

Scaling Up Conservation for Large Landscapes



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Blackfoot River

Jamie Williams

The central question facing land conservationists today is how to scale up efforts to protect entire landscapes and whole natural systems. The land trust movement has been built on the individual successes of conserved private properties, but increasingly both conservationists and landowners entering into conservation agreements want to know what is being done about their neighbor, their neighborhood, and most significantly their landscape (Williams 2011).

Farmers and ranchers talk of the need to sustain a continuous network of working lands—a critical mass of agricultural activity—or risk losing the supporting businesses and community cooperation they require to survive. Firefighters say that keeping remote lands undeveloped reduces the hazards and costs of firefighting for local communities. Sportsmen are losing access to public lands and

wildlife when scattered rural development fragments habitat. Conservation biologists have long suggested that protecting bigger places will sustain more species, and conversely that fragmentation of habitat is the leading cause of species decline and loss. Finally, a rapidly changing climate reinforces the need to protect large, connected ecosystems to be resilient over the long term.

With many funders and public partners seeking to focus on collaborative, landscape-scale conservation efforts, the land trust community has an excellent opportunity to leverage its good work by engaging in landscape partnerships. Land trusts, with their grassroots base and collaborative working style, are in a good position to help support local initiatives. The process of building these efforts, however, requires a commitment beyond the urgency of transactions and fundraising, and necessitates a sustained focus that is much broader than the immediate objectives of many land trusts.

What Does Success Look Like?

Montana's Blackfoot River was made famous in Norman Maclean's 1976 story, *A River Runs Through It* (Maclean 2001), but what really stands out about the Blackfoot region is how the community has worked together over many decades to sustain this special place. Building on conservation work initiated by local landowners in the 1970s, the Blackfoot Challenge was established in 1993 to bring the area's diverse interests together around consensus-based approaches to sustaining the rural character and natural resources of the valley. Rancher Jim Stone, chairman of this landowner group, says "we were tired of complaining about what we couldn't do, so we decided to start talking about what we could do."

This collaborative effort has used innovative conservation approaches for the Blackfoot that have been replicated in many other places. The

group's work began with a focus on better managing increased recreational use of the river and protecting the river corridor. The first conservation easement secured in Montana was on the Blackfoot in 1976 as part of this pioneering effort. From that initial success grew more ambitious initiatives with engagement from an expanding set of partners.

When landowners said they were not getting enough help to control weeds, the Challenge established one of the largest weed control districts in the West. When landowners argued there were not enough resources for conserving working ranches, the Challenge helped create an innovative U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) program to purchase conservation easements with the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF), which historically has been used for public land acquisition.

When landowners were concerned about the potential sale of vast forest lands in the valley, the Challenge launched a comprehensive acquisition plan that linked protected private ranches on the valley floor with forested public lands at higher elevations. When landowners recognized the need for systemic river restoration, the Challenge and the Big Blackfoot Chapter of Trout Unlimited helped restore more than 48 tributary streams and 600 miles of fish passage for native trout and watershed health (Trout Unlimited 2011).

The Blackfoot Challenge partners with more than 160 landowners, 30 businesses, 30 nonprofits, and 20 public agencies. Clearly, the Challenge's vision for the area is not limited to just a few ranches, but rather is focused on the long-term health of the entire river valley, from "ridge to ridge" in Jim Stone's words (figure 1).

The wonderful aspect of the Blackfoot story is that it is no longer a rare exception but an emblem of a much larger movement of collaborative conservation efforts around the country. These landscape partnerships confirm an emerging consensus about the need to protect and sustain entire landscapes that are vital to the health of fish and wildlife, as well as to the vitality of local communities, their economy, and their quality of life.

