



The State of  
American Philanthropy

Giving for  
Conservation,  
Pollution  
Mitigation and  
Agriculture

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## ABOUT INSIDE PHILANTHROPY

Inside Philanthropy is a digital media site that covers the world of charitable giving. We report daily on foundations, major donors, and trends in philanthropy. Through our GrantFinder resource, we also profile and track thousands of funders working across key issue areas and geographic regions. Inside Philanthropy is supported by reader subscriptions and advertising. We do not receive funding from any other source. Learn more at [insidephilanthropy.com](https://insidephilanthropy.com)

## ABOUT THE STATE OF AMERICAN PHILANTHROPY

The State of American Philanthropy is a series of background papers on important topics and trends in U.S. philanthropy. The papers draw on past research and reporting by IP writers, as well as new interviews, grantmaking data, and other sources. Learn more at [insidephilanthropy.com/state-of-american-philanthropy](https://insidephilanthropy.com/state-of-american-philanthropy).

**AUTHOR:** Michael Kavate

**EDITOR:** Michael Hamill Remaley

**COPY EDITOR:** Chris Packham

**GRAPHICS & DESIGN:** Sue-Lynn Moses

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This brief examines the grantmaking of foundations and major donors concerned with conservation, pollution and agriculture, overlapping yet distinct segments of funding. Just as farming practices impact the air we breathe and water we drink, these areas are inextricable, yet also have their own dynamics. The funding community includes both collaborators working across these silos and donors focused on their niche concerns.

For all these areas, grantmaking has grown rapidly in recent years and a new surge of climate change grantmaking promises to bring new funders and resources to these causes. Climate change and new attention to equity are two of the dominant forces in this field, while philanthropic shifts like expanded funder collaboration through intermediaries and greater funding via donor-advised funds add new considerations. Meanwhile, an influx of billionaire donors is creating new power brokers.

Inside Philanthropy's key findings on the current state of conservation, pollution and agriculture philanthropy we explore in this brief include:

## Who's Giving

- The leading source of funding is private foundations, ranging from multibillion-dollar national foundations to regional and small family foundations.
- Individual major donors account for a notable share of support and appear to be growing in influence.
- Community foundations are not usually large donors in this area, but they play vital roles in local conservation efforts and, to a lesser extent, agricultural projects.

## Who's Getting

- Nonprofits receiving grants for conservation, pollution and agriculture work are a diverse bunch, with some focusing on one area, while others work on multiple of those issues.
- Most grantees fall into four main categories: major environmental groups, intermediaries and regrantors, hunting and fishing organizations, research organizations.
- Front-line organizations and Indigenous-led efforts are receiving rising attention, but are still a minor share of support.

## The Big Issues and Funding Trends

- Like philanthropy as a whole, equity, climate change and billionaire donors are three of the big-picture issues in this space.
- Collaboration appears to be growing within the field, with an increasing number of intermediaries and regrantors coordinating cooperation.
- Discussion of movement and grassroots funding has shifted some funding, but opinions vary on how much.

## Equity in the Sector

- As in other segments of philanthropy, equity has become a major consideration in this sphere, though concerns persist that attention will fade or fall short of needs.
- Each segment has particular active niches, such as a focus on Indigenous communities in conservation and on diversity of access and stakeholders in agriculture.
- Engagement on equity beyond race is limited, but corporate foundations have played a role in opening access to the outdoors for people with disabilities.

## Fundraising Now

- Fundraisers say it is a time of uncertainty and possibility, with foundations changing practices and climate change causing major shifts in the field.
- Donor-advised funds are offering a major new source of flexible support for groups while also raising questions about how to reach such donors.
- Intermediaries and regrantors are playing a more prominent role, both as fiscal sponsors and by channeling funds from donor collaboratives.

The experts IP interviewed while researching this brief identified a number of challenges and opportunities for the philanthropic community. One that came up repeatedly was the growing public awareness of climate change and the ease of making connections to the imperatives associated with addressing conservation, pollution and agriculture challenges. Despite that common opportunity, the experts said the environmental field remains too siloed and territorial in competing for funding.

The relatively small number of mega-givers who gravitate to environmental work remains an enduring mystery to many in the field. The gravity of the threat to humankind seems obvious, and yet billionaires and their foundations largely continue to direct their “charitable” giving to alma maters, named hospital wings, elite arts and culture, and the usual interests of the moneyed classes. Still, with great generational transfers of wealth occurring, many second- and third-generation donors are integrating social justice frameworks into environmental giving. Environmental justice isn’t just a frame that appeals to younger donors, but a practical opportunity to engage wider swaths of the public in important concerns about conservation, pollution and agriculture.

The final “Opportunities and Challenges” section of this brief explores those issues more deeply, along with implications related to increased collaboration in possibly unexpected places, a changing political terrain and federal spending environment, and the expanding voices of Indigenous communities in environmental issues across the board.

# Introduction

Philanthropy for conservation, pollution and agriculture — the three areas on which this paper focuses — is neither a unified block of funding, nor entirely separate islands. Those three issues are useful shorthand for three traditional philanthropic categories, if not a perfect fit for all grantmakers, let alone the real world. Each possesses their own dynamics, along with cross-cutting themes and trends. They bring together complementary and often overlapping funders and grantees, yet also have players focused on one or the other topic. This mirrors the physical world, where it is clear that agriculture, pollution and conservation are discrete but inextricable, reflecting the complexity of assigning grants to one funding bucket or another.

What's clear is that funding in these overlapping categories is rising. According to IP's analysis of Candid data, grants for conservation, pollution and agriculture groups doubled from \$409 million to nearly \$805 million between 2015 and 2019 (the most recent year for which full accounting of IRS data is available). The shift appears to reflect an enormous diversification of the field by foundations. Grantmakers issued only 14% more grants by the end of that five-year period, yet the number of grantees more than doubled, reaching nearly 7,700. While more recent field-wide data is not yet available, it's clear the last few years have seen a large increase in funding within these spheres, almost entirely due to hundreds of millions of dollars in new climate spending.

Climate change is a topical current that runs throughout this paper, but the primary discussion of such funding is a separate brief in our State of

American Philanthropy series, [Giving for Climate Change and Clean Energy](#). Each of these issues cannot be considered outside of the climate emergency. For most of the major players in the field, it is a key, if not central, consideration in how they approach their work. It has also attracted massive new entrants that are reshaping the sphere, such as the Bezos Earth Fund's major conservation commitments. This paper acknowledges the role of climate change in these areas while simultaneously attempting to examine the unique features of these funding landscapes. This brief also has some overlap with the subject of another in the SAP series, [Giving for Animals and Wildlife](#).

Each of the areas covered in this paper are shaped differently, both by historical funding trends and current forces. To start, conservation philanthropy has, in recent decades, started to transition from a largely preservationist or “[fortress mentality](#)” to a people-focused model. Now, it is undergoing a similarly momentous shift to both adapt practices to the demands of climate change while also maximizing conservation's contributions to emissions reductions.

Like all the areas in this report, pollution funding is being remade by a new generation of climate change donors. Pollution grantmaking was, for many years, the speciality of certain state or regional foundations, as well as a few national funders. Even though no one is unexposed to pollution, most funders treated it as an overly complex or remote challenge that was not a good match for their limited resources. But the imperatives of climate change seem to be changing many funders' calculations. With new interest in reducing emissions, organizations with long histories of fighting polluting industries are starting to see new support. And with new attention

being paid to equity, there's also an uptick in funder interest in anti-pollution groups with an environmental justice focus.

Agricultural philanthropy remains a small segment of philanthropy with a lot of smaller players and a few large ones, including agribusiness funding that includes grantmaking. A recent surge in interest in regenerative and sustainable agriculture from funders with a wide variety of priorities, particularly climate change, is one of the most significant developments. With money already flowing from major players like Eric and Wendy Schmidt and the Waltons (several foundations derived from the WalMart family fortune make grants related to the environment), and new donors like Jeff Bezos more recently joining the cause, there's a lot of change underway.

On a technical note with regard to our analysis of Candid data, the three categories covered in this paper encompass a complex and overlapping set of funding tags. Conservation topics include bird preservation, endangered species protection, wildlife sanctuaries, and forestry. Pollution categories include hazardous waste management, water pollution, air quality, and solid waste management. Agriculture and water issues include sustainable agriculture, sustainable fishing, and water conservation. These are conceptual categories, with individual projects and funding often crossing several or even all of these categories in ways that current grant tracking does not reflect. For instance, there is a subsection of water funders that come to the issue from a variety of backgrounds and motivations.

In sum, these three areas are in a period of growth, driven by a fresh generation of billionaire donors and a new wave of climate giving. Philanthropy's

racial equity awakening has also sparked a shift, though the jury is still out on the long-term impact. Both funders and grantees are considering their places within the ecosystem and how their work can address those issues or carve out a niche amid those new currents.

# The Lay of the Land

## Who's Giving

Grantmaking aimed at conservation, pollution and agriculture has doubled in recent years, rising from \$409 million in 2015 to \$805 million in 2019. This increase came despite the number of grantmakers falling from 4,828 to 4,299 over the five-year period. With fewer grantmakers distributing significantly more money, there is possibly more funding available but fewer potential places to turn, making each relationship more valuable to grantees.

Private foundations are the leading source of funding for conservation, pollution and agriculture. Institutions range from multibillion-dollar foundations with projects from coast to coast to small operations concerned with a particular lake or community's health. The largest institutions can shape whole regions, such as the Walton family's engagement on the Colorado River, while smaller grantmakers may be key experts in approaches later adopted more widely, such as the Wilburforce Foundation's work on Indigenous-led conservation.

Individual major donors account for a substantial share of the support for this segment of philanthropy and appear to be growing in influence. They are a top-heavy force, with many among the top 25 donors in the space. Most are among the nation's leading climate donors as well, including donors such as the Walton family, Michael Bloomberg, and Eric and Wendy Schmidt. There are also donors with considerably lower public profiles who nevertheless play notable roles in this field, such as Howard G. Buffett.

Corporate philanthropy plays a relatively small role in this space, with only a few corporate foundations

among the largest donors. Most draw from three industries: clothing, food and beverages, and agricultural products companies. The first group is mostly concerned with land and species conservation, while agricultural funding is the primary focus of the latter two types, but there is substantial crossover. Beverage companies hold a variety of concerns.

### 10 Funders to Know: Conservation, Pollution and Agriculture

Charles Stewart Mott Foundation

David and Lucile Packard Foundation

Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation

Heinz Endowments

Howard G. Buffett Foundation

JPB Foundation

Richard King Mellon Foundation

Walton Family Foundation

William and Flora Hewlett Foundation

William Penn Foundation

Community foundations have relatively little representation among the top donors in this segment, but they play vital roles in local environmental conservation efforts and, to a lesser extent, agricultural projects. They are also channels through which action is possible on community-level pollution concerns, as seen in Flint, Michigan. With more money flowing into donor-advised funds, the community foundations that manage a large portion of them may be poised to grow in importance.

