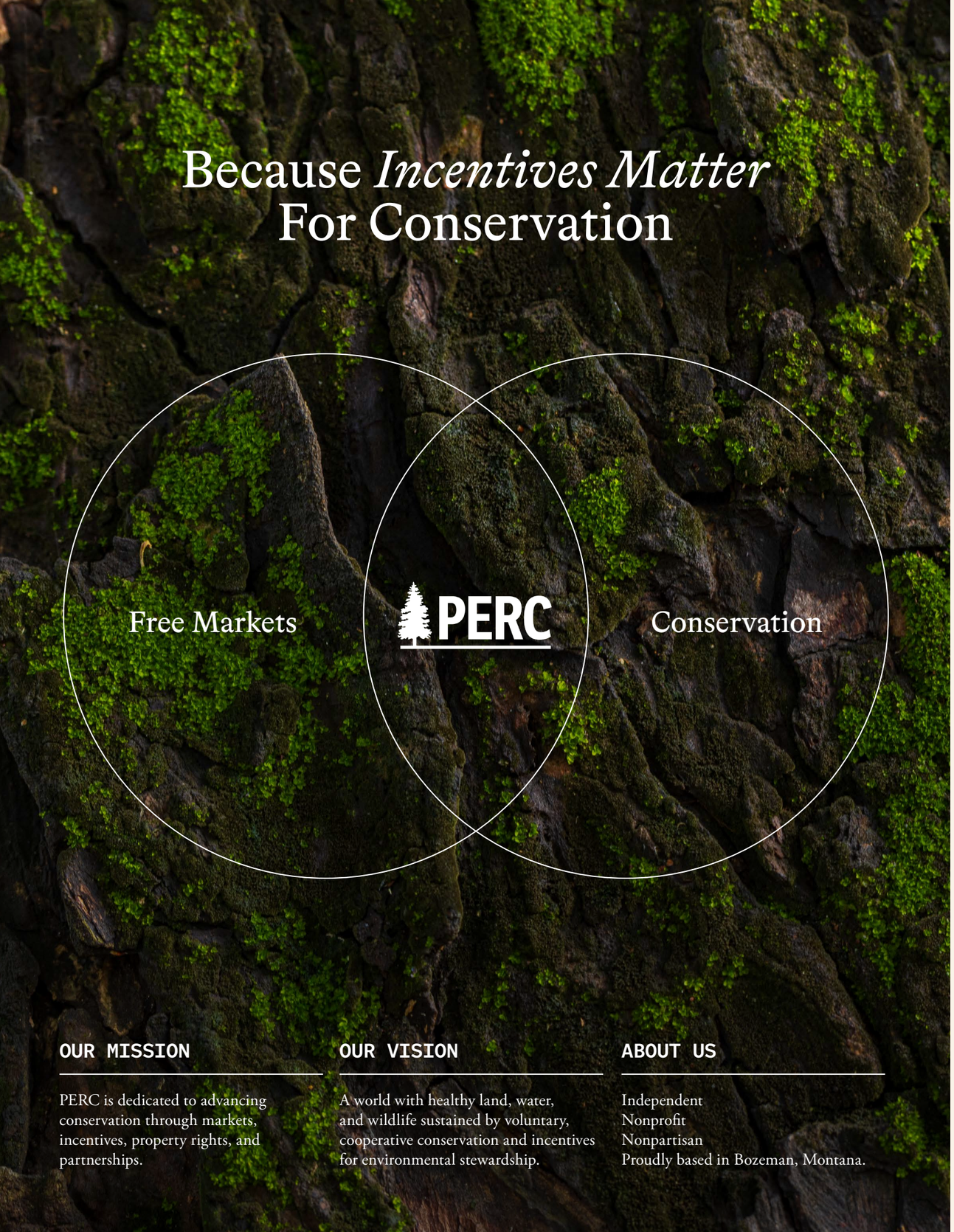
The next era of conservation will thrive through secure property rights that give landowners the confidence to invest in habitat, through voluntary agreements that align ecological goals with economic realities, and through tools that reward stewardship, from conservation leasing to market-driven ecosystem payments.

These approaches recognize that durable conservation comes not from coercion, but from cooperation.

Yet the most important shift may be cultural. It's time to center the people whose choices sustain open space, migration routes, private forests, and pristine rivers. A rancher who keeps grasslands intact for elk, a timber family managing for fire resilience, a tribal community restoring bison—these are not peripheral stories. They are the story of American conservation's future.

Imagine the landscape 50 years from now: thousands of voluntary partnerships, wildlife corridors stitched together by neighbors instead of regulations, water restored through markets rather than litigation, and forests managed for resilience because landowners are empowered rather than constrained. That future begins with people like Dave Gottenborg—stewards whose quiet work keeps the wild intact.

