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# Rural Perspectives on Western Conservation

A report on interviews conducted by M+R  
on behalf of The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation

BY M+R

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## Introduction

The rural North American West is facing chronic drought, wildfire, invasive species, and unpredictable weather events. Wildlife are being forced down off the high-and-dry slopes of public lands and into the streams and estuaries of private lands. At the same time, land ownership is being concentrated into fewer and fewer hands as wealthy individuals buy up Western landscapes, farmers retire, developers move in, and multi-generational ranchers are forced to expand acreage and heads of cattle to maintain a livable income or sell their land altogether.

For many people in the rural West, things are not as good as they were for their parents or their grandparents. You can see it in the migration patterns of people leaving small communities, the fewer and lower paying jobs, and the towns struggling to keep K-8 schools. The disappearance of small-town newspapers has removed an important place where communities historically debated and negotiated opinions. As local newspapers have shuttered, cable news and what little local press is left only have room to cover the things that divide us.

The prosperity and productivity that historically defined rural Western identity and livelihood have deteriorated alongside these pressures. Identity, values, and a sense of belonging – all intimately connected to place and way of life here – are under threat and being eroded. These factors flavor every discussion that is had around land and water use in the rural West.

This is the picture that 39 Western advocates, academics, and landowners painted of the North American West as part of an interview process conducted by M+R on behalf of the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation from September-December 2017.

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*“Many people are doing measurably worse, and their subjective experience of that means they see conservation either as a threat to them regaining ground, or as a way to move forward.”*

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When considering the core elements of life in the West that are changing, it is not surprising that advocates and funders are actively reflecting on the durability of the investments made in federal public land and water conservation efforts. After all, there are many ways to achieve land preservation. Historically, the Hewlett Foundation has supported a range of these strategies, and now the Foundation seeks to understand the attributes of efforts that have been successful in withstanding the winds of economic, social, and political change. M+R’s

interviews were designed to inform this reflection as part of a broader Foundation evaluation of grant-making strategies across its Western Conservation program.

What the interviews revealed is that there is a distinct nature to organizing in the rural North American West that is leading to sustainable, shared conservation gains by creating pathways that help preserve an individual, family, or community's values, livelihood or way of life.

The following report includes a summary of M+R's findings, methodology, and a deeper dive into the top themes that cut across our interviews.

## Summary of Findings

The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation hired M+R in September 2017 to conduct an interview process with 39 individuals representing advocacy organizations, landowners, academics, and Western environmental news reporters. The Foundation sought to understand attributes of successful conservation efforts from a rural Western perspective, and what commonalities exist among and across Western communities that advocates can learn from and apply to future efforts.

Our interview findings provide a snapshot of the current economic and social landscape of the rural West and possible implications for conservation. The interviews also yielded insights into the motivations and aspirations of individuals in the rural West that indicate both surprising as well as common sense best practices on how to engage and communicate with these communities.

There are vastly different conservation perspectives and experiences from place to place throughout the “rural West.” For the purposes of this report, we are using “rural Westerners” and “rural West” to describe people who use or own land in Western states as well as the people in the small towns most closely associated with those lands. Those towns might be near or far from big cities like Portland or Denver; near or far from national parks and other protected public lands; and either tied to traditional rural economies like farming and timber or engaged in newer Western economies like outdoor recreation.

We articulate our four top takeaways in greater detail in the pages that follow. Collaborative, community-driven conservation efforts are attuned to these considerations. They include:

1. Rural westerners value conservation because they know their livelihood depends on it
2. Messaging and outreach should embrace the values, culture, and tone of a specific place
3. Don't start with a solution
4. Rural conservation should be personal – not political

The best outreach efforts are responsive to a Westerner's underlying longing for certainty, community, culture, and a good life. Successful partnerships between advocates and community members are built in person, over extended periods of time, with shared trust and respect as a foundation. This model allows mutually agreeable solutions to authentically emerge, instead of one party proposing solutions that might not reflect community concerns or desires. Effective advocates respect the conservation ethic that already exists among many landowners in the rural West and recognize that the depth of knowledge and experience of local landowners and other stakeholders is central to solutions that work and endure. These approaches are ground-up rather than top-down.