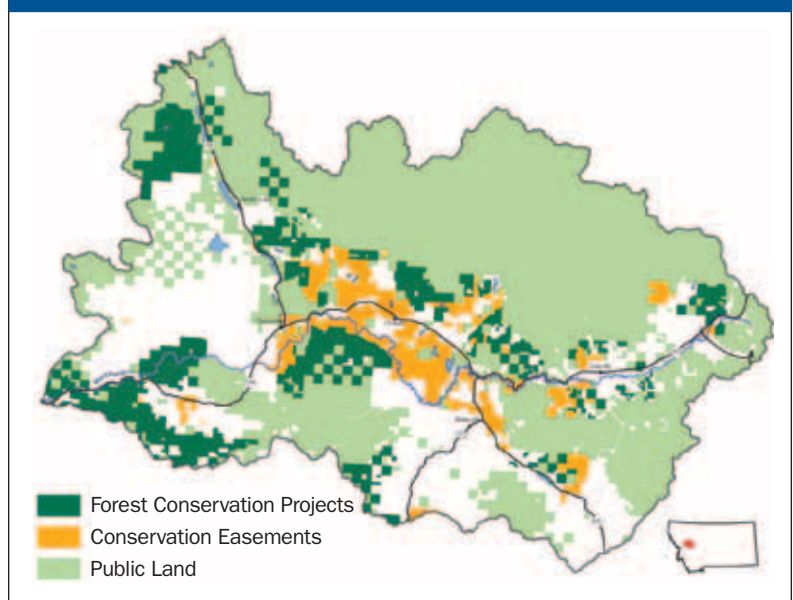
Landowner-Driven Conservation Efforts

The Blackfoot story underscores one of the most important lessons emerging from community-based conservation initiatives—local landowners

should be in front and everyone else behind. An example from the Yampa River in western Colorado illustrates this approach. In the early 1990s, conservation groups were trying to protect the area, but were met with major mistrust by the local ranchers. The valley had no shortage of community visioning exercises and groups trying to conserve the region, but none of the ideas had really taken hold in a meaningful way, precisely because local landowners were not in the lead.

That dynamic was then turned on its head by several landowner initiatives, the most significant being the Routt County Open Lands Plan. The plan's recommendations grew out of a series of local landowner meetings held throughout the county. The plan called for eight significant measures to better manage explosive growth in the valley, ranging from a right-to-farm ordinance to a purchase of development rights program on working ranches. Routt County became one of the first rural counties

FIGURE 1
The Blackfoot River Valley, 2011



Source: Amy Pearson, The Nature Conservancy.

The Blackfoot valley is a large, 1.5-million-acre watershed on the southern end of the Bob Marshall/Scapegoat Wilderness and the Crown of the Continent ecosystem. Historically the watershed has been approximately 60 percent public lands, 20 percent corporate timberlands, and 20 percent private lands. After 35 years of conservation work, approximately 250,400 acres of private lands in the Blackfoot have been conserved, connecting private and public lands over the entire watershed. Approximately 123,800 acres have been placed into conservation easements and 173,060 acres of timberlands have been purchased for conservation and continued community access.

in the West to raise public funds through a local ballot measure to protect working ranches.

The Malpai Borderlands is another enduring example of how landowner leadership can break through decades of gridlock. After years of conflict between ranchers and federal agencies over the management of public lands around the Animas Mountains in the boot heel of New Mexico and southeastern Arizona, Bill Macdonald and other neighboring ranchers helped spearhead a landowner collaborative called the Malpai Borderlands Group to reintroduce fire for the health of grasslands and the local ranching economy. That effort grew into an innovative partnership among ranchers, conservation groups, and public agencies to conserve and sustain this one-million-acre working wilderness through conservation easements, grass banking, and a more integrated stewardship approach to the system as a whole.

Land Trusts and Public-Private Partnerships

As significant as landowner leadership is to collaborative, landscape-scale conservation efforts, land trusts and agencies also can play a vital role in leading from behind as a reliable partner with deep local ties, knowledge of outside resources, and an ability to implement research and conservation projects. On Montana's Rocky Mountain Front, for example, local ranchers are working together with several land trusts and the USFWS to protect working lands through conservation easements. The local landowner committee has been led by several local ranchers, but their 20-year friendship with Dave Carr of The Nature Conservancy has been pivotal in their staying engaged. Greg Neudecker of the USFWS's Partners for Wildlife Program has played a similar role in the Blackfoot, given his 21-years of service to community collaboration there.