Conservation's next era won't be written up in distant bureaucracies. It will be directly forged on ranches, in watersheds, and across the private lands that quietly hold the key to ecological resilience. It will be conservation from the ground up—rooted in place, guided by people, and scaled through trust.



OUR MISSION

PERC is dedicated to advancing conservation through markets, incentives, property rights, and partnerships.

OUR VISION

A world with healthy land, water, and wildlife sustained by voluntary, cooperative conservation and incentives for environmental stewardship.

ABOUT US

Independent
Nonprofit
Nonpartisan
Proudly based in Bozeman, Montana.

The Art of *Economics* and *Environmental Impact*

Page Lee Hufty helped launch the first Earth Day—now she's shaping the next era of conservation

Across America's valleys, foothills, and open plains, Page is a Florida rancher, conservationist, and painter. She has a deep, personal knowledge of the importance of property rights and market incentives to human and ecological flourishing.

Her family's Buck Island Ranch near Lake Placid preserves over 10,000 acres of grasslands and pastures. The ranch is consciously devoted to sustainable practices that enable over 3,000 cattle and dozens of species of birds, mammals, amphibians and reptiles, and fish to thrive together.

Today, Page focuses her time painting the natural world to communicate the joy she finds in it. She has paintings in museums, embassies, and corporate offices. And she is active in conservation efforts in Florida and across the nation, including supporting PERC for over three decades.

Her philanthropic partnership is helping build the nationwide movement that is coalescing behind bottom-up, incentive-based approaches to saving wildlands, water, and wildlife. In Page's own words: "America needs economic solutions to environmental problems."

And as a rancher and conservationist, she is well-informed of the big environmental problems that require fast economic solutions—solutions that can't wait for government approvals or rely on intransigent regulation. As an enthusiastic young Stanford grad, Page helped plan the original Earth Day, even if she didn't share some of the "edgy" political leanings of other founders. ("I am really happy where Earth Day is right now," she has said more recently, "which is not a wildly political place.")

In the Sunshine State, Page is involved in a host of conservation efforts, including recovering endangered and threatened species, creating migration corridors that allow private landowners and wildlife to coexist, and ensuring healthy water supply for Florida's people as well as its diverse ecosystems.

Page's generosity and insight have enabled PERC to bring market-based solutions to address environmental challenges nationwide. And thanks to the support of her and other generous philanthropic partners, PERC is positioned to strategically expand our efforts and focus in Florida and beyond.

Are you interested in discussing how your philanthropic partnership can help PERC advance the next era of conservation? Reach Rupert Munro at rupert@perc.org or 406-587-9591.

THE CASE FOR CONSERVATION ABUNDANCE

How fixing America's affordability crisis points toward a conservation future defined by plenty rather than scarcity

By Sophie Gilbert

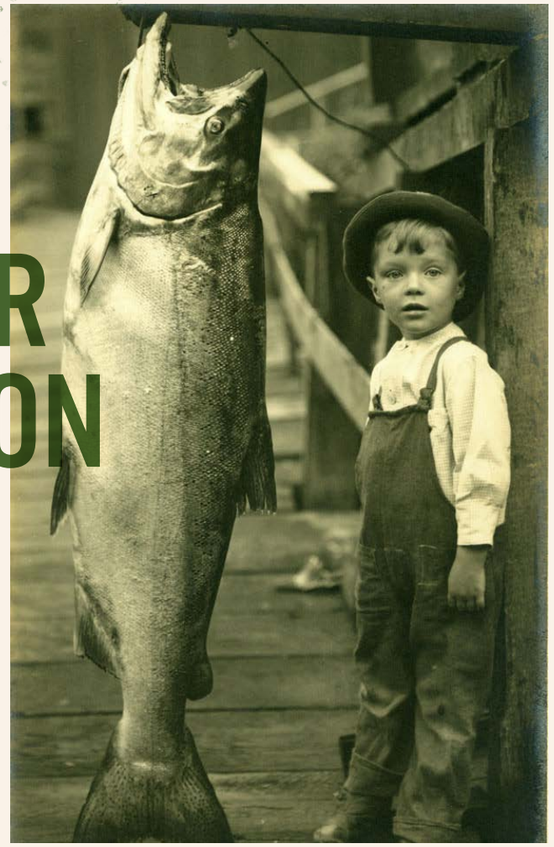


Photo Credit: J.A. McCormick, 1913
Washington Historical Society

After years of heightened inflation and sky-high housing and energy costs, one concept pervades American politics and culture today: the "affordability crisis." The median age for a first-time home-buyer has climbed to an all-time high of 40 years old. Heating costs have risen by roughly 30 percent over recent years. Now electricity costs are up, and rising numbers of Americans are facing debt collection over unpaid utility bills.