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*“With top down, you can get a lot accomplished. But in our society, I don’t feel that you get lasting change. You get lasting change by having it be grassroots up, because grassroots really requires community input.”*

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An overwhelming takeaway from our review is that, when considering the kinds of tools available to achieve gains like public and private lands conservation or river protection, the techniques and best practices outlined in this report are seldom being used. While they may seem like common sense principles of smart organizing, interviewees told us that efforts often fail because advocates don’t recognize the significance of these strategies to the long-term sustainability of their conservation goals, or because they are funded to achieve near-term outcomes, which leads to transactional work rather than long-term change.

The key shift that likely needs to be made is one of mind-set: shifting from a focus on how to get something from someone to how to establish mutually beneficial relationships and co-create a shared vision and solutions. This requires advocates to take Main Street issues more seriously, to focus on local priorities and on creating benefits through joint action, and to relentlessly tie those benefits back to shared rural norms, values, and conservation goals.

This kind of organizing takes time, a willingness to start to conservation conversation where a community is at, and sustained funding and focus. This is not a model where an infusion of funding can push a campaign over the finish line. This model requires working with communities to identify and build long-term conservation goals over time. Choosing this route is a hefty endeavor, but more likely to lead to years of vibrant relationships and multiple opportunities for mutually beneficial outcomes and solutions that motivate interests across the community.

## Methodology

M+R reviewed grantee applications and reports to the Hewlett Foundation from SalmonState, Conservation Fund Idaho, Partners for Conservation, Sonoran Institute, Trust for Public Land, and Trout Unlimited. We conducted a first round of interviews with Foundation grantees. The evaluation was deepened during a second round of interviews with a broader circle of advocates and academics, and finally rounded out with a third group of interviews that included reporters and Western landowners. We conducted interviews with a total of 39 individuals representing 29 organizations. The quotes included in this report come from those conversations.

Marjory Garrison and Cosabeth Bullock conducted these interviews between September – December 2017. The Foundation also shared a draft of this report with several external reviewers.

Below is a full list of interviewees:

- **Ackerman-Munson Strategies**, Sybil Ackerman-Munson, President
- **Center for National Resources & Environmental Policy at the University of Montana**, Peter Gurche, Associate; Roundtable on the Crown of the Continent, Coordinator
- **Colorado Cattlemen's Agricultural Land Trust**, Erik Glenn, Executive Director, Maggie Hanna, External Relations Coordinator; Rancher
- **Colorado College**, Walter E. Hecox, Ph.D, Professor Emeritus of Economics, Environmental Program
- **Colorado Water Trust**, Dana Dallavalle, Director of Development; Amy Beatie, Outgoing Executive Director
- **Conservation Fund-Idaho** (Grantee), Mark Elsbree, Senior Vice President, Western Director, Conservation Acquisition
- **Conservation Lands Foundation** (Grantee), Angel Pena, Rio Bravo Program Director
- **Gallatin Valley Land Trust**, Jon Catton, Vice Chair
- **Gunnison Ranchland Conservation Legacy**, Susan Lohr, Director of Conservation
- **Idaho Statesman**, Rocky Barker, Environment-Energy Columnist
- **Malpai Borderlands Group**, Bill McDonald, Executive Director
- **Montana State University-Bozeman**, Paul Lachapelle, Associate Professor, Department of Political Science and Extension Community Development Specialist
- **Montana State University**, Dan Clark, Director, Local Government Center
- **Mountain Springs Ranch, Skyline Alpacas, Hewlett Foundation family member**, Mary Jaffe
- **Northern Plains Resource Council**, Olivia Stockman Splinter, Director of Organizing and Campaigns; Teresa Erickson, Staff Director