Intermediary organizations, nonprofits that assemble funding and distribute grants, are quite prominent in the environmental field generally, and there are several key intermediaries in the

conservation, pollution and agriculture fields. The major green groups that dominate the list of top grant recipient organizations are often huge grantmakers, too. The Nature Conservancy and the Environmental Defense Fund both rank among the top 100 grantmakers in the space, and some degree of regranting is part of the operations of other major groups like the National Audubon Society, World Wildlife Fund, and Wildlife Conservation Society.

## Inside Philanthropy August 2020 Survey

*“The MOST crucial issue funders are not yet addressing as a whole is how environmental and climate philanthropy can drive partisanship OR drive opportunities to bridge the partisan divide. By investing almost exclusively in progressive climate action, however important in its own right, without similarly investing in the civil society groups on the right pushing for climate action, philanthropy contributes to and fuels the partisan divide. This is THE MOST significant strategic opportunity for US climate action that is not yet being mined.”*

—Philanthropy supporting professional, Lexington, Massachusetts

ClimateWorks Foundation, whose work on climate includes initiatives on conservation, agriculture and pollution, is another notable intermediary. The multi-issue New Venture Fund, which has nearly \$1 billion in assets, was among the top 10 recipients, and made more than \$60 million in awards in conservation, pollution and agriculture in recent years. Other intermediaries for this field include Resources Legacy Fund, Windward Fund, Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors and Tides Foundation.

Note that donations from institutional philanthropy are actually a relatively small portion of revenues for most nonprofits working in this

area. Government is, in fact, the primary funder in this space, far outweighing philanthropic support. Federal government grantmaking on all issues, but particularly agriculture, is a major source of support for those working in this field. Further funding comes from state governments. Taking out bonds for major projects, whether conservation or water management, is also a common and important funding mechanism.

Fees are another way funding is channeled into support for these issues. There are entities like the Land and Water Conservation Fund, a \$900 million annual fund that relies on fees charged to companies for oil and gas leases. At the state level, fees on ammunition can make up a significant share of conservation funding. In some cases, levies on online sports betting also go to conservation.

While many communities have small-scale programs in these areas, particularly on conservation, a significant share of funding in these spheres comes from national funders and major individual donors focused on big-picture goals. This structural reality may be why, despite growing talk about democratizing philanthropy, few in the space see it happening anytime soon. Just 7% see a “growing trend,” while more than twice that number (16%) say there are no significant examples of democratization, according to an August 2020 IP survey. Even larger shares say there are good examples, but it will spread slowly (39%) or that it is not a significant trend outside of a few instances (23%).

“I am seeing lots of talk. There will be a few new instances of employment, and then it will go back to domination by white folks who look like their desired rich white folk donors,” said a Chapel Hill, North Carolina, fundraiser.

## Who's Getting

Nonprofits concerned with conservation, pollution and agriculture are a diverse bunch, with some focusing on one area, while others work on multiple of those issues in addition to other topics. At the same time, most fall into one of five categories of recipients: major environmental groups, intermediaries and regrantors, hunting and fishing organizations, research organizations and all other types. Such a summary is a simplification, but it captures the greater landscape of recipients within this area of philanthropy, if not the wide variety of organizations in this space.

Philanthropy seems to have diversified its support in recent years, with the number of grantees growing nearly 140%, while funding only doubled, according to an IP analysis. That increase has taken place despite the number of grantmakers falling, suggesting that institutions that continue to fund on these issues have become more open to relationships with new groups. That said, long-established organizations still dominate the field.

Major environmental groups, sometimes pejoratively called the “big greens,” are by far the largest recipients of funding in this area. These include groups like the World Wildlife Fund, Environmental Defense Fund and the Nature Conservancy, all of which rank among the sector’s top 10 recipients. Such groups typically do not rely heavily on foundation funding, thanks to substantial public support and often extensive corporate partnerships.

Intermediaries, regrantors and support organizations are another substantial presence in this space. A pair of groups known for their wide-ranging work as fiscal sponsors, the New Venture Fund and Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors, are

among the top recipients. Other more environmentally focused operations, such as Resources Legacy Fund and Windward Fund, are also important players. The major climate intermediary, ClimateWorks Foundation, is also a leading grantee. These organizations are generally highly reliant on foundation funding.

### 10 Nonprofits to Know: Conservation, Pollution and Agriculture

Clean Air Task Force

Ducks Unlimited

Environmental Defense Fund

National Audubon Society

Nature Conservancy

Ocean Conservancy

Recycling Partnership

Soil Health Institute

Wildlife Conservation Society

World Wildlife Fund

Hunting and fishing groups, historically referred to as “sportsman groups,” are another important segment of this sector. Based on Candid data, Ducks Unlimited is by far the largest recipient, with three times more grants than the next largest recipient. Trout Unlimited, National Wildlife Federation, Ducks and Anglers, and the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership have also been significant players on these issues. Like major green groups, most receive substantial funding from members.

Research organizations and think tanks are also leading recipients within this space. Wildlife Conservation Society, which also manages the Bronx Zoo, is one top grantee. Recipients of this type exist across the multiple categories within this space, from the Colorado School of Mines to Tall Timbers Research. Several agriculture-related

research bodies are top grantees, including the Soil Health Institute, Good Food Institute and Rodale Institute. Sequoia Farm Foundation is also a top recipient, largely because it is favored by major donor Howard G. Buffett. The importance of funding from institutional philanthropy varies among such organizations.

A wide variety of other nonprofits also receive support in this space, though the share they receive pales in comparison to the categories outlined above. Front-line organizations and Indigenous-led efforts comprise one segment that has received a rising amount of attention and some degree of funding from foundations in recent years, but it remains to be seen whether any single organization or network will rise to rival the largest recipients in this space. By their nature, such grassroots and community-led groups are unlikely to quickly ascend the list of recipients in this space.

“They’re the mice around the elephants,” said Heather Grady, vice president at Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors (RPA), who believes that competition in the environmental field is more intense than other areas. “They get money, but pass-through grants, tiny little bits of what can start out as big money.”

Wildlife sanctuaries, zoos and aquariums comprise another major category of recipients, both for their operations and related research. Such support is mostly accounted for in our State of American Philanthropy report “Funding for Animals & Wildlife,” but there are some grantees, such as the Wildlife Conservation Society, that are major recipients across both fields. Unlike that report, conservation funding also encompasses preserves like Chimp Haven in Keithville, Louisiana; the Elephant Sanctuary in Hohenwald, Tennessee; and

the South Florida Wildlife Center, a former affiliate of the Humane Society of the United States.

Many organizations focused on birds, at least in name, have notable success within this category of funding. Ducks Unlimited and the National Audubon Society are the two leading grantees, with several less-prominent organizations also among the top recipients. The American Bird Conservancy, International Crane Foundation, Peregrine Fund and the Point Reyes Bird Conservancy are all top 35 grantees.

Outside the major green groups, top pollution recipients include the circular waste group The Recycling Partnership, the climate-focused Clean Air Task Force, the Philadelphia-based, ’60s-era organization Clean Air Council, and the national campaign support group Clean Water Fund. Most air quality grantmaking is focused on the United States, along with China and India, according to [research](#) by the Clean Air Fund.

According to analysis of an August 2020 survey of fundraisers and funders, nearly three-quarters of those who work in conservation, pollution or agriculture area believe philanthropic interest and funding levels are growing or remaining stable, with 35% saying they see no changes and 37% reporting increased funder engagement and grantmaking.

## Giving & Getting Deeper Dive

This report covers a set of issues that are overlapping yet to some degree have distinct dynamics and are supported by unique sets of funders. Grant figures from Candid offer a window into the priorities within each space. The following is based on their tagging methodology. While that system has its limits, and many categories reflect

intersecting concerns, it is one of the few sources of big-picture and comparative data on this broader area of grantmaking.

This section considers the interests specific to each of the three areas examined in this brief, as well as the range of funders who, while they do not make the top 10 list, are important players in these areas.

### Grantee Spotlight



**CLEAN AIR  
TASK FORCE**

The Clean Air Task Force has been working toward its global mission of achieving affordable zero-emissions since 1996. CATF's strategy includes enacting carbon limits on power plants, developing technologies to eliminate carbon emissions, mitigating or eliminating green house gas and climate damaging emissions and ensuring that bioenergy is carbon neutral or carbon negative when possible. CATF is supported by a wide range of funders including the Packard Foundation, Arnold Ventures, and the MacArthur Foundation.

For conservation funders, some of the biggest grantmaking buckets are focused on protecting animals. Bird preservation is by far the biggest category, receiving more than twice as many grant dollars as the next most popular conservation priority. IP's data analysis indicates it's a big tent, with a large number of grantmakers and many grantees compared to other areas, which suggests smaller award amounts on average. Other key areas in conservation philanthropy are endangered species protection and wildlife sanctuaries, each of which rank among the top 10 areas of giving.

Within philanthropy concerned with pollution, the largest grant area is hazardous waste management,

which receives nearly twice as many grant dollars as any other pollution priority, according to our analysis. Candid data suggests the philanthropic environment for hazardous waste management is a small world compared to other areas in this field, with a smaller number of key grantmakers and a larger, but still limited, group of grantees. Other areas of concern for grantmakers in this space include water pollution, air quality and solid waste management, which collectively receive roughly as much as hazardous waste management. Other analyses suggest very different focus points. A 2018 [report](#) by Clean Air Fund found two-thirds of global funding for air quality went to communications and policy-related activities.

Agriculture funding is the smallest category in this analysis. A single Candid tag, sustainable agriculture, accounts for most such funding, which is the third-largest category of grantmaking in this area. However, there are several other areas of concern, including water pollution, air quality and invasive animals, that have crossover with agriculture funders' priorities. Water is a major cross-cutting concern for grantmakers within these areas of grantmaking, whether their formal priority is conservation, pollution or agriculture. Water pollution is one of the top five areas of funding, along with sustainable fishing. Water conservation and irrigation and water management also rank among the prominent subcategories.

Beyond the top funders, there is a long list of foundations that play important roles in this space without commanding the same level of resources. By maintaining a tight focus on a particular region, or working on issues historically ignored by others, these foundations typically play narrower, but still significant, roles. Some smaller foundations are known for deep conservation work in a particular

region. For instance, the Keith Campbell Foundation is known for its work on Chesapeake Bay. Another, the Meyer Memorial Trust, is focused on the Willamette River in Oregon, as well as its equity work.

Others have made similar reputations within the pollution space. Despite its small size, Pisces Foundation is known for its focus on toxic chemicals. The Garfield Foundation has been a leading funder of campaigns to develop a reuse economy as a means to reduce plastic and other polluting products – an area that some say is growing. “There is a growing number of funders who are looking at this question of a reuse economy,” said Grady of RPA.

Funders in conservation frequently cite the Wilberforce Foundation as a leader in funding Indigenous-led conservation. The Seattle-based grantmaker has more than two decades of experience in such approaches. Others working in that vein include the Swift Foundation (which has supported pipeline resistance), Edgerton Family Foundation (which combines conservation work with job programs) and the NorthLight Foundation (which supports tribes in Alaska’s Bristol Bay).