Affordability arguably sealed the outcome of the 2024 presidential election and seems to have influenced ballot-box results in November as well. But while I believe meeting human needs like houses and energy is critical, when I think about the need to provide more in the world, I also can't help but think about fish—enormous fish.

At the heart of the affordability crisis is scarcity of built infrastructure, including housing, electricity transmission lines, and transit. There simply aren't enough of the things that people need, so prices rise, encouraging supply to catch up to demand. But like infrastructure itself, much of the scarcity is manmade, created by a system of laws, policies, and norms that make it easy to slow or stop projects, and dampen the supply response of markets.

Likewise, a host of conservation challenges are also underpinned by scarcity. Only a century ago, for example, schools of Chinook salmon bigger than golden retrievers swam up the Columbia River. Somewhere between 10 and 16 million salmon and steelhead spawned in the Columbia Basin each year. Then, once dozens of dams were built along the Columbia and Snake Rivers for hydroelectric power—compounding overharvesting and habitat degradation from growing timber and agriculture industries—salmon populations crashed, and their size also dwindled. Today, just one to two million salmon and steelhead return to the Columbia annually, and hundred-pound salmon are unheard of. While economic analysis suggests net benefits would result from removing dams, concerns about reduced energy supplies and other costs of removal have repeatedly stalled action.

The opposite of scarcity is abundance—a topic that is top of mind in political and policy circles today. As Ezra Klein and Derek Thompson argue in their 2025 bestseller, *Abundance*, we can solve our problems of scarcity and build plentiful infrastructure by reforming land-use regulations, overhauling permitting processes, inventing new solutions, and harnessing other supply-boosting approaches. A growing, bipartisan abundance movement is gaining popularity, increasingly translated into real political power.

Many conservation challenges share similarly powerful "abundance" solutions with the affordability crisis. Much of the world's "natural infrastructure"—the functioning ecosystems that provide clean water and air, fish and wildlife habitat, recreation opportunities, livestock forage, wood products, carbon storage, and more—is in need of rehabilitation. But as in the built world, our slow political and policy systems bog down projects that aim to rebuild or improve natural infrastructure—sometimes, they even favor constructing with concrete or steel over restoring forests or rivers. To take one example, a California project to restore riparian habitat needs more permits than an Alaskan oil pipeline. But that can change.

Traditionally, conservation strategies and tools have focused on a principle aim: reducing harm. And this approach has achieved much success by defending protected areas, regulating hunting, and guarding against habitat destruction. Spectacular national parks and massive rebounds of wild turkeys, white-tailed deer, and many other game species stand as testaments. But these defensive tools are not enough, as the ongoing global decline in habitat and biodiversity shows.

Conservation groups may see the abundance movement as a threat, because they fear giving up defensive regulatory tools as well as a massive loss of habitat to infrastructure. The risk is real. In the United States alone, over 30 million acres—more than 10 Yellowstone National Park's worth—of natural areas and farmland could be converted into housing by 2040. The U.S. is expected to add 250,000 to 500,000 acres of new solar power generation, equivalent to roughly a Grand Teton National Park's worth, per year between now and 2030. And this is not just a domestic problem. Globally, the amount of infrastructure is expected to double by 2030, transforming our planet.

The question facing our country and the world more broadly is not whether a massive amount of energy infrastructure and housing will be built, but where, how and when. And those are questions that conservationists can and should help answer. If conservation values and research can be included in siting, designing, and building more of what people need, then both nature and people will win.

By the same token, adopting an "abundance mindset" to tackle conservation challenges can help restore natural abundance in surprising ways. Here are five key principles that can help unlock the potential of abundance for humans and nature:

DREAM BIG TO RESTORE HABITAT AND SPECIES

In the Tongass National Forest in Southeast Alaska, salmon are still so plentiful that they fill creeks in late summer with a shining, rippling mass of fish. After spawning, the nutrients from the bodies of those salmon feed the entire ecosystem, growing massive riparian trees and a rich understory of plants, which in turn feed countless insects and birds. Wolves, bears, eagles, and many more creatures feed on those salmon directly. It's an example of nature's super-abundance, but it's increasingly rare.