- **Partners for Conservation** (Grantee), Steve Jester, Executive Director
- **Pew Charitable Trusts (Grantee)**, Nicole Cordan, Project Director, US Public Lands Team
- **Resources Legacy Fund**, Deborah Frey Love, Senior Program Advisor; Ben Alexander, Senior Program Advisor
- **Rural Development Initiatives**, Heidi Khokhar, Executive Director; Michael Held, Director of Rural Economic and Policy Services
- **SalmonState** (Grantee), Tim Bristol, Director
- **Society for Range Management**, Jess Peterson, Executive Vice President
- **Sonoran Institute** (Grantee), John Shepard, Senior Director of Programs
- **South Dakota Grassland Coalition, Aldo Leopold Conservation Award winner**, Jim Faulstich; Rancher
- **Trout Unlimited** (Grantee), Scott Yates, Director, Western Water Project; Robert Masonis, Vice President for Western Conservation; Corey Fisher, Energy Team Lead
- **Trust for Public Land** (Grantee), James Petterson, SouthWest & Colorado Director; Dee Frankfourth, Associate National Director Conservation Finance; David Weinstein, Western Conservation Finance Director; Peggy Chiu, Counsel; and Cyane Anaya Director of Institutional Giving
- **United Tribes of Bristol Bay (Grantee)**, Alannah Hurley, Executive Director
- **University of New Mexico**, John Fleck, Professor of Practice & Director of the Water Resources Program
- **Land Stewards**, Laurel Angell, Director
- **Western Landowners Alliance** (Grantee), Cole Mannix, Membership and Advancement Officer

*Cover photo provided by Cole Mannix, Western Landowners Alliance*

## Finding 1: Rural westerners value conservation because they know their livelihood depends on it

Successful conservation efforts in the rural West are often cast by outsiders and press as having been successful because they “brought ranchers and conservationists together.” But often, ranchers and other rural Westerners already have a conservation ethic, and they resent outsiders coming in and assuming they don’t.

*“We are the stewards of the land. We take umbrage at outsiders coming in and acting like we aren’t already doing it.”*

*“I hear this all the time from farmers: We already are the stewards of the land. They want to be respected for being conservationists.”*

*“We’ve been taking care of it for years. We don’t need you guys. You guys want to protect it: We have been protecting it!”*

**There’s a lot of focus among national environmental groups on reaching residents of rural communities in the West with a conservation message. But a strong conservation ethos is already ingrained there.** Environmental advocates work to develop narratives designed to bring rural Westerners along in seeing conservation as a goal (i.e., the protection of land or improved land management to save species or conserve resources). But for rural Westerners, conservation is not the end, but a means to an end. For landowners in particular, they are stewards of the land because their livelihoods and way of life depend on it—and thus conservation is an ingrained cultural value. These individuals work the land. They eat, breathe, and drink their resources. They know what conservation means to their family, their legacy, and their livelihood.

*“If you’re in this business, and living on a ranch, and looking at how things are going out there, and how things will work for years to come, you have to have a conservation ethic.”*

*“Family ranchers understand that if they overgraze their land, they’re going to pay for it later. The health of their herd and their livelihood depends on them taking good care of their land. That’s why ranchers might say: ‘What are you talking about? We’re already conservationists.’”*

In the rural West, people’s traditional livelihood and way of life is being eroded – by drought, wildfire, development, and other factors. This is propelling many people to engage in conservation initiatives for the first time. Smart conservation advocates are not educating these communities about *why* conservation matters but showing them *how* conservation is

both economically viable and beneficial for the preservation of their way of life—and how this way of life and their core values can be bolstered and protected accordingly.

The most consistent motivator for advocates to tap, across all the successful examples we encountered, is almost always connected (but not limited) to economic outcomes. Successful conservation efforts tap into people's need for a secure economic future – their interest in regaining lost ground to have the economic security that their parents and grandparents once enjoyed – and attempt to reframe what drives or could drive future economic security and growth in a community. Many of our interviewees touched on communities which are grappling with the need to stay relevant; the need to suddenly transform their economies; the need to feel connected to other communities like them; and the need to convince others that their history and way of life is worth maintaining.