Many landowners and land trusts hesitate to bring public agencies into landscape partnerships because they often pride themselves on achieving conservation through private action. When engaged as part of landscape partnerships, however, state and federal agencies can be very effective allies. In the Blackfoot, the science, research, monitoring, funding, and restoration work delivered by the State of Montana and the USFWS has made a huge impact on the recovery of the river system.

On the land protection front, public acquisition of extensive timberlands in the Blackfoot has com-

plemented private land trust work by consolidating public lands and maintaining community access to those lands for grazing, forestry, and recreation. Recognizing the problems associated with a century of fire suppression, the U.S. Forest Service has initiated experimental thinning projects of small-diameter stands to restore the structure and function of forestlands and reduce the fire threat to the valley. That work is now being expanded through a new federally funded Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program (CFLRP) across the Blackfoot, Clearwater, and Swan valleys.

The larger principle is that all the major stakeholders have to be at the table, working together toward their common ground. David Mannix, another Blackfoot Challenge rancher, explains what they call the 80–20 rule: “We work on the 80 percent we can agree on and check the other 20 percent at the door with our hat.” Jim Stone claims that when people show up at a Blackfoot Challenge meeting, “We ask you to leave your organizational agenda at the door and put the landscape first,” focusing on the health of the land and the community so closely tied to it.

What's really important is having the “right people” at the table for private-public partnerships to work—creative individuals motivated by a common vision and humble enough to recognize that they do not have all the answers. Collaboration takes time. Once common-ground approaches are developed, it is critical to have initial success, however small, that can build the kind of foundation needed for bigger solutions down the road.

The Need for Funding

The most serious barrier for local collaborative groups to achieve landscape-level goals is the lack of adequate funding. Without sufficient financial support, collaborative efforts often lose momentum, which can set back this kind of work for years.

Funding is not a static element, but it is responsive to the scale of the outcomes that can be achieved and the breadth of the constituency engaged. Neither private nor public funders want to participate in partial success unless it is a step toward a long-term, sustainable goal. And they do not want to fund places where groups are competing. Increasingly, land trusts and agencies have come to realize the potential of what can be achieved through collaboration. Donors consistently have led on this issue because they under-



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stand a resource-constrained world and the value of leveraging diverse strengths and funding.

Even when great collaborative efforts come together around common goals and achieve a heightened threshold of success, a serious funding gap often exists in achieving truly landscape-scale conservation. Mark Shaffer, former director of the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation's Environment Program, estimated this gap to be about \$5 billion per year in new funding and tax incentives needed over the next 30 years to conserve a network of important landscapes in the United States.

The land trust community is now conserving land at the rate of about 2.6 million acres per year—a cumulative total of about 37 million acres according to the last census in 2005 (Land Trust Alliance 2006). However, to sustain whole landscapes before urgent threats close the window of opportunity, that rate needs to double or triple, and efforts must be conducted in a more focused way.

Emerging Opportunities for Landscape-Scale Conservation

There are several major trends and near-term opportunities that could enhance landscape-scale conservation efforts, but their success hinges on land trust engagement and leadership. First, it is critical that Congress make permanent the

enhanced deductions for conservation easements. The Land Trust Alliance (2011) points out that these deductions can protect more than 250,000 additional acres per year. Given the current congressional focus on spending cuts and tax cuts, this is one of the few conservation finance tools that may be achievable in the near term. Over the longer term, a national transferable tax credit program, similar to those in Colorado and Virginia, could create an enormous incentive for securing conservation easements.

The second trend relates to increasing the federal focus on protecting whole landscapes by empowering communities that are already working together. In 2005 the Bush administration launched a Cooperative Conservation Program that provided improved agency coordination and capacity grants for local collaborative work. In 2010, the Obama administration launched the America's Great Outdoors Initiative to help communities better sustain their land and water resources through locally driven partnerships and to reconnect America's youth to the natural environment (Obama 2010).

