Overview

Conservation efforts in Africa face huge challenges in the years to come. Human population growth, infrastructure development, enduring governance and political weaknesses, intensifying land use change, and illegal wildlife use all are putting tremendous pressures on wild landscapes, species and ecosystems. These pressures also increasingly threaten the well-being of the local communities and national economies dependent on natural systems.

In a changing world, dynamic, creative and effective leadership is more critical than ever. A new generation of African conservation leaders, rooted in their communities, landscapes, and social and political contexts, are developing new solutions, locally-based conservation models, and national movements that collectively have the potential to address today's challenges.
Today’s conservationists are acting and thinking differently than their predecessors. For example:

- Their work tends to be rooted locally, working with, rather than against indigenous people and local communities;
- They are keenly attuned to the political nature of many key land and resource use decisions, and the ways that governance shapes conservation outcomes;
- They have a greater openness to collaborating across fields, using new technologies, and innovating through multi-disciplinary tools.

These conservationists need effective support to develop their personal leadership skills, build strong organizations that can sustain and grow their work, and deepen new collaborations with each other, and with the wider conservation field. They need to be supported to grow as ‘systems leaders’, who are able to think and act at the level of rapidly changing social, ecological, and political systems. A strong support network made up of their peers can help them grow into the type of conservation leaders that Africa urgently needs today.

The African Conservation Leadership Network provides a platform for investing in this new generation of conservation leaders across the region, and helping them grow and work together. The program combines an investment in the leadership skills of key individuals in the African conservation field, with a growing new platform for connecting, learning, and collaborating across different organizations and geographies.

Building Systems Leaders

The ACLN has two basic interconnected components of its design and functions:

1. It constitutes a unique leadership development program comprised of three roughly week-long training sessions spread over an 8-12 month period. Based on the experience and lessons learned from Maliasili Initiatives, The Nature Conservancy (TNC) and the eight organizations involved in the first cohort, the curriculum has been tailored for emerging African conservation leaders and covers individual leadership, organizational leadership and management, and wider systems-level leadership through collaboration and collective action.

2. It is structured as an emerging network of the participating organizations, which is envisioned to grow with new cohorts added annually (starting with the next phase described below), as well as a forum for African conservation leaders to interact with other key actors, such as international NGOs, leading thinkers and researchers, and conservation funders.
The program approaches leadership development through three fundamental levels:

- **Individual leadership.** This relates to how individuals develop their own personal skills and characteristics as leaders, develops self-awareness of their preferences and tendencies, maximizes personal strengths, develops the ability to relate to and interact with other people, and manages one’s own time and health (e.g. motivation, avoiding burnout).

- **Organizational leadership.** This pertains to the leadership of organizations and their management as a group of people working towards common aims. The focus of the program in relation to organizational management includes managing for results, building, managing, and retaining teams of people, and resource mobilization (i.e. fundraising and business development) as it relates to organizational leadership.

- **Systems Leadership.** This aspect of leadership extends beyond one’s own organization, to the scale of multiple organizations and different actors whose interactions are critical to achieving large-scale, systemic change. For example, changing government policies or institutions, or achieving change at the landscape scale, generally requires collaboration and collective action beyond the capacity of any single organization. It requires leaders being able to get many different actors, with different ideas, interests, powers and personalities, to work together to achieve shared goals. Doing this is difficult, but it is fundamental to the kind of leadership required to achieve meaningful change.

Cutting across all three levels of leadership is the ability to build strong relationships based on trust and mutual understanding. Whether building and managing teams within one’s organization, or working to catalyze ambitious collaborations, relationships based on trust are fundamental to any leader. This aspect of leadership is central to the program’s overall design and contents.
Then we will be able to scale the impact of effective conservation models and approaches in critical ecosystems across Africa.
Pilot Phase Impacts

The ACLN was piloted through convening a first cohort of eight African organizations, which came together three times from August 2016 to September 2017. This cohort’s experience provided key lessons for the design of the initiative and suggests that this unique network can play a critical role in the development and growth of a new generation of African conservation leadership, and new ways of thinking, learning, and working together.