*“People don't need to be educated on the why. You have to be deeply conversant on the how.”*

*“People have to see themselves making a living as part of the vision of success. A solution that allows them to live in a place that they love, where they can picture their kids having some place in that vision.”*

*“Economics is culturally interpreted. It's almost always the folk economics of how people understand the world. How can we connect conservation to people's notion of the good life? It's their understanding of what success is: providing for kids, honoring a legacy, etc. We have to bridge to that way of life and a sense of what the good life is within it.”*

Advocates should expect landowners to want and need to be compensated for many conservation actions. Even if affected community members believe in the solution at hand, it's seldom economically viable for them to act purely out of a conservation ethic. This is where outside funding and tools come in. Any opportunities to increase the financial incentives for the people and communities most affected will dramatically improve support, collaboration and conservation outcomes.

*“The economics have to work. There has to be some return financially that they're going to see if they're going to commit to going forward.”*

*“You've got to give them the economic ammunition for why they should do it.”*

One group we spoke with described presenting a community with contrasting outcomes of two long-term options: Option 1 was the status quo that would ultimately lead to fiscal insolvency. Option 2 included specific snapshots of what planning would look like, including

revenues and costs for services. The specifics allowed the community to start considering how the status quo might not be right for them.

*“You have to get people to look at the dollars and cents around what it would cost to have a nickel mine come in and destroy the water quality, to have to clean it back to drinkable standards. What does that mean in terms of the bottom line numbers, and how do we then band together so that those costs are not borne by this poor rural community?”*

To pursue this approach, advocates should have deep insight on how to talk about conservation as an economic driver in ways that are authentic to a place or community, which we address in later findings.

What’s more, this finding indicates that rural Westerners are likely to support conservation proposals that include funding for better land management of local public lands. Many rural Westerners point to a degradation of underfunded public lands around them – fires, timber overgrowth, etc. – and argue that local landowners are better land stewards than state or federal agencies with no money to support stewardship. Many interviewees expressed a desire to increase public funding to prevent these kinds of issues that impact nearby communities.

*“It creates a lot of angst because the public owns wild lands without the resources to care for them.”*

*“The health of public lands is in tough shape because of national fire policy, climate change, which some people will talk about and some won’t. Someone has to manage it, and public agencies don’t have the funding or personnel that’s needed. A healthy ecosystem takes stewardship. Someone has to perform that stewardship. That takes funding.”*

## **Finding 2: Messaging and outreach should embrace the values, culture, and tone of a specific place**

Two complementary factors of successful conservation advocacy efforts emerged from our interviews. One is around *what* you say, and the other is *how* you say it – and the thread that connects them is *place*.

- The *what*: Interviewees told us that effective messaging in the rural West explicitly communicates an understanding of the unique factors that make a place special.
- The *how*: There was universal consensus among our interviewees that relationship-building in the rural West should align with preexisting relationship norms; i.e., be built on time and commitment to finding mutually-beneficial solutions.

We’ll first address the ***what***.

When assessing the values that motivate audiences on conservation issues in the North American West, interviewees expressed variations on the phrases: “We just want to Keep Idaho, Idaho;” or, “We’re all *choosing* to live here, it’s a way of life.”

There is deep local pride in place across Western communities, as well as very specific regional characteristics that keep people in these places and interested in their preservation. For instance, in Alaska, salmon is a predominant unifier that major groups – indigenous communities, commercial fishermen, recreationalists – see value in preserving. In Montana, the pride in having a consistently rich outdoor life is ever present.