A few family foundations have made increasing the ability of wildlife to move between protected areas a funding priority. The Liz Claiborne Art Ortenberg

Foundation, started by the American fashion designer, is one medium-sized institution known for such work. George B. Storer Foundation has also done notable work in the Midwest. An operating foundation, the Pew Charitable Trusts, is a major source of research and projects on this front.

Regenerative agriculture – a conservation and rehabilitation approach to food and farming systems whose proponents use a variety of sustainable agriculture practices including topsoil regeneration, improving the water cycle, increasing biodiversity, and supporting biosequestration – has a wide and growing funding base. There are major living donors who support the field, such as billionaires Eric and Wendy Schmidt (via the 11th Hour Project) and Laurene Powell Jobs (via Emerson Collective). But there are limits. “I wouldn’t say that any of the major climate funders to date have really deeply engaged in regenerative ag,” said Jennifer O’Connor, executive director of Funders for Regenerative Agriculture.

Stalwart backers of regenerative agriculture include Grace Communications Foundation and No Regrets Initiative, both of which have been closely involved in the relatively new Funders for Regenerative Agriculture affinity group. The AgroEcology Fund is a related group where such funders gather and pool resources.



*“Traditionally, there was a lot of money going into what is sometimes referred to as ‘fortress’ conservation. What has expanded faster now is more people-centered approaches to protecting nature and protecting the environment – and understanding that it’s not just setting aside protected areas, but it’s building local community and national government investment in keeping nature healthy.”*

–Heather Grady, Vice President, Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors

Agriculture of all types is attracting a range of climate-concerned funders. Some see funders only beginning to awaken to this connection. “I don’t think the narrative is quite mainstream yet,” said Yvonne Chen, founder and CEO of the consulting group Maukemana. “But agriculture is a huge contributor to the climate change problem.”

## Inside Philanthropy

August 2020 Survey

*“Considering livability in U.S. communities, there is finally more attention (albeit much less than other countries) to the issues around livability including walkability, environmental protection, decreasing pollution, and health outcomes.”*

—Consultant, Troy, Michigan

Examples of smaller-scale foundations whose portfolios include agriculture are the Santa Fe-based Thornburg Foundation and Atlanta-based Turner Foundation. The Rockefeller Foundation is also active in this space, though its efforts are focused abroad.

Like many areas of funding, new entries by billionaire donors have grabbed the attention of the field. Both Amazon founder Jeff Bezos (via the Bezos Earth Fund) and a Bay Area real estate clan, the Sobrato family (through Sobrato Philanthropies), have put some funding toward agriculture or conservation as part of their climate funding.

There are also billionaires that could grow in importance. One example is Home Depot co-founder and Giving Pledge signatory Arthur M. Blank, who has long funded conservation in places like Montana and intends to expand his grantmaking. In a similar vein, the Paul G. Allen Foundation, whose funding has included projects

on river protection and dam removal, could grow as his estate is settled.

Water issues also have some distinct champions. As one could guess from its name, the purpose-created Water Foundation – an intermediary with institutional supporters such as Hewlett, Gordon and Betty Moore, Mott, Pisces and Walton Family foundations – is a key player in philanthropic engagement on water issues. Its creator, The S.D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation, was an important member of that community until its sunset in 2020. Kresge Foundation has also engaged on this issue, including funding a review of opportunities for philanthropy to bring more investments in water infrastructure to urban, low-income neighborhoods and communities of color.

## The Big Issues & Beyond

While the funding areas covered by this report have individual dynamics, there are big-picture issues that have impacts across these segments. Some of them include critiques of whether the field’s language around equity is more talk than action; consistent calls for more philanthropic dollars to be directed toward advocacy and policy work; the imperative for old-school conservation and pollution organizations to reshape their messaging to fit the climate change era; and the possible undue influence mega-billionaire donors, who appear to be altering the funding landscape across philanthropy, including within the conservation, pollution and agriculture sphere. This section outlines how those shifts are playing out in this space.

Equity is a leading topic in conservation, pollution and agricultural grantmaking – but as the vast majority of funding still goes to the “big greens” and grassroots organizations helping mobilize

frontline communities to advocate for policy changes and prepare for climate change's effects continue to scramble for funding — is it just talk?

Foundations across all three segments have placed increasing rhetorical emphasis on ensuring their grantmaking promotes equitable participation and outcomes, particularly regarding racial equity. While many are skeptical that the new focus will persist, or even that these efforts are well-directed, it is currently a core lens foundations are applying in this area, and some intermediaries report growing desire by foundations to form direct relationships with such grantees.

Whether in the short or long term, it's unclear yet whether this new attention will significantly shift funding, such as reducing foundation support for typically white-led and -dominated major environmental groups, often pejoratively called Big Greens, toward other segments of this space, particularly BIPOC-led grassroots organizations. It need not be a zero-sum game, as philanthropy could continue to fund the Big Greens and bring considerably more funding to grassroots climate justice organizations. But that scenario has yet to materialize. Many traditional recipients have launched racial justice projects, which, while needed to transform the movement, may attract money needed by the long-time but less-connected voices for change who helped bring about this moment.

Many in the field say there's a lot of discussion of advocacy, policy work and backing grassroots movements, but very few dollars actually moving to those strategies, according to IP's 2020 survey. More than half (52%) said there's a lot of talk but little funding, while a smaller share (15%) sees no change at all, versus less than one-third (29%) who believe more funding is supporting such work.

“There is still a squeamishness about fully committing to movement-building. Entrenched interests in philanthropy have trouble letting go of power and taking big risks, and that is what must happen if movements are to grow,” wrote one California fundraiser.

Nevertheless, IP's survey found high levels of support for such funding among funders and fundraisers in this space. Asked what strategies most deserve increased attention and support, the second-most popular choice among respondents in this sector was “grassroots movement building and cross-movement organizing,” with 41% selecting it as a priority.

Climate change is also reshaping priorities and messaging among organizations that have been focused on conservation and pollution for decades. To take one example, local and regional organizations fighting pollution, such as the Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania-based Clean Air Council, have seen funding for climate-related work grow as pollution-centric support declined in recent years. In some cases, this represents similar work under different names, but it has been a shift in focus.

In conservation, new emphasis on the climate emergency has meant less money. The Resources Legacy Fund, for instance, has seen grantmaking for traditional conservation work fall as more funders look to how forests, mountains and coastlines can play a role in stopping climate change.

A fresh crop of mega-donors is also emerging as a new center of power and influence in this space, thereby creating new dynamics and tensions. The prospect of transformative grants from [billionaires](#) like Jeff Bezos, MacKenzie Scott and Lukas Walton

is leading many to look for every advantage in winning support from those philanthropists. Relatedly, some organizations debate whether or not to accept funding from ultra-wealthy donors whose fortunes are responsible, to one degree or another, for fueling pollution or land degradation.

## Funder Spotlight

### **SOBRATO**

Philanthropies

In 2019, Sobrato Philanthropies expanded its philanthropy by approving a plan to increase its engagement, collaboration and accountability. Its Sustainability program launched in 2020 and focuses on mitigating climate change and protecting the world's oceans. In 2021, Sobrato committed an initial \$23 million toward those ends. Areas of grantmaking include marine protected areas, over fishing, plastic pollution, reducing harmful emissions, strengthening natural carbon sinks, and forest protections. In 2012 John A. and Sue Sobrato, and their son John M. Sobrato, became the first multi-generational signatories of the Giving Pledge.

One perennial issue within the environmental space, although one somewhat at the margins, is whether certain grantmakers, particularly corporate foundations, are choosing non-confrontational issues over effective strategies. Some popular grantmaking areas, such as tree planting or removing plastics from natural environments, have been criticized as ignoring root causes. This is philanthropy as window dressing. Plastic removal, for instance, is often backed by beverage companies, while funding to shift plastic usage practices by industry gets far less support, if any. Tree planting, which is favored by a long list of high-emissions corporations, runs into similarly nettlesome concerns.

## Funder Strategies & Trends

Conservation, agriculture and pollution are inextricably linked in the natural world, yet as philanthropic categories, each has both shared and individual dynamics. Some funder strategies and trends transcend these constructs, while others are specific to individual issues, or manifest differently for each area.

This section first examines macro-level trends that are playing out within these funding streams, including the integration of equity actions to reshape priorities in every corner of the funder and grantee world; reorienting work and messaging about conservation, pollution and agriculture to align with climate change imperatives; increasing collaboration among funders; and applying public health perspectives and messaging to this area of work. This section then delves into some of the “micro” trends that are bubbling up in certain areas of the field, including people-centered approaches; conservation finance; regenerative agriculture; greater attention to wildfires; new approaches to textile production; and development of wildlife corridors. Some of these are discussed again in the Opportunities and Challenges section at the end of this brief.

**Prioritizing Equity.** Funders and their grantees are spending considerable time and resources to integrate equity frames — especially focused on race — into their work. It is such an important trend in the field, we explore it more deeply in its own section of this brief, Perspectives on Equity.

**Connecting to Climate Change.** The emergency of our era is fast reshaping our lives, and that's increasingly evident in these funding areas. This was touched on briefly in the Big Issues section above, but in this section, we delve into the

reoriented strategies of the conservation, pollution and agriculture fields.

Conservation funders are considering how their work can both support climate goals and will need to shift because of shifting climate realities. One example is the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation’s [work](#) with the Open Space Institute to ensure projects both conserve and capture carbon. “The biggest change for my organization has been the increased interest in conservation because of climate change,” wrote a fundraiser in IP’s survey.

This is also true in other segments of this space. Agricultural philanthropy is seeing new interest from climate funders, while also supporting grantees facing increasingly extreme and unprecedented weather events and changes. Pollution, of course, encompasses the emission of greenhouse gases and other pollutants, and thus, many traditional goals of philanthropy are the same as those of new climate funders.

**Increasing Collaboration.** Several experts said funders are focused on working with others to address their priorities, and responses to an Inside Philanthropy survey reinforced those anecdotal reports. Funders in this space overwhelmingly reported collaboration among their peers is either increasing (45%) or about the same (49%), with the latter category roughly split between those who think there is the right amount and those who believe more is needed.

“Funder collaboratives are becoming more powerful and more directive in what they will support,” wrote one Washington, D.C., fundraiser. Examples include newly formed groups, like Funders for Regenerative Agriculture; national and international conservation mega-pledges, such as

the Protecting Our Planet Challenge; and newly formed intermediaries such as the [Community Land Rights and Conservation Finance Initiative](#).

**Communicating Public Health Impacts.** While pollution-focused funders have long counted public health as a key concern, increased and expanded attention to the role the environment plays in all manner of health concerns has helped all three of these segments attract new funding, say experts. A wide range of specific factors, including the [links between wildlife trade and zoonotic diseases](#), the growing number of foundations considering the health impacts of pollution, and expanded attention on environmental justice, have brought new attention to these intersections.

One notable longer-term result is the entry of health grantmakers into areas where they had rarely sent funding before. So far, these entrants are most often large, national foundations, the most prominent example being the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. If regional health grantmakers and health conversion foundations follow suit, it could mark a substantial change for the field.