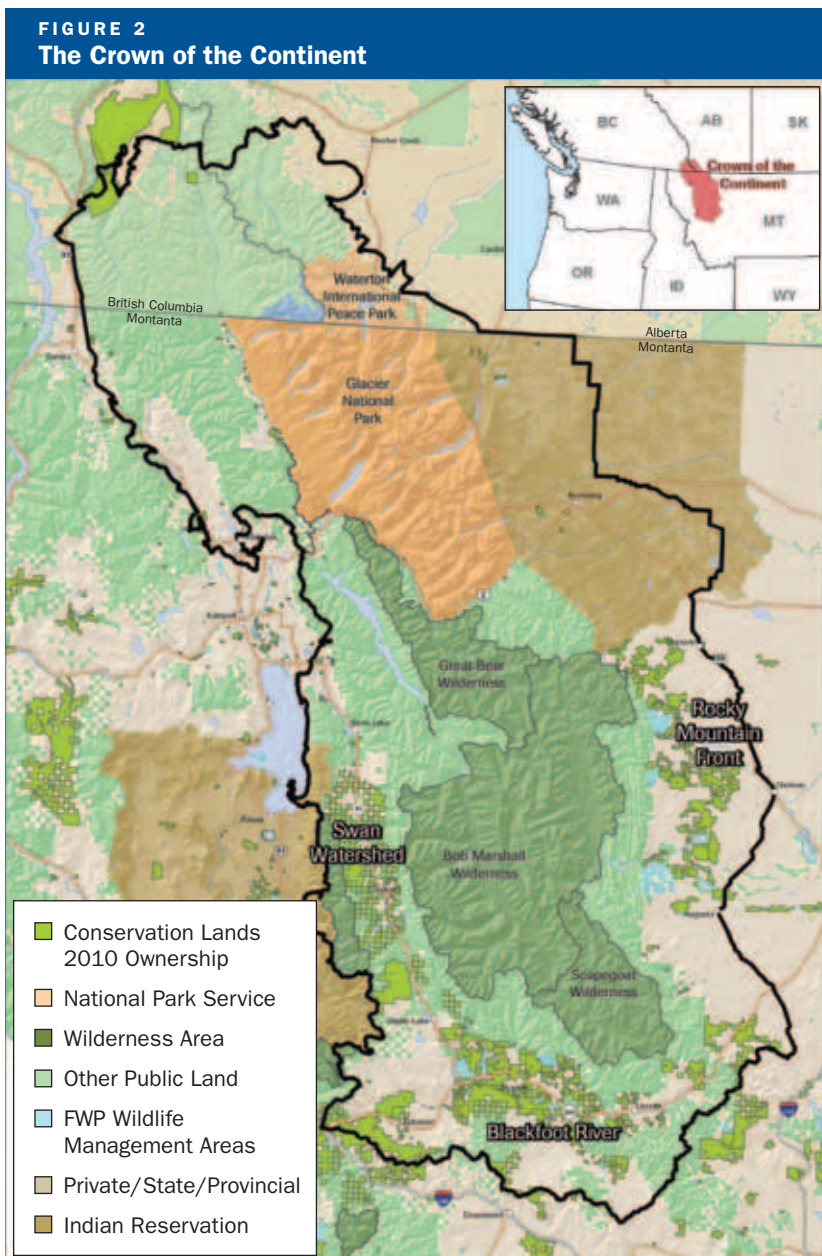
While federal resources are highly constrained in the near term, existing programs and funding could be more focused on whole landscape conservation projects. Secretary of Agriculture Tom

Swan Valley Watershed

Vilsack has announced a major policy shift for the department to an “all lands” approach to conserving and restoring the big systems of the United States. For example, the Natural Resources Conservation Service recently announced that it would reinvest \$89 million of unspent Wetland Reserve Program funds to purchase conservation easements over 26,000 acres of working ranches in the Florida Everglades. The opportunity facing the land trust community is to ensure that these projects are implemented in a manner that builds broad support for this work over the long term.

The third opportunity is passing local and statewide measures to increase funding and tax incentives for conservation. Despite the weak economy and pervasive talk of less government and lower taxes, voters in the 2010 elections passed 83 percent of the ballot initiatives presented nationwide to fund land and water conservation. Overall, 41 of 49 funding measures passed, generating more than \$2 billion for land, water, parks, and farmland conservation over the next 20 years (The Trust for Public Land 2010).