*“Love for salmon is deep. From there, try to figure out how to move from people’s affinity for salmon, their cultural connection, to the next level.”*

*“The good life: providing for family, living in beautiful places, whatever that means in each place.”*

**Interviewees told us that successful Western conservation efforts result from taking the necessary time to learn what makes a place special, and putting in the work necessary with the local community to preserve those characteristics.**

Messaging that is not tailored to the specific place turns people off from the start. Consider a broad campaign message like, “We should protect public lands for use by all Americans.” Since the message does not communicate specific insight about any specific place, it will likely elicit concerns that the goal (protect public lands) reflects an outside agenda rather than an understanding of a community’s interests, vision, or preferred solution.

*“The broad message isn’t effective any longer. I don’t believe it will take us anywhere right now.”*

*“You don’t need to paint a narrative in national media. That hasn’t worked. In order to build support, you have to be in the community and speak to people in real terms.”*

When conservation efforts tap into a highly specific sense of place or a cultural unifier, it communicates a deep understanding about what makes that place unique, elicits trust in the messenger, and conveys an interest in making sure solutions are locally relevant. To successfully ground campaign messaging in language that local communities will be most receptive to, it is critical that advocacy groups discover (if you don’t already know) what the essence of pride is for that place (or: What do people love about living here? What are the unique assets of that place that keep people from leaving?) and imbue campaign communications with that understanding; i.e., speak the community’s language.

Second, the **how**.

Interviewees described a set of characteristics for how things get done in the rural West that advocates should understand and respect if they want to move conservation goals forward. These methods reflect the cultural norms and way of life in rural Western communities.

First, people in the rural West value face time, so as one interviewee framed it, you have to put in the “windshield time” to drive out to ranches and talk one-on-one with landowners. This builds trust and helps avoid missteps, since we heard from most interviewees that it’s all too easy to get things wrong and turn people off for good. It’s not that rural Westerners aren’t on Facebook, or can’t be reached via other channels, it’s just that they need to get to know you and learn to trust that you see, hear, and understand them.

*“I only visit one-on-one. I don’t even take paper to leave with them. I go as often as it takes to explain the process, and when they get it they really get it. It’s painstaking, patient work one-on-one with landowners.”*

*“They want to be heard! ‘Wow, no one ever came and asked for our thoughts before.’ There are dividends that come with showing up.”*

Second, interviewees we spoke with consistently said that discussions move at a slower “rural pace.” Local communities don’t want to feel rushed into something, but to take time to consider the implications, and talk the situation out with their neighbors and those they trust. That pace necessitates patience and a commitment to be part of the conversation over the long-term.

*“Successful efforts put the time in. They adapt to move at a rural pace. They mobilize from the ground up – landowner to landowner, neighbor to neighbor. They take into account what’s happening locally. They don’t just ‘go local’—they are local. This provides the base layer of your organizing that all other work (committees, town halls, group meetings, etc.) is built on.”*

*“It’s not very efficient. We spent two years with a group of 15 people just trying to frame what the community engagement process would look like – ground rules, principles – so people wouldn’t feel like the fix is in, that we’re genuinely going to come together as a community to look for solutions together.”*

Third, and related to the “rural pace,” there’s a flow to daily life in these communities that affects everything people do. Advocates expressed frustration with having to meet arbitrary deadlines to fit a campaign mold, like having to recruit a certain number of supporters in days or even weeks. Instead, better outcomes are possible if they have flexibility and time to be

sensitive to what's affecting people's daily lives. For landowners, there's a flow to the work and seasons – calving, haying, harvesting, branding cattle, etc. – that outreach and organizing efforts should be attuned to.

*“We have flexibility that we're willing to deploy. We do evening calls and meetings. We know when it's harvesting season, calving season. We're sensitive to what's happening on the ground.”*

*“We know Mike comes in every Tuesday for his feed. If Mike needs to move his cattle off some land, meet him that Tuesday for a cup of coffee to talk about it.”*

Fourth and finally, people in the rural West open up best when they're among their peers. By hiring staff locally, recruiting local messengers, and facilitating peer-to-peer conversation on conservation issues, advocates can work to create environments where community members may be authentically engaged – and not co-opted for someone else's agenda.