**Shifting to People-Centered Approaches.** This “micro” trend is not remotely new, but it is growing. Despite a decades-long shift away from “fortress” conservation toward approaches that focus on

### Inside Philanthropy August 2020 Survey

*“Advocacy and support for better human conditions is out of balance with interests of big business and polluters. Philanthropy could play a role in supporting and persuading decisions supportive of better conditions for humans and for the environment.”*

—Consultant, Troy, Michigan

people and their needs, conservation philanthropy is still largely entrenched in the old mentality and messaging. But the noticeable shift is influencing and intertwining with big-picture changes, from Indigenous-centered approaches to public health benefits.

“Traditionally, there was a lot of money going into what is sometimes referred to as ‘fortress’ conservation,” Grady said. “What has expanded faster now is more people-centered approaches to protecting nature and protecting the environment – and understanding that it’s not just setting aside protected areas, but it’s building local community and national government investment in keeping nature healthy.”

### **Experimenting With Conservation Finance.**

A great deal of creativity around financing conservation projects is occurring outside of the United States, but these efforts have also seen a

#### **Funder Spotlight**



It’s always hard not to feel conflicted about Jeff Bezos’ climate funding. However, the \$10 billion Bezos Earth Fund, while focused on climate, has already thrown down some serious green for conservation. Bezos is funding some major U.S.-based groups for international work on the 30x30 global challenge, as well as issuing smaller grants to climate justice intermediaries doing adjacent work. He’s also pledged \$1 billion for landscape restoration, including work in the U.S., and a separate \$1 billion commitment aims to transform how the world grows and consumes food. Details remain limited regarding how much of either sum would be spent domestically.

spike in interest and major projects here. Billionaire MacKenzie Scott, for instance, [backed](#) the Nature Conservancy’s Blue Bonds program, which used debt relief to expand protected water areas. The [Global Fund for Coral Reefs](#) is another notable example.

“There’s a whole set of really exciting spaces where innovative finance is unlocking new sources of capital,” said Sacha Spector, program director for the environment at Doris Duke Charitable Foundation. “As these kinds of investment or these kinds of financial vehicles expand and prove to be good ways of aggregating capital, that essentially aggregates social capital at the same time.”

**Nurturing Regenerative Agriculture.** A wide range of priorities, including climate, health and water, has brought new grantmakers to regenerative agriculture, even as it remains a relatively small area of funding. The [rapid growth](#) of the recently launched support group Funders for Regenerative Agriculture, or FORA, is one indicator of its popularity. There is broad interest in this area, spanning small family funds to major donors like Eric and Wendy Schmidt and the Walton family.

**Increasing Attention to Wildfires.** By necessity, funders within all of these spheres have also been paying more attention to wildfires. Devastating conflagrations can kill wildlife, lower water quality and pollute whole regions, so more grantmakers are not just seeing them as an important issue, but looking for ways to be proactive. While experts were less likely to mention other extreme weather events, like hurricanes or floods, climate-driven disasters seem likely to become a greater and greater concern across these philanthropic areas.

### **Pushing for Changes in Textile Production**

**Systems.** Philanthropic engagement and action on textile production is still nascent, but the potential for impact is huge, given clothing’s cultural centrality. Like regenerative agriculture, it has drawn not only agricultural grantmakers, but also funders concerned with climate and water, as well as the philanthropic arms of apparel companies.

Members and staff of Sustainable Agriculture and Food Systems Funders [birthed](#) this new push. The organization also helped seed FORA.

**Creating New Wildlife Corridors.** Though not a new concept, there’s been growing interest among conservation funders in wildlife corridors, or safe passageways for animals between protected areas. With climate change shifting traditional habitats, and expanded recognition that animals need protected migratory pathways, more conservation funders are looking for ways to create links between new or existing wilderness zones. As preservation campaigns like 30 by 30 accelerate and threats to biodiversity mount, interest in these types of preservation projects may grow.

### **Perspectives on Equity**

Since the murder of George Floyd and the uprisings of 2020, a great many philanthropists with widely different funding priorities have been thinking more deeply about how their resources can advance equity, typically with a focus on racial equity. Some foundations have made high-profile pledges for racial justice, as IP recently [explored](#).

Equity efforts are playing out in different ways across conservation, pollution and agriculture funding areas. Indigenous communities, for example, have attracted cross-cutting attention, with particular focus on conservation. In the past five years, there has been a marked increase of

activity around racial equity in philanthropy, with more explicit realignments and shifting of priorities since 2020. Environmental grantmakers have announced pledges, produced racial justice statements, revamped strategies and developed new collaboratives since the widespread public support for racial justice that was so prominent in 2020.

But close observers of philanthropy appear to have mixed feelings about the commitments funders have made and seem suspicious about the motivations for these first steps. Nearly half (46%) of survey respondents working in conservation, pollution or agriculture agreed with an IP survey question that stated both that most philanthropic professionals believe that racial justice is “important to confront and address,” but also that not every foundation sees the cause as within their mission.

Many in the field see centering equity as a necessary strategic move. When those same respondents were asked which funding strategies most warranted greater engagement and funding, the third-most popular selection by those in this space was “centering racial justice,” with about 4 in 10 indicating it should be a priority. In other polling, People of color comprise a demographic group that is consistently among the most supportive of environmental protection. So there are clear practical reasons, as well as fundamental moral imperatives, to integrate racial justice into environmental work.

Some are uncertain whether the current energy will be sustained. “As time passes, attitudes and support to make the ‘needle’ move will revert to the classic models – maybe two-year grants, with just enough to do something, but not enough to make a marked improvement,” said a West Virginia fundraiser.

For now, these forces are having a range of impacts in the field. New attention to historical injustices has led to major debates at several of the nation's largest environmental groups about the problematic history associated with founders and namesakes. Michael Brune [resigned](#) as executive director of the Sierra Club not long after publishing a [blog post](#) critical of the racist connections and words of environmental author and icon John Muir. [At least three organizations](#) have changed their names to cut ties with the 19th-century artist John James Audubon due to his ties to slavery, posing tough questions for the National Audubon Society, which our analysis found was the second-largest grantee in this sphere.

There is also new attention in philanthropy on supporting Indigenous-led projects. This is particularly spreading within conservation philanthropy, where there is both the moral imperative of supporting Indigenous sovereignty over traditional lands following colonization and robust research showing excellent outcomes for such efforts. The Wilburforce Foundation has been one notable leader, and there are also national funders, like Ford Foundation, that have been active in this space. Both helped bring together a [\\$1.7 billion pledge](#) for Indigenous protection of tropical forests. Christensen Fund also has a history of supporting such work.

This type of work includes landback campaigns, land tenure efforts and other pushes to return traditional Indigenous land to Native physical and/or legal control. Yet much more could be included, such as agriculture. “There’s a lot more potential to partner with tribes than is currently being done,” said Karen Lehman, director of Fresh Taste, a Chicago-area food system funder initiative.

Any increase in funding for Indigenous projects adds to a very small pot. Native communities have received an average of [just 0.4%](#) of funding by major U.S. foundations. This is a reality that confronts all Black, Indigenous and people of color leaders of environmental organizations. A 2021 study by the InDEEP Initiative found a [\\$2.7 billion funding gap](#) between white-led and BIPOC-led environmental and conservation organizations.

## Inside Philanthropy

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*“Most funders are prioritizing racial justice and that is clearly having an impact on decision making, but philanthropy as a sector is extraordinarily white and western. It is important for funders to prioritize diversity in their own institutions as well as those that they fund.”*

—Fundraiser, Portland, Oregon

Questions of land tenure and rights can apply for other communities. Sacha Spector of Doris Duke Foundation highlighted efforts to secure property rights for Black farmers and landowners in the South, and the potential for those to broaden opportunities for a more diverse set of farmers and ranchers.

“A lot of deep injustices have been driven by long-standing structures in land tenure and land rights, and those have deep ramifications, not just through history, but in terms of the kinds of land ownership patterns we see, and access to land and to capital associated with land,” Spector said. “There’s a lot of really, really important injustices – and opportunities to address some of those things through conservation culture.”

Sarah Shanley Hope, vice president of brands and partnerships at Solutions Project, said one focus for

them and other grantmakers has been broadening access, particularly for Black youths, to careers in conservation and STEM careers. For instance, the grassroots intermediary fund is supporting the Greening Youth Foundation, in Atlanta, Georgia, which helps connect youth and young adults to the outdoors and conservation careers.

Many foundations support another type of environmental access: ensuring the outdoors is welcoming to all. Groups like Outdoor Afro, Green Latinos and Hispanic Access Foundation are notable, if still small, recipients in this area. Many of these organizations have attracted support from major funders.

The Biden administration has named environmental justice as a priority, which had the effect of raising awareness of the disproportionate impact of pollution on communities of color among many in the general public, and in some circles of philanthropy. New funders of environmental justice work have previously supported more general areas of climate philanthropy, for example, the unprecedented grants from the Bezos Earth Fund to veteran environmental justice groups.

With Congress approving a record amount of climate funding since the arrival of the Biden administration, that's become another area of focus for grantmakers in these spaces. Funders are not

only advocating for equitable distribution of federal funding, but also looking to build expertise within communities for applying for such funding, particularly within front-line communities of color.

Internal racial equity work is gaining traction in foundations and within a broad array of environmental organizations. Some foundations have organized trainings, added new DEI-focused leadership positions, or sought to change culture. One excellent resource on this front is J.E.D.I. Heart's 136-page report, [Transforming a Movement](#), which offers a detailed background on these issues within environmental organizations and examples from seven funders' efforts.

Whether their speciality was conservation, pollution or agriculture, experts we interviewed for this brief were less likely to find connections in their work to other areas of equity such as gender, immigration status or disability. "So far as I can see, the interest in informing and infusing the work with concern for addressing equity has largely been limited to racial equity," said Stuart Clarke, program director of the William Penn Foundation's watershed protection team. He added that funding for Indigenous communities and support for farmers to transition to sustainable practices showed there were some efforts outside that core focus, but that he sees few other such areas where that concern is matched.

## Grantee Spotlight



Outdoor Afro "celebrates and inspires Black connections and leadership in nature." Created in 2009 by Rue Mapp, Outdoor Afro has a participation network of over 60,000 and is active in 60 cities across the country. Its partners include large outdoor retailers such as The North Face, REI and Stanley. Outdoor Afro has received funding support from the Hewlett, Heinz Family and Western Conservation foundations, among others.

That said, there are some foundations working on access issues, notably corporate grantmakers. Multiple funders told me that the charitable arms of outdoor apparel companies have carefully targeted their grantmaking toward improving access to the outdoors for people with disabilities. REI and Patagonia are “leading in that space,” said Moira McDonald, director of the environment program at the Walton Family Foundation.

There are also funders that take on class and geographic equity. One expert highlighted Lumpkin Family Foundation for its work on rural communities’ access to federal funding for conservation, with McKnight Foundation and the Native American Food Foundation as other notables. This has also been a priority for some community foundations. Overall, however, rural communities have historically received a disproportionately low share of foundation funding, according to a USDA study.