What if we could recover natural abundance elsewhere, and do so in ways that harness rather than impede the infrastructure abundance movement? Energy abundance for humans is an invitation to dream big for conservation. The return of plentiful, hundred-pound salmon to the Columbia River is possible if hydroelectric dams can be replaced by new sources of abundant energy. The Klamath River offers an example of what is possible. In 2024, a century after the construction of four major dams excluded salmon from the upper Klamath, the largest dam removal in U.S. history brought them down. The negotiations and eventual agreement and legislation needed to remove the dams took 14 years, following decades of conflict, and the permitting, demolition, and restoration took another four years. But just a day after the last dam debris was removed in October 2024, a salmon was detected swimming past the demolition site. A year later, Chinook salmon have returned over 300 miles upriver to spawn far upstream of the former dam sites, faster than biologists can keep up with monitoring. Recovery of natural abundance can be rapid, if we can get past the human choices and construction processes that are blocking it.

INCLUDE PEOPLE AND LIVELIHOODS IN CONSERVATION

Durable conservation solutions must work for people, too, and we should create and seize opportunities to make more of these "win-wins" happen. In the western United States, if cheap energy can make and move more water where it is needed, then we might find peaceful resolutions to the "water wars." The Colorado River, for example, has seen roughly 13 percent declines in supply of water in the past quarter-century due to a warmer, drier ecosystem, while overall consumption has held steady. Advances in desalination have the potential to boost the supply of drinking water for coastal cities, or even for inland areas with sufficient pipeline infrastructure. Fifty years ago, it took more than six times as much energy to desalinate seawater, and the technology continues to improve rapidly. Desalinating enough water for an average American household would take about half the energy that family uses for air conditioning. With abundant, cheap energy, the scenario goes from daunting to doable.

INCREASE INCENTIVES TO BUILD AND MAINTAIN NATURAL INFRASTRUCTURE

We desperately need to increase the supply of high-quality habitat, which remains the primary threat for most declining species worldwide. There are a growing number of proven, incentive-based tools to boost the supply of wildlife habitat, like paying ranchers for elk presence to reduce the costs of coexistence, compensating farmers to leave water in streams for trout, and sharing costs with ranchers to improve sage grouse habitat. But to unleash the power of incentives for conservation abundance, we need to increase financing in creative ways, as well as make changes to law and policy, such as reforming aspects of the Endangered Species Act to give landowners an incentive to recover listed species on their land, as PERC has long advocated.

REDUCE BARRIERS TO ACTIVE CONSERVATION

The wildfire crisis costs Americans nearly $400 billion annually and threatens ecosystems and human communities alike. Forest management, such as thinning and prescribed burning treatments, can greatly reduce wildfire risk. But these treatments are slow, expensive, and easily stopped by local objectors and the threat and reality of lawsuits. Abundance policies could change that. For example, PERC research has found that from the time the U.S. Forest Service begins the environmental review process under the National Environmental Policy Act, it takes an average of another three-plus years to start a mechanical treatment project on the ground, or nearly five years to start a prescribed burn. More complex forest restoration projects can take much longer. Policy reforms could help accelerate solutions to the wildfire crisis—and there's similar potential to harness reforms to speed up conservation of endangered species, movement of water through markets, and other domains.

BUILD CONSERVATION FIXES INTO INFRASTRUCTURE ABUNDANCE

Energy, housing, and other needed human infrastructure can be built in ways that maximize conservation potential—if conservation researchers and practitioners can invent and include these innovations in the construction process. For instance, building out solar on rooftops rather than in native grasslands or forests spares nature, but red tape often makes the former cost prohibitive. Dreaming up ways for solar panels to share land with farms, ranches, canals, and habitat restoration projects can not only use less land but also can juice farm profitability, reduce water loss, and build new habitat for pollinators and other wildlife. On the housing side, wins for people and the environment are possible with clustered development that avoids prime habitat, dense and intensive housing buildouts, and nature-friendly yard practices. We need to create better designs, improved siting tools, supportive policies, and sound incentives to make this happen.

Like salmon swimming upstream to spawn, there will be swift currents to navigate and waterfalls to overcome to make a conservation abundance agenda a reality. But in harnessing the principles of abundance, the conservation community, groups focused on human needs and built infrastructure, and conservation-minded citizens across the political spectrum can come together to help build a world where both nature and humans flourish.

Dr. Sophie Gilbert is a senior researcher at PERC. She thanks Max Lambert, director of science for the Nature Conservancy in Washington State, for indispensable help thinking through and working on this issue. Their journal article, "Building Plentiful Housing and Energy Needs Conservation Science," is currently undergoing peer review.

A LEGACY OF CONSERVATION

For over 40 years, PERC has worked to improve environmental outcomes using markets and voluntary incentives to ensure our conservation heritage is protected for wildlife, for our lands and waterways, and for the people who cherish them.

To learn more about the PERC Legacy Society or share your commitment, please contact Rupert Munro at legacy@perc.org or visit perc.org/legacy

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