*“It works when who's in the room is someone you can relate to: other landowners. You don't want to be the only landowner in the room. What doesn't work is just NGOs, agency people and scientists speaking at [community members].”*

*“You can have all the literature and agency input out there you want, but until people hear it from their neighbor or friend or someone from the next state- that's when it starts to have impact.”*

*“Start with landowners who influence other landowners. If you create a good experience with them, the floodgates open. The areas where there are lots of landowner interest is where people have seen their neighbors have success.”*

*“If it worked for Joe maybe it'll work for me.”*

Staff and messengers should ideally be authentic locals who understand what life is like in a place and can infuse advocacy efforts with a diversity of ideas and backgrounds that facilitate finding common ground. Someone's title often matters less than their homegrown perspective.

*“Air-dropping people in does not work. It has to be [ingrained], professional staff who love living and working there, so they can shake off the bullseye on their back. They have to be part of the community, be accountable to each other. They are part of it. They're not trying to pull a fast one on their neighbors.”*

*“Let’s get a veteran’ or ‘Let’s get X magic unicorn’ is not the right way to think about this. Metrics should not be how many spokespeople you get to do an op-ed or Letter to the Editor. The assessment should be, how are you working in the community? These ranchers want to talk about conservation and they’re tired of being made to look like villains. They can speak to that in an authentic way. That’s how we should back up and do it.”*

*“You have to be really careful to pick spokespeople with a credible, direct connection to resources.”*

When advocates do tap outsiders to help make a point, it’s critical to only put forward outsiders with an authentic connection to a community’s experience, as well as a deep understanding of local realities.

*“We don’t want scientists who come in and give a schpeal. But we’re open to scientists if they really dig in and know the area and connect to useful next steps for the community.”*

*“It is helpful if experts know the area well and can provide information and resources on what to change to improve outcomes and conditions. That advice is respected and appreciated but has to be deeply informed by local conditions.”*

## CHANGE IS COMING

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A common narrative emerged as interviewees talked to us about the messaging they use to move conservation issues forward in the rural West. The narrative consistently followed a formula (explained in greater detail below): **There's an oncoming change that could pose a threat to local way of life or livelihood, but local Westerners can be empowered to find the certainty they seek through conservation.**

The oncoming change is usually an external force that's triggered by humans or sometimes nature: fire, weeds, or invasive species; development; a lawsuit, particularly in timber; regulatory action; and so on.

This change could result in a threat to local way of life or livelihood that is most often connected to a family or community's economic future. People might lose something that they rely on or that they consider part of their identity: access to grazing, the opportunity to feed America, their open spaces, and so on. Interviewees stressed to us that they're careful not to overplay the threat with a heavy-handed alarmist "doom-and-gloom" message.

Instead, advocates respond to rural Westerners' apprehension of change by empowering communities to find certainty through conservation.

*"[Rural westerners are] trying to stave off negative change. Not keep things the way they are but really recognize that change is out there, it's coming, it could affect our community values in a negative way. We latch onto issues that could impact the community in a negative way and get on their side of those issues."*

*"Please don't do 'the sky is falling.' It'll shut the conversation down. It has to be positive. Empowering."*

*"Folks are averse to change. People want certainty and consistency."*

*"Certainty is motivating. The certainty issue is huge on the ground in the rural West. That certainty is business-based."*

### Finding 3: Don't start with a solution

Typically in advocacy, you start by defining a problem and solution, then map out a theory of change that will get you that solution, which ultimately leads you to the audiences and allies you'll engage to reach your goal. But based on our interviews, that is not the case with successful conservation efforts in the rural West. Instead, local advocates build relationships (as described above) and then solicit and respond to a community's ideas about both the problem and the possible solutions.

If advocates aren't seen as engaging in an authentic dialogue with the local community to understand how they view their situation, what problems they see, and what kind of solutions would work best for them, then conservation efforts often lack traction and are seen as simply trying to push an outside agenda. Audiences in the rural West are most receptive to productive, thoughtful conversations facilitated to hear them out about the issues at hand, and to be part of a collaborative process to decide which conservation mechanisms to explore and why.