## Initiative Spotlight

# InDEEP

INITIATIVE

The Inclusion, Diversity and Equity in Environmental Philanthropy Initiative or InDEEP, engages foundation staff and leaders “committed to integrating racial equity and social justice throughout their environmental philanthropy.” Its intended outcomes include increasing contracting opportunities for organizations led by BIPOC, greater inclusion among long-standing grantees, and enlisting both formal and informal commitments from nonprofits to dedicate funds to groups led by BIPOC. The Doris Duke, Hewlett, Kresge, Joyce, Packard and McKnight foundations are among InDEEP’s roster of supporters.

# A Closer Look at Funder Types

## Private Foundations

Private foundations are the dominant institutional philanthropic force in conservation, pollution and agriculture giving. They account for the biggest share of the top 10 funders, and also the top 100. These institutions include some of the nation's top climate funders, as well as many focused on goals like saving America's forests, keeping its water clean, or supporting its farmers. Such work overlaps with climate action, and is even inextricable from it. Yet these distinctions reflect traditional segments of philanthropy – and often reflect identities these grantmakers have historically embraced, even as such categories grow outdated.

At a time when major philanthropy is increasingly concentrated on the coasts, these foundations also show the enduring role of wealth generated in some of the country's former centers of power. While some of the biggest players are based in Silicon Valley or New York City, many others are in the Midwest or the former industrial centers of the Northeast. Private foundations have been a mainstay of support for these issues, and many in the field believe that role will expand. Nearly 58% of respondents to an IP survey indicated private and family foundation support is increasing in importance, versus just 8% who say it is decreasing.

Based on our analysis of Candid data for U.S. grantmaking, the [Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation](#) sends many of its awards abroad, such as for its signature Andes-Amazon initiative, but this [\\$8.4 billion-plus](#) grantmaker still ranks as the top funder of U.S.-based organizations in this area. For instance, it supports [watershed conservation](#) in

the Northwest that is critical for wild salmon. Its Markets and Conservation initiative also sends big checks to U.S.-based green groups, such as [World Wildlife Fund](#) and the [Nature Conservancy](#), for related projects.

The Walton Family Foundation, the philanthropic vehicle of one of America's richest families, is the second-largest private grantmaker in this space. It is known for its support for waterways, with a focus on the Colorado and Mississippi rivers, as well as backing market-oriented efforts on agriculture and fishing. This grantmaker also ranks among the top funders of animal and wildlife preservation.

About half of the [David and Lucile Packard Foundation's](#) priorities are environmental, with a specific commitment to conserving the American West. The Los Altos, California-based grantmaker also supports smallholder farmers, but only abroad. The [\\$9 billion-plus](#) foundation has a particular interest in [conservation in the Golden State](#), though it has [leveraged grants and program-related investments](#) to preserve land across the North American West.

[William and Flora Hewlett Foundation](#) is perhaps best known among green grantmakers as one of the nation's leading climate funders. But like Packard, its environmental portfolio also focuses on Western conservation. Thanks to its [\\$13.3 billion-plus](#) endowment, it is among the top 50 funders on a long list of issues, but at the top among conservation, pollution and water funders. For instance, it has funded past projects to remove dams, as [IP has covered](#). The Menlo Park, California funder's [current goal](#) is to conserve 320 million acres of public land in the North American West by 2035—and ensure safe migratory routes for key species.

Unlike most of the grantmakers mentioned here, [Richard King Mellon Foundation](#) funds in virtually every segment covered in this report. From its Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, home, it issues grants spanning (by Candid’s classifications) support for wildlife, sustainable agriculture, water conservation, anti-pollution measures and forest preservation. The latter is the **\$3.1 billion-plus** foundation’s single biggest area of grantmaking. Western Pennsylvania is a focus, but it distributes environmental funding nationally. Grantees include the Memphis-based Ducks Unlimited and the San Francisco-based Trust for Public Land.

**Private Funder Spotlight**  
**CHARLES STEWART MOTT FOUNDATION®**

The Michigan-based Charles Stewart Mott Foundation addresses conservation and pollution matters through its larger Environment program. Its Freshwater Challenge is dedicated to the long-term conservation of freshwater ecosystems, particularly in the Great Lakes region. Mott’s freshwater grantmaking also focuses on the development policies concerning freshwater quality and quantity.

[William Penn Foundation](#)’s green grants are laser-focused on protecting the Delaware River watershed. Much of that money goes to groups focused on water quality, monitoring and management. But that’s not all. For instance, the **\$2.7 billion-plus** foundation has put big money toward [walking and cycling trails](#) along the river. The Philadelphia-based grantmaker also supports some equity-focused groups, such as the work of Outdoor Afro.

On the other side of Pennsylvania, the Pittsburgh-based Heinz Endowments is a large and important funder of environmental projects. According to

Candid, Heinz Endowments gave over \$35 million for conservation, pollution and agriculture projects from 2015 to 2019. Its “sustainability” funding area supports work on inclusive economy, clean economy, environmental and public health and sustainable food systems. It also has a major initiative on safe drinking water.

[Charles Stewart Mott Foundation](#) sends grants around the world for environmental priorities like development finance and clean energy.

Domestically, it works on water, particularly the Great Lakes and the water crisis in its hometown of Flint, Michigan. The **\$3.9 billion-plus** grantmaker funds a wide range of fresh water work across the many states that border the lakes, including Michigan, Ohio, Wisconsin and New York. It also supports work to make access to clean water a reality for all communities, in Flint and beyond.

“Philanthropic organizations ... can and should do more to ensure all U.S. residents have access to safe, affordable water,” wrote Ridgway White, president and CEO of Mott, in an IP op-ed, [“How Funders Can Support Clean, Reliable Water for All.”](#)

One of the three focus areas of [Margaret A. Cargill Philanthropies](#) is the environment. With combined assets topping **\$8.2 billion**, its work spans animal welfare (from dogs and cats to wildlife rehabilitation), water protection (freshwater and coastal) and habitat conservation (grasslands to tropical forests). The latter area trumps the rest, with the Twin Cities, Minnesota-area institution ranked recently among the top five domestic conservation grantmakers in the U.S., based on Candid data.

Headquartered in New York City, [Doris Duke Charitable Foundation](#) is widely recognized by its

peers as a leading conservation funder. In recent years, it has supported projects with explicit climate elements, such as conservation work by the Open Society Institute focused on the [Southern Cumberlands](#) and [Appalachia](#). The foundation also maintains a subprogram focused on its home tri-state region, and it is a top 10 animal and wildlife grantmaker, according to Candid data.

Several other smaller grantmakers are notable within this space for leadership or focused programs on specific issues. For instance, Wilburforce Foundation has been an influential and early voice advocating for Indigenous-led conservation and land management. Swift Foundation is also known for such work. Panta Rhea Foundation also is recognized within progressive circles on agriculture funding, particularly as it relates to climate funding.

## Corporate Funders

The corporate givers in this space largely come from three industries: clothing, food and beverage, and agricultural products. Few are major players in the space, with only two ranked within the top 30, and only a few placed among the top 100. Yet some of those discussed in this section work closely with funder networks and are well-recognized in the field.

Despite the modest scale of grantmaking, particularly in relation to corporate size, this giving can play important niche roles. For example, several apparel retailers' foundations provide microgrants of less than \$10,000 to community grassroots groups that might struggle to get support from traditional funders. Some also back underfunded areas, such as access to the outdoors for persons with disabilities. REI and Patagonia are "leading in that space," said McDonald of Walton.

The PepsiCo Foundation and Coca-Cola Foundation are the lone corporate funders among this field's largest 50 grantmakers. Pepsi issued \$23 million in grants and Coca-Cola distributed \$19 million grants between 2015 and 2019, according to our analysis. Pepsi funds education, workforce development, poverty relief and, most recently, provided pandemic relief. Coca-Cola is known for backing water conservation and, related to its role as a major producer of plastic waste, [preventing plastic pollution](#). Past U.S. grantees include the Ocean Conservancy and the Cahaba River Society.

### Corporate Funder Spotlight



The Clif Family Foundation is funded entirely by Clif Bar and Company. Giving priorities include strengthening food systems, improving equitable community health outcomes and protecting the environment and natural resources. Recent grantees include 412 Food Rescue and the California Climate and Agriculture Network. Unsolicited grant applications for operational support are reviewed three times per year. It also accepts offers grants to support specific projects.

A smaller but well-known operation is the [Clif Family Foundation](#), the charitable arm of the energy bar maker Clif Bar, based in Emeryville, California. Last year, the [foundation](#) gave slightly more than \$3 million to 465 environmental organizations across the U.S. and Canada, with an average award of about \$6,600. An IP analysis of Candid data puts the foundation among the top 100 funders on conservation, agriculture and pollution. Many grantees are hyper-local, such as Bikemore, which works on cycling options in Baltimore, or 47Daisies, an organic farm in Vassalboro, Maine. But the foundation also funds some national

groups, such as 350.org. It's the primary public giving vehicle for the couple, [Kit Crawford and Gary Erickson](#), who own 80% of Clif Bar. (The term "family foundation" and the centering of Crawford and Erickson may confuse grantseekers who assume it is organized as a family foundation, but it is funded by the corporation; its official IRS name is Clif Bar Family Foundation, and it does have paid staff associated with the company.)

Another charitable arm recognized by those in the field is the General Mills Foundation. With \$42 million in assets as of 2020, it is quite small relative to its \$45.6 billion parent company. But along with other major food producers, like Land O'Lakes or Danone (parent company of Dannon yogurt), it is a notable force in the agricultural sphere through its corporate giving, often supporting projects within their own supply chains.

Three apparel companies are the best known in this area: [Patagonia](#), REI and VF Corporation. The Ventura, California-based clothing retailer Patagonia has donated 1% of its total sales each year for grantmaking since 1985, a program that has generated more than \$140 million in cash and in-kind donations for environmental nonprofits. Our analysis of Candid data puts it among the top 70 foundations in conservation, agriculture and pollution grantmaking. It has funded research on [how philanthropy can support regenerative agriculture](#) and participated in philanthropy's [nascent efforts to back the dirt-to-shirt movement](#). It also supports [journalism](#) and [film](#) projects related to the environment. It's even sued the federal government over a decision to shrink several national monuments.

Patagonia's founder, Yvon Chouinard, recently made news by [transferring ownership](#) of the

company, valued at \$3 billion, to a "specially designed trust and a nonprofit organization" created to preserve the company's independence and ensure that all of its profits, estimated at \$100 million per year — are used to take on climate change and "protect undeveloped land around the globe." Expect to see more news in the future indicating whether this unusual philanthropic action spurs others to similar transfers, and whether Chouinard's action increases the company's overall giving to these areas.