The final trend and opportunity for the land trust community is partnering with private capital funders on major land conservation projects. Between 1983 and 2009, more than 43 million acres of forest lands traded hands (Rinehart 2010). New private equity groups, called Timber Investment Management Organizations (TIMOs) and Real Estate Investment Trusts (REITs), picked up 27 million acres of this land in a very short period, and many of these investment groups, including Lyme Timber, Conservation Forestry, Ecosystem Investment Partners, Beartooth Capital Partners, have conservation as part of their business model.



Source: The Nature Conservancy.

The Question of Scale

An ongoing trend in conservation has been an expanding focus from individual properties to neighborhoods, landscapes, ecosystems, and now networks of ecosystems. For example, landowners in the Blackfoot, Swan Valley, and Rocky Mountain Front have come to realize that the health of their landscapes depends on the health of the larger Crown of the Continent (figure 2).

Surrounding the Bob Marshall Wilderness and Glacier-Waterton International Peace Park, the 10-million-acre Crown is one of the most intact ecosystems in North America. Thanks to a century of public land designations and 35 years of private land protection by local communities, this ecosystem has not lost a single species since European settlement. Landowners and other partners have been reaching across the Crown in a variety of ways to see how they can work together more closely for the good of the whole.

Even in the Crown’s large expanse, the sustainability of its wildlife populations depends on their connections to other populations throughout the Northern Rockies. That even larger network of natural systems can only be realized, however, if critical linkage areas can be sustained. For this

reason, land trusts in Wyoming, Idaho, Montana, and Canada have been collaborating through a framework called the Heart of the Rockies to identify common priorities and conservation needs. This level of regional collaboration has resulted in both a new level of conservation and more attention from funders. It has also been pivotal for land trust collaboration around common policy priorities.

Organizing at these larger scales is truly imperative if we are to sustain well-connected natural systems, but it is also important to understand what can be achieved at each scale. Large regional initiatives are important for creating a broad, compelling vision, but not for implementing conservation on the ground. Such large-scale approaches are good at applying science at nature's scale, creating regional collaboration around common priorities and a forum for exchange on innovative ideas, and bringing greater attention to the area. They also provide an important context for why local work is so significant.

Melanie Parker, a local leader for collaborative conservation efforts in the Swan Valley, cautions: "We need to aggregate our efforts across the larger region to influence policy and to access resources, but anyone who thinks that conservation work can or should be done at the scale of 10 million acres is seriously misguided. This kind of work has to be done at the scale at which people live, work, and understand their landscapes."

Local people are moved to act by the power of their own place and in their own way. Designing strategies at a large scale is often too abstract for landowners at best, or outright alienating at worse. As in politics, all conservation is local. Likewise, politicians are most responsive to homegrown projects devised and backed by local residents. How large place-based efforts really can be and still hold community cohesion is an important question, but certainly the Blackfoot, Rocky Mountain Front, and Swan Valley are pushing the outer limits. Each is addressing lands at the scale of 0.5 million to 1.5 million acres.

Land trusts can add value to local efforts through regional collaboration. While landowners and local residents often do not have the additional time to participate in these larger initiatives, they want their place and specific issues to be well-represented. Land trusts and conservation organizations can play the very important role of connecting local, place-based groups, but they need to coordinate

with those groups and not get out in front of them. In the end, the land trust community could be well served by strengthening its collaborative work, by deepening its engagement in landscape partnerships, and by working at larger scales to achieve conservation success.

Conclusion

After many decades of outstanding work, the more than 1,700 land trusts across the country can use their momentum to conserve the large systems that matter for people and nature. Indeed, this is what communities are asking for and what nature needs to survive. Moving beyond isolated victories to a more interconnected conservation vision is just as important for local sustainable economies and recreational access as it is for wildlife corridors and healthy watersheds. To be successful at this scale requires real collaboration and a reorientation for everyone involved. With the many opportunities currently rising for whole-landscape conservation, the moment is ours to seize. **L**

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