Participants changed their understanding of and approach to their individual roles as leaders. This enabled some participants to take on new roles within their organizations, accepting more formal leadership roles which they are now more prepared to take on and deliver on.

“The three ACLN sessions have shifted my view of leadership. I’ve taken more leadership roles in my organization. I’ve learned enough to give me confidence in guiding others, at the same time embracing my new role as a manager. The trust that’s been built over the ACLN sessions formed a strong foundation for deep collaborations and partnerships going forward.”

–SAM SHABA, Program Manager, Honeyguide

“ACLN has greatly helped me in building on my leadership skills, including understanding my strengths and weaknesses, how to manage teams and understanding team dynamics.”

–DANIEL SOPIA, CEO, Maasai Mara Wildlife Conservancies Association

Participants also applied the program’s insights to carrying out active changes in how their organizations are led and managed.

“The leadership training has kept my energy high and focused on various elements of organization development including completing work on the organizational structure, better packaging our core messages for communications and building our brand, and implementing new management practices such as weekly staff meetings.”

–JOHN KAMANGA, Executive Director, SORALO

Finally, one of the most exciting developments from the ACLN experience has been witnessing new collaborations emerge in an organic way. For example, NACSO (Namibian Association of CBNRM Support Organisations) and KWCA (Kenya Wildlife Conservancies Association) began collaborating, after the ACLN sessions in 2016, to advocate for a new platform for rural communities at the 2016 CITES conference which is expected to result in communities having a voice at CITES for the first time. More recently, organizations such as Honeyguide, SORALO, and Lion Guardians – all of whom work in the transboundary rangelands of southern Kenya and northern Tanzania – have hatched new plans and ideas for working together. New relationships, and the friendships borne from this shared and reflective, intimate experience, have enabled these to emerge, and to start laying the foundations for a conservation leadership network that puts peer learning and collaboration at its core.

“ACLN provided the right platform and trusting environment to develop meaningful collaboration and exchanges of ideas. We are very excited about the high-level conversations we have started with other ACLN participants, which could potentially result in immense impacts for conservation. ACLN made this collaboration possible.”

–LEELA HAZZAH, Executive Director, Lion Guardians
Structure

The program is designed around annual cohorts, with the curriculum delivered through three workshops spread over a roughly 8-12 month period. The cohorts have the following design characteristics:

• Organizations are invited to apply for participation in the program. The program targets outstanding, high-potential conservation organizations working in eastern and southern Africa, as its focal geographic area. Applications are reviewed by a coordinating group that comprises the conveners (Maliasili and TNC) and two representatives from the first cohort.

• Two individuals from each organization, usually the ED/CEO and another key member of the senior management team, participate in the program.

• Each cohort will include about 8 or 9 organizations - so 16-18 individuals.

• Participants in the previous cohorts serve as session leaders, mentors or coaches, and resources for the new cohorts.

• Participants are expected to commit to each of the three training sessions throughout the year.

The trusted relationships built through the course of the program are an inherent and critical component of the cohort-based structure. These relationships provide the basis for an ongoing network of support and collaboration. The participation of previous cohorts (e.g. Year 1 pilot) with new cohorts (Year 2 and later) also helps build new relationships and linkages that can seed new collaborations, provide mentorship, and peer-to-peer learning.

The centerpiece of the network will be an annual gathering—an African Conservation Leadership Forum—that will provide space for each year’s cohort to come together, and then for the cohorts across different years to interact, as well as interacting with select external individuals. The focus of this event will be on peer learning, sharing innovative ideas and solutions, and creating space for developing or deepening collaborations amongst different groups.

Building the Network: Next Steps

In building ACLN over the next 18 months, following on the successful pilot carried out over the past year, the key plans are:

• To select a second cohort of outstanding African conservation leaders, and to run the next series of leadership workshops from roughly Q2 2018 to Q4 2018. Precise scheduling TBD.

• To hold the first African Conservation Leadership Forum in early 2019, possibly in Kenya.
AFRICAN CONSERVATION LEADERSHIP NETWORK

Strong leaders. Effective organizations. Transformative impact.