Outdoor supplies giant REI is an even smaller grantmaker, but the Kent, Washington-based retailer is well-known in the space. [It announced](#) plans last year to close the REI Foundation, which provided \$7 million in grants in 2021, and shift focus to the new [REI Cooperative Action Fund](#), which gave out \$1.4 million in its inaugural round of grants. The new fund aims to promote "justice, equity and belonging" in the outdoors. One emphasis will be supporting organizations that are led by and serve Black, Indigenous and people of color, as well as individuals who identify as LGBTQ+, people with disabilities, and women.

Another corporate philanthropy frequently cited by those in the space is [VF Foundation](#), the charitable arm of the multibillion-dollar global apparel and footwear company that manages brands like The North Face and Timberland. It granted more than \$8 million during its most recent grantmaking period, with the company making another \$16 million in corporate awards, according to its [annual report](#). It's a global operation, supporting environmental work in 73 countries. It has supported the Trust for Public Land's Equitable Communities Fund, the [American Indian College Fund](#) and a U.N. Foundation-backed [resilience fund](#) for female textile workers.

Several other outdoor companies, like Arc'teryx, Keen and Kelty, also have grant programs. But whether due to their size or their level of collaborations with private philanthropies, they have lower profiles. One other corporation well-known to grantmakers in this space is Tiffany & Co., the jewelry corporation. Its philanthropy focuses on preserving “the world’s treasured seascapes and landscapes,” and supports organizations such as Wildlife Conservation Society and Trout Unlimited.

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*“We need more investment in sustainable agriculture and local food. Small farmers who are growing food for people depend on their own direct marketing through CSAs and Farmers Markets. We need a Food Hub that would provide processing and delivery to retail markets. Young beginning farmers need land and encouragement to grow food for people. Soil improvement is a major need. Industrial agriculture is not sustainable and soil health is suffering.”*

—Nonprofit board member, Ames, Iowa

The charitable arms of two international agricultural corporations, Dow Chemical Company and Cargill, are the biggest corporate philanthropies from the agriculture sphere. Both rank in the bottom half of the largest 100 grantmakers, with Cargill Foundation granting close to \$7 million between 2015 and 2019, and the Dow Chemical Company Foundation funding totaling \$5.6 million over the five-year period. Both focus on agriculture-related giving.

Some groups assemble a range of corporations to work together on philanthropic projects in this space. For instance, the Midwest Row Crop Collaborative brings together companies like Bayer, Cargill, Kellogg’s, Pepsico and Unilever in partnership with three major environmental

groups – the Environmental Defense Fund, Nature Conservancy and World Wildlife Fund. Another example is the [Conservation Alliance](#), a network of more than 270 businesses that funds efforts to protect rivers, remove dams, create marine reserves and other such projects.

Corporations also contribute indirectly to these issues. For instance, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, one of the largest wildlife funders, works to build partnerships between U.S. companies and federal agencies. Its [corporate partners](#) come from a diverse range of industries, but most are Fortune 500-level companies, such as AT&T, Chevron and Wells Fargo. In addition, several technology companies, including Microsoft, Google and Cisco, are known for providing in-kind support for wildlife conservation organizations.

## Community Foundations

Community foundations are an important but not always highly visible presence in giving for conservation, pollution and agriculture, according to conversations with a wide range of philanthropic leaders. Almost none named individual community foundations as major voices on these issues. Yet, community foundations, as with many giving concerns, can serve to connect big-picture issues to local realities and channel local energy into action. For instance, many community foundations are known for their work on lead contamination.

There are a few community foundations that rank among the sector’s larger funders. The Foundation for the Carolinas stands out among the 10 largest grantmakers on these issues, based on our analysis of Candid data. A pair of community foundations, the Silicon Valley Community Foundation and the California Community Foundation, are among the 30 largest grantmakers for these issues.

There are even more community foundations among the 100 largest funders in this segment. Unsurprisingly, the list includes several of the richest and most well-known in the country, including the Greater Kansas City Community Foundation, Chicago Community Trust, New York Community Trust and Community Foundation for Greater Atlanta.

There are also several lesser-known and smaller community foundations whose donors direct substantial funding to these causes, even outranking their larger peers. These include the Community Foundation of Greater Flint, Maine Community Foundation and the Community Foundation of Greater Memphis.

West Coast community foundations also play a seemingly outsized role on these issues, likely reflecting the concentrated wealth and environmental values of the region. Beyond the two that make the top 30, the San Francisco Foundation, Marin Community Foundation and Seattle Foundation are all among the top 100 donors in this space.

Community foundation support also includes outfits like the Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation. Formed by Commonwealth Edison, the Illinois electric utility, it provides funding for energy efficiency and renewable energy. Such funds could take on an increasingly important role in the years ahead as the energy transition accelerates.

Donor-advised funds, whether managed by community foundations or national financial institutions, play a major role in this space. For instance, the total support from accounts managed by the National Philanthropic Trust ranks second

only to the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation as a source of support for these issues, albeit spread across nearly nine times more grants. Fidelity Investments, the nation's largest DAF manager, also ranks in the top 20.

Faith-based fund managers also have a supporting role. Two religious community DAF managers, the National Christian Foundation and the Jewish Community Federation and Endowment Fund, are on the list of 100 largest grantmakers in this area.

### Program Spotlight



The Trust for Public Land's Equitable Communities Fund is a \$50 million effort to "energize efforts for creating parks and stabilizing organizations that provide essential services in communities subjected to underinvestment and hit hardest by COVID-19." The trust has identified 62 communities across the country that will be the focus of the program's funding.

### Major Donors

The mega-wealthy are a significant and growing force in this area of philanthropy. Three of the top eight funders in this space are backed by living donors, and many other billionaires are among the top 20 and beyond. Nearly all such major donors of note operate through foundations, typically institutions named for their founders. We discuss in this section any entities – often private foundations – for which a single donor or a partnered couple primarily directs the giving.

It is likely that Amazon founder Jeff Bezos' philanthropic operation will soon emerge as the largest grantmaker in this space. The Bezos Earth Fund is focused on the climate crisis, but its

grantmaking spans areas inextricable from conservation, agriculture and pollution funding. Some of its biggest pledges to date have been to conservation and agriculture, including **\$1 billion** toward the goal of preserving 30% of the earth by 2030 and a \$2 billion commitment that will be split between landscape restoration and food systems, though [details remain scarce](#).

While neither *Forbes* nor Bloomberg list Howard G. Buffett as a billionaire, his foundation's grantmaking ranks among the top 10 donors within this segment of philanthropy. Buffett's father, legendary investor Warren Buffett, has reportedly given about **\$2 billion** to each of his children's foundations. The Howard G. Buffett Foundation operates much like an operating foundation, with nearly all its grants in this area going to one organization: the Sequoia Farm Foundation, which, according to its IRS statements, is "primarily focused on agricultural research experiments with a focus on water-use efficiency, soil management, and cover crop use, which reduce the dependency on synthetic fertilizers." Both are based in Decatur, Illinois, both are chaired by Howard G. Buffet, and both share other board members, based on the foundation's most recent tax filings.

Barbara Picower, the widow of investor Jeffrey Picower, whose wealth largely derived from the Bernie Madoff Ponzi scheme, is the founder and president of the \$4.6-billion-plus **JPB Foundation**.

She is a media-shy grantmaker, but her giving ranks her among the largest recent funders of anti-pollution efforts, according to our analysis of Candid data. It has funded organizations battling pollution such as the Bluegreen Alliance Foundation, Earth Day Network and EarthJustice.

One of the top three supporters of sustainable agriculture is the Schmidt Family Foundation, the vehicle of former Google CEO Eric Schmidt and his wife, Wendy, who serves as the president of the foundation. The couple are also notable donors to organizations that battle pollution. Grantmaking flows through the \$2.2 billion-plus Schmidt Family Foundation, but it's their 11th Hour Project that manages much of their environmental work. Grantees range from regional to national, such as Missouri Rural Crisis Center, Land Stewardship Project, Occidental Arts and Ecology Center and Western Organization of Research Councils.

"It's crucial to consider how global industrial food systems hurt our world. Philanthropists can help change those systems for the better by supporting farmers pursuing agroecology, which draws from Indigenous knowledge to create resilient food systems that preserve biodiversity and feed communities," wrote Wendy Schmidt in an IP op-ed, "[Philanthropy Can Seed Agroecology](#)."

Several other members of the families mentioned above have emerging portfolios in this space, or

### Major Donor Spotlight: Howard G. Buffett



Howard G. Buffett's philanthropy flows through the foundation that bears his name and has been a major funder in food security, conflict mitigation, and public safety. Its Food Security program focuses on supporting agriculture resource development and helping smallholder farmers in developing countries. In the U.S., environmental funding tends to focus on teaching farmers about conservation agriculture and raising awareness about food insecurity.

have previously funded these issues. Third-generation Walmart heir Lukas Walton chose food and agriculture as one priority of his still-growing foundation, Builders Initiative. With a fortune Bloomberg puts at \$20.5 billion, the 35-year-old could make a big splash in the years ahead. Another is Rob Walton, one of the four children of Sam and Helen Walton, and his wife Melani. The couple's Rob and Melani Walton Foundation has joined several high-profile international conservation efforts, including a \$5 billion conservation pledge and an effort to preserve 5% of the world's oceans, and funded a wildlife rehabilitation center in the U.S.

Peter Buffett, another child of Warren Buffet, and his wife Jennifer, were previously major agricultural donors, though their NoVo Foundation, which has in the past three years shifted priorities, seemingly now focusing on the Hudson Valley of New York.

Former New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg ranked among the 20 largest donors in this space based on his oceans-oriented conservation grantmaking, but most of Bloomberg Philanthropies' funding goes to a small selection of internationally focused groups, including Wildlife Conservation Society and Global Fishing Watch.

Jeff Skoll, the one-time eBay CEO, has sent some big checks to U.S.-based groups working on agriculture, like MyAgro, and conservation, such as Forest Trends, but again, the focus is mostly on international work.

Bill Gates and Melinda French Gates, through the foundation the former couple continues to direct jointly, are also a notable presence. Technically, their foundation does not support such work in the U.S., according to its website, instead focusing its

funding on agricultural projects across Africa and South Asia. It is a leading source of funding for some U.S.-based organizations doing research or working abroad. Examples include World Poultry Foundation, AgBiome and International Food Policy Research Institute, each of which have received tens of millions in support.

Other notable wealthy and celebrity donors in these areas include Margot Pritzker, who supports urban agriculture and is active in the MidWest food grantmaking sphere; Ted Turner, whose foundation is dedicated to conservation; and Leonardo DiCaprio, whose regularly evolving philanthropic projects have largely focused on conservation.

There is a lack of consensus on whether new funding from major donors has changed the field. In IP's 2020 survey, just over a third (38%) believed they are exerting influence, but just under a third (31%) said they have little sway at all, with the remainder undecided. Similarly, some survey respondents (48%) saw an increasing role for major individual donors and donor-advised funds, but others saw the importance decreasing for major individual donors (35%) and DAFs (39%).

## Intermediaries & Associations

A variety of intermediaries serve this space, though they do not play as prominent a role as in other corners of green philanthropy, such as climate grantmaking. Some degree of regranting takes place via the major green groups that dominate the list of top recipients within this space. The Nature Conservancy and the Environmental Defense Fund both rank among the top 100 grantmakers and some degree of regranting is likely part of the operations of other major groups like the National Audubon Society, World Wildlife Fund, and

Wildlife Conservation Society. Within wildlife philanthropy, the list would include groups like the Humane Society of the United States.

Purpose-built regrantors have only a couple major representatives in the space. The multi-issue New Venture Fund, which has nearly \$1 billion in assets, was among the top 10 recipients, with more than \$60 million in awards. ClimateWorks Foundation, whose work on climate includes initiatives on conservation, agriculture and pollution, is another notable player.

### Affinity Group Spotlight



Kicked off with a meeting at a mill in 2019, this affinity group now has more than 60 members. Small and mid-sized private and family foundations are the core of the group, but there are also billionaire-backed operations. Some are focused on agriculture, while others care more about health, climate change or another adjacent issue. The group exemplifies the fast-growing interest in this area, and while still a featherweight in funding terms, it has already spawned several funder collaborations.

Other intermediaries in the space include the conservation-focused, \$100-million-plus Resources Legacy Fund and the \$136-million Windward Fund, which manages a variety of environmental projects, both of which are among the top 100 recipients. Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors, a consultancy, is another big recipient. Tides Foundation is also active on these issues, narrowly making the list of top 100 funders.

A variety of other intermediaries play smaller roles in funding terms, but are known for their work in this sphere. One example is the Water Foundation,

which serves as a regrantor for a variety of donors concerned about water issues, with a focus to date on California, where it is based. There are also organizations like Justice Outside, a nonprofit with a [small-scale green grantmaking program](#), that help move foundation funds to small, grassroots groups. Some intermediaries build their own specialized funds, such as Rockefeller Philanthropy Associates' [Plastic Solutions Fund](#), which works globally on plastic pollution.

Regional groups also play important roles for local funders, whether as intermediaries or support organizations. Examples include Fresh Taste, a network of Midwest grantmakers; the Chicago Region Food System Fund; and California Food Shed Funders.

There is a wide range of philanthropic support organizations (PSOs) focused on environmental funders, frequently with overlapping and complementary missions, and most work on issues related to conservation, pollution and agriculture. The groups themselves are highly interconnected, with some maintaining subgroups that are sizable or influential in their own right, while other organizations were seeded by funders from another network. Except where noted, these groups generally do not manage collaborative funds or make their own grants.

Perhaps the oldest and best-known PSO on this list is [Environmental Grantmakers Association](#), which has probably the broadest membership of any environmental funder affinity group, encompassing a wide range of green funders. Its Tracking the Field initiative is one of the few data-tracking efforts in the field and offers one of the most comprehensive databases on environmental grantmaking available, but only for members. The

network played a key role in spawning several other major green PSOs. It also has initiatives that are widely known in their own right, such as the [Blue Sky Funders Forum](#), which is focused on environmental literacy and education.

The [Biodiversity Funders Group](#) brings together roughly 75 environmental, conservation and climate and energy grantmakers, mostly based in the U.S. Species survival and ecosystem health is a focus, along with climate change, which is helping to fuel a sixth mass extinction.

[Health and Environmental Funders Network](#) works to inform and coordinate grantmakers at the intersection of environmental, health and community concerns, with a focus on justice. Pollution of all sorts is a major priority. Like several others on this list, it also maintains subgroups. For instance, its [Past Petro Funder Group](#), formerly known as the Fracking Working Group, focuses on communities transitioning from fossil-fuel-based economies.

[Sustainable Agriculture and Food Systems Funders](#) works with its roughly 100 members, which are predominantly located in the U.S., to support just and sustainable food and agricultural systems. Like others on this list, its work includes organizing policy events, such as a session this year with the White House on nutrition, hunger and health. Another [ongoing effort](#) is to marshal philanthropic dollars in service of making Americans care as much about what's in our closets as what's on our plates.

Founded more than two decades ago, [Animal Grantmakers](#) remains small compared to some others mentioned here, with around 35 members. Many of its members focus on companion animals,

but it also has members concerned with wildlife and farm animals.

[Funders for Regenerative Agriculture](#), Known as FORA, was founded in 2019, making it one of the youngest such networks. Its 60-plus members range from billionaires to small family foundations, and have a variety of concerns, such as health, climate change, water conservation and employment. What they share is a faith that regenerative agriculture is a key solution. Despite its relatively small size, it has also seeded offshoot funder collaboratives, such as the Grassfed Alliance, and it helps organize collaborative funding by its members.

The [Water Table](#) is one of the newer, smaller and more narrowly focused groups on this list. A creation of the Walton Family Foundation and S.D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation, this network is now hosted by the Water Foundation. It works to both bring more funders and funding to this space, as well as more broadly ensure the resilience and sustainability of watersheds and water systems amid a rapidly changing climate.

### Association Spotlight



ENVIRONMENTAL GRANTMAKERS ASSOCIATION

The Environmental Grantmakers Association (EGA) has grown from 12 member foundations when it was established in 1987 to over 200 organizations. Though EGA is not a grantmaker, its members have collectively funded more than \$1 Billion for environmental causes worldwide. EGAs participating organizations include large funders such as C.S. Mott and Packard, as well as, small to mid-sized foundations including As You Sow and Kalliopeia.

# Fundraising Now

Fundraisers and leaders at conservation, pollution and agriculture organizations say the space is rich with both uncertainty and possibility, both due to changes in foundation practices and as organizations work to determine—and publicize—how they can play a role in battling climate change.

“Everything is in sort of a flux. There are a lot of opportunities coming on board,” said Tona Simpson, managing director of foundation relations for Ducks Unlimited, a Memphis, Tennessee-based conservation group. “I think there are a lot of people trying to figure out, ‘What is our best place in this space?’” she added.

In 2022 conversations with fundraisers and leaders, many noted changes in grantmaker priorities, particularly on equity, the growing role of donor-advised funds and intermediaries, and the particular influences of major donors. All saw both possibility and concerns in these trends.

More than any other shift, fundraisers emphasized that foundations are putting a new focus on how grantees can support diversity, equity and inclusion, even though some foundations are only starting on that journey themselves. This lens reflects the gradual implementation of pledges foundations made after the racial justice protests of 2020.

For instance, Lee Bodner, president of the New Venture Fund, said that the funding intermediary’s portfolio once largely focused on federal policy and traditional conservation and environmental goals. That’s changed. The fund’s “biggest projects, our most exciting projects” are mostly centered on equity, he said.

Conservation funders are increasingly seeking direct relationships with grassroots and movement organizations focused on equity, Bodner said. Diane Regas, president and CEO of the Trust for Public Land, sees an even broader trend of foundations looking to fund community groups directly.

Along with equity, climate change has become a dominant frame for fundraisers across these areas. Joseph Otis Minott, executive director and chief counsel of the Pennsylvania-based Clean Air Council, told IP that most funders in the pollution space are primarily focused on climate change now, rather than the air pollution and public health concerns that brought foundations to the space in the past. New focus on climate change can result in funding fairly similar work as before, he said.

In the conservation arena, some fundraisers reported less support for traditional forms of conservation, particularly land acquisition, with many foundations shifting focus to climate change and energy systems, or changing strategies to focus on policy advocacy.

The focus on climate within the space is big and growing bigger. With a new climate bill authorizing hundreds of billions of dollars of new federal investments, foundations are supporting organizations that aim to guide and influence that spending, continuing a longer-term trend of funders looking to leverage other sources of funding through their grantmaking, Bodner said.

Fundraisers from across all three sectors said support from donor-advised funds (DAFs) has grown substantially. The Clean Air Council, for instance, has seen its DAF donations double in the last two years, according to Minott. DAF windfalls have helped groups get funding for work that

foundations typically do not support, such as more contentious forms of advocacy. They've also helped some fundraisers broaden who they can reach, sometimes with little or no work required. "They're able to help us reach a larger and more diverse donor pool," Regas said.

Yet along with appreciation, most expressed some concerns about how DAFs operate. With checks typically coming straight from massive sponsor organizations like Fidelity Charitable, often with no contact information available for the donors, a key concern for fundraisers is their inability to follow up with new benefactors personally.

"As a front-line fundraiser, I'm seeking to build a personal, warm, dynamic, transparent partnership with donors and potential supporters," said Bland of GFI. "Working through the donor-advised fund staff... sometimes doesn't give us quite the same ability to build that kind of meaningful partnership."

### Inside Philanthropy August 2020 Survey

*"Grassroots organizing and building people power is essential to broad sweeping transformation yet is too often underfunded and smaller groups are often having to compete for small amounts of funding. Also, we need more equity in funding groups led by BIPOC. BIG greens get too much of the funding."*  
—Fundraiser, Brevard, North Carolina

Ballooning billionaire wealth, particularly in the technology sector, has been a boon for many conservation, pollution and agriculture-focused organizations. Groups like the Clean Air Task Force have benefited from an influx of wealthy entrepreneurs, often from technology backgrounds, who are passionate about the issues and interested in digging into the nitty-gritty details of prospective grantees' programs.

Often, these donors identify with the concept of "effective altruism," following the philosophy and giving approach advocated by writer and activist Peter Singer, which emphasizes using evidence and reason to figure out how to benefit others as much as possible, and taking action on that basis. This approach is often boiled down to "using data to identify projects that do the most good for the largest number of people who are most marginalized on the planet." These philanthropists are creating a new generation of major groups, such as the Good Food Institute, which has grown from two people in 2016 to a staff of 150, coordinating with a globe-spanning network of partners.

At the same time, a focus on metrics among this group of donors means relationships or charismatic vision are valued less than measurable results. "You have to earn your bread every day and show performance," said Armond Cohen, co-founder and president of Clean Air Task Force. "It's actually a great discipline, but the fundraising... has to be much more robust."

Amazon founder Jeff Bezos, with his \$10 billion, climate-focused Bezos Earth Fund, is one of several new, widely known mega-donors that have sent conservation, pollution and agriculture fundraisers scrambling to be noticed. "When you have somebody with that amount of money, there's going to be a lot of ripple effects," Simpson said. "Every conservation board of directors went to their fundraising staff and said, 'How do we get a piece of that?'"

As in other fields, fundraisers' leading concern about certain mega-donors, whether it's Bezos, MacKenzie Scott, Laurene Powell Jobs or any other mercurial billionaire, is that there's often no public avenue through which organizations can introduce

themselves, let alone make a pitch. Sometimes, there isn't even a website or any other guide – other than their publicized funding – to illuminate the donor's priorities.

While some big donors look around the globe for potential causes to support, major donors can also be an important source of support for local projects in this space. Regas mentioned a case of a donor funding a "Central Park" for Bozeman, Montana, where visitors could learn to fly fish. These projects can support equity and act as models to be scaled nationally, but they start at home. "One thing that really distinguishes some of the individual donors, I would say, is the passion for making their own community or their own state better," said Regas. "It's not just ethereal policy that everyone knows is important but you can't see and touch."

Several fundraisers noted that fiscal sponsorship has become much more common in environmental philanthropy over the last five to 10 years. Projects like the Environmental Justice Data Fund and the

Campaign for Nature have turned to intermediaries such as the New Venture Fund and the Resources Legacy Fund, respectively, for fiscal sponsorship support.

But fiscal sponsorship is only one aspect of such groups' role. Funders use intermediaries for a variety of reasons, including ease of multifunder collaboration, reputational distance for experimental projects, incubation services for new social entrepreneurs, and expertise in a particular place or region.

"The beauty of intermediaries and fiscal sponsorships is that we can do a lot of different things," said Bodner of the New Venture Fund, one of the field's biggest operations.

At the same time, as with DAFs, some fundraisers say intermediaries can complicate outreach. Minott recalled coming across foundations whose missions seemed like a perfect fit for his organization, only to be told that all such funding is channeled through an intermediary. Others find certain intermediaries opaque. "Sometimes, you don't know exactly who you're talking to or what mission you should be dealing with," Simpson said.

One of the perennial challenges of raising money has not changed: It's hard to recruit talented, experienced fundraisers, and turnover can be high. Organizations that have successfully onboarded and retained good fundraisers say an openness to remote work and nontraditional candidates has been key. All these realities hold true in this sector.

Another challenge for some organizations – also not unique to these fields – is deciding when to use development specialists and when to involve program staff. The latter have the deepest expertise,

**Intermediary Spotlight**



RESOURCES LEGACY FUND®  
CREATIVE SOLUTIONS. LASTING RESULTS.

The Resources Legacy Fund (RLF) has helped conserve over 5 million acres of land, aided in advancing new approaches to environmental policies and generated over \$30 billion in new public funding for environmental conservation. Established with the help of funding from the Packard Foundation, RLF continues to build and develop relationships with underserved and Indigenous communities that are "driving conservation solutions to today's intersecting issues of climate change, community health, and social equity."

but fundraising time is time spent not doing the actual work. “That tension is what we’re trying to grapple with right now,” said Matt Walker, advocacy director at Clean Air Council.

Despite the challenges, several organizations were growing their fundraising teams as of late 2022. Clean Air Task Force’s development department has expanded from one person to 11 staffers, while Ducks Unlimited is looking to hire 10 new fundraisers. Others are taking first steps, like the Resources Legacy Fund, which is bringing on its first-ever development director.

In a time of uncertainty, Simpson at Ducks Unlimited isn’t alone in seeing possibilities, or at least a need to make a more vocal case for funding. “What seems like maybe a negative storm of events can be a positive storm of events,” she said. “Natural disasters bring a lot of awareness to some of the things that we could be doing better” as a society to ensure a better future. “I see that as a strong opportunity.”

## Collaboration Spotlight: Protecting Our Planet Challenge



In late 2021, nine organizations pledged \$5 billion over 10 years to create, expand and manage more protected swathes of land and sea worldwide. The effort supports the international campaign to protect 30% of the planet’s land and waters by 2030, known as 30x30. By the organizers’ account, it is the largest private funding commitment for biodiversity conservation. By any account, it is a lot of money for a critical cause. Funders include the Bezos Earth Fund (\$1B), Wyss Foundation (\$500M), Bloomberg Philanthropies, Rob and Melani Walton Foundation and the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation.

# An Analysis of Opportunities & Challenges

Funders that focus on conservation, pollution and agriculture share intersecting and overlapping opportunities and threats, alongside distinct and unique considerations. Strengths and weaknesses tend to be more sector-specific, but there are also issues that are cross-cutting.

Climate change is a massive threat for this area of grantmaking, but growing public awareness does present opportunities. The planetary emergency is a complexity multiplier, and that holds true for work on conservation, agriculture and pollution.

Conservation models may not work as temperatures shift, agriculture is changing rapidly and an alternative energy wave may introduce new pollution threats. Yet climate change is also bringing new approaches, new funders and new ideas. As with any complex and far-reaching emergency, it is demanding wider collaboration and coordination both among funders and with their stakeholders, whether governments, Indigenous communities or nonprofit organizations.

Some experts told IP that one of this area's traditional weaknesses is its siloed nature, not just into the three categories explored here, but into groups focused on water, land or health. Another weakness is that it remains a low priority for most high-net-worth family donors, both in the United States and abroad, though time-limited foundations do treat it as a greater priority, as explored in a pair of [reports](#) by Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors and Campden Wealth.

Climate considerations and an equity-driven push to pursue more intersectional approaches may be driving both more collaboration and more cross-segment work in these areas.

Collaboration between funders has been a strength across priorities. McDonald at the Walton Family Foundation highlighted the role it has played in water funding. Collaborations like the Water Solutions Fund and Water Table have brought tens of millions of dollars into that issue. "That's a big strength in that sector," she said.

Regional collaborative groups have also grown in number and activity, such as Chesapeake Bay Funders Network or the newly developing group of Texas water funders, partly demonstrating how vital these issues are becoming to local communities. "Foundations don't always play well together, so to see a lot more energy around that is pretty exciting," McDonald said.

Sector-wide weaknesses are similar to those afflicting all grantmakers. While some progress has been made, many say the sector suffers from the traditional blinders of philanthropy. "We continue to be ivory-tower-oriented, we continue to still not extend ourselves enough to our grantees and to our partners, we continue to think that we know the answer even when we don't," McDonald said. Silos can also be an issue, with some funders focused narrowly on water, land or health, and lacking awareness of adjacent work.

A weakness unique to the sector, according to some, is the zero-sum scramble among green groups that foundations often reinforce, with groups feeling pressure to lead projects to win more funding. "The biggest threat in these areas is competition between NGOs and grantees," said Grady. "I feel like competition is worse in the environment field than it is in other fields." More collaboration and

intersectional strategies are needed to overcome this history.

Within conservation, some funders see strength in the diversity of the field's grantmakers. The field spans national, regional, state and local grantmakers, as well as private, corporate and community foundations. With diversity of geography, size and perspective, it's a big tent with lots of approaches. However, racial equity focus has not always been the norm in this area of philanthropy. Racial diversity within the ranks of environmental grantmakers has started to shift in recent years, according to measures like Green 2.0. But many say the fields of conservation, pollution and agriculture have a long way to go in reorienting toward a true intersectional equity lens.

Conservation experts also say that at a time of deep partisan divides, the generally bipartisan support for conservation has been a source of strength for philanthropy. It remains to be seen whether that can

hold in a hyper-partisan environment and as the field increasingly integrates the still politically charged topic of climate change.

Within agriculture, some experts cited its visual and tangible nature as a strength. Whether it's shoppers picking up produce or rural communities experiencing the smells and sights of agricultural operations, agriculture provides a direct experience, unlike other sectors. "The immediacy of agriculture to human nutrition in our daily lives is becoming more and more apparent," Grady said.

Pollution, by contrast, has traditionally struggled to make the same link, both with funders or the broader public. Whether driving fossil-fuel-consuming vehicles or sending our trash to a landfill, pollution is often invisible to everyone but the communities that share a fence line with a local dump or chemicals plant. Pollution can exist solely as an abstract negative concept that is a collective responsibility, but which oil companies and other interests have sought to portray as an individual responsibility.

Agriculture funders face the challenging modern-day financial realities confronting those trying to make a living as modest-scale farmers or ranchers. "One of the threats in this space is the economic viability of this work when philanthropy is not involved," said Lehman of Fresh Taste. Carbon credit programs offer a potential new revenue stream, but that area is still struggling to come up with legitimate means of measurement.

In conservation philanthropy, a deeper engagement with equity and justice may require a more fundamental shift in how the field operates, what it prioritizes, and particularly, who it benefits. "Protecting land, particularly for its own sake, has

### Collaboration Spotlight



Following years of collaboration, these two partners launched the Appalachian Landscapes Protection Fund in 2021. The \$18 million initiative aims to conserve the rugged mountain range, ensuring it is climate resilient, while also considering how investments can maximize the carbon-capture potential of the chosen forests and advance equity for the region's communities. Significant but not massive in dollar terms, this fund shows how grantmakers and grantees are attempting to integrate top concerns — climate and equity — into traditional conservation goals.

become a more difficult investment to defend in the face of social concern with equity, and with a variety of other factors, like public health crisis and economic recession,” said Clarke of William Penn.

The large sums of forthcoming federal spending represent a generational opportunity, whether from the stimulus and infrastructure bills, or the climate provisions in the Inflation Reduction Act. Such investments could have a transformational impact for cities, states and regions that can successfully secure funding, but the process is long and many communities lack the expertise to secure funding. “We need to be thinking about what the durable strategies are. How do you build capacity to influence these things over the long term?” said McDonald.

The Biden administration’s 30x30 plan to conserve 30 percent of the nation’s land and waters by 2030 is another massive opportunity. While the proposal has attracted expected political criticism, conservation has long won bipartisan support, particularly at local levels, where voting preferences are unlikely to change how you feel about preserving the nearby lake.

Shifts in practice offer other new opportunities. Grantmakers throughout this space are taking first steps in supporting Indigenous-led projects and giving more direct support instead of channeling funding through major green groups. Such changes may help activate communities, resource different ideas and bring about other unexpected shifts.

With government opportunities taking center stage, some urge foundations to think in more nuanced terms about presidential administrations. During the Trump administration, McDonald felt most foundations gave up on trying to advance

policies through the federal government, though there were areas where some progress was possible. “We do have friendlies,” she said. With the Biden administration now calling the shots, she is concerned the pendulum may have swung too far the other way. She says it can be important to pressure even your friends, of which she has many in the current administration. “We would probably benefit from taking off our rose-colored glasses occasionally,” she said.

Stepping back further, it has become clear that major threats to democracy and polarization within the United States have stymied political cooperation and action on issues across the spectrum. Experts say legitimate democratic rule is at risk. Philanthropic effectiveness is a much lower-order necessity, but in the absence of a system breakdown, the challenges will remain. “We are confronting significant challenges as a democracy – and that has had and will have repercussions for the kind of work that we’re trying to advance,” Clarke said.

## Inside Philanthropy

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*“I see a growing movement toward community-centric fundraising and efforts to address anti-Blackness and discrimination within philanthropy itself. Many people are challenging the assumptions of how we do this work and calling out systems that continue to oppress communities...I see these leaders as pushing for alternative visions of philanthropy that benefit people and communities - not racist systems of power that keep wealthy individuals at the top and Black and Brown people jumping through hoops to try and get money to the people who need it most.”*

—Fundraiser, United States

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# Thank You

*Thank you to these individuals who were interviewed:*

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Tona Simpson, Managing Director of Foundation Relations, Ducks Unlimited

Sacha Spector, Program Director for the Environment, Doris Duke Charitable Foundation

## Feedback?

The State of American Philanthropy is an ongoing project. Each SAP brief will be updated periodically to integrate new information, additional data and evolving perspectives. This brief was originally posted to Inside Philanthropy in December 2022. It has not yet been updated. If you have comments or information you'd like to share with us, please email us at [managingeditor@insidephilanthropy.com](mailto:managingeditor@insidephilanthropy.com).