*“Don’t come in with a prepackaged plan that you want someone to impose. Listen, listen, listen.”*

*“Don’t drop a solution on a community. Throw out ideas. Hear likes and dislikes. Over time you’ll find overlap and figure out how to move it through.”*

Interviewees told us that all too often advocates think they’re being open and humble, entering a community, willing to engage and hear people out (after all, this is Organizing 101), but time and time again, the way advocates enter a community or start a dialogue reveals that (1) they’ve already defined a problem they believe needs fixing, regardless of the community’s point of view, or (2) they’ve been funded to advance a certain kind of change or solution that doesn’t track back to what the community sees as the principle threat or opportunity. By comparison, some of the most successful examples were those that said they waited to be invited into a community or dialogue; those that went in looking for help as much as offering it; and those that *“under-promised and over-delivered.”*

*“Be open to different ideas – really be open. Be flexible. Reassess in the moment. Don’t get stuck in your own stuff. Think creatively and flexibly. Show that you’re trying to find the common ground between you.”*

*“Sit down, ask good questions, and listen. Don’t make it a lecture. Ask people what they want. Get the resources and knowledge they need to them. Show value. Work out an approach together ... Meet people where they are. Find out about their aspirations. Find some common ground.”*

**The challenge to advocates is to come in open-minded, willing to build trust around the problems and solutions a community puts forward—and yet, to also quickly act and deliver results.** Advocates must be savvy enough to use initial dialogue to get a community oriented around something that’s actionable in short order. They must filter through what a community puts on the table and look for quick wins or promising shorter-term pathways that will help build trust for harder, larger conservation gains down the road.

*“People get frustrated by endless meetings that don’t get anywhere. Even if they’re congenial. If nothing happens on the ground, and you lose their interest, you won’t get people back.”*

*“It’s tricky, deciding what not to engage on. We’ve learned along the way, some issues don’t get us anywhere. There’s no rule of thumb but you have to pick something solvable ... focus on where you have the skill and talent to affect the*

*outcome. Ask, 'What will we gain if we solve this issue that contributes to our staying power, our relationship with the community?'"*

### THE ROLE FOR NATIONAL GROUPS

People in the rural West are commonly skeptical of outsiders, and as a result according to most of our interviewees there can be tension around how and whether national groups should engage at the local level.

*"National groups have almost the same level of distrust as government."*

*"Funders keep wanting 'arranged marriages' between national and local groups. That's not always possible because sometimes those national groups turn off the locals we're trying to attract."*

But interviewees were predominantly supportive of, if not enthusiastic about, several roles national groups can play in rural conservation efforts. National groups are perceived as positive contributors when they infuse local efforts with resources, including funding, staffing, access to policymakers, and access to new information or expertise that has been tailored locally.

*"[National groups] can deploy critical resources at the right time. When they have a good relationship with people in the state, they can bring a staffer in for a project at a critical moment where we need it."*

*"These communities don't see a lot of these folks roll through. They don't have the Rolodex. We brought the right kind of people to town. We showed we were helpful."*

*"They can show smaller groups the ropes in Washington."*

*"It is helpful if experts know the area well and can provide information and resources on what to change to improve outcomes and conditions. That advice is respected and appreciated but has to be deeply informed by local conditions."*

#### **Finding 4: Rural conservation should be personal – not political**

Political affiliation doesn't need to be part of a conservation discussion within a rural community. People who stand at radically different ends of the political spectrum can and do come together around conservation solutions all the time. Advocates should avoid talking about politics (even "bipartisanship"), since those labels tend to turn rural people off more than engage them.

*"There's this idea and it's true: conservation and land preservation are absolutely apolitical and non-partisan. The minute you say, 'Let's show there's bipartisan support for conservation here,' you won't get any cooperation. This stuff matters on a visceral level to people who work the land."*

*“Water in Colorado is nonpartisan. I’ve been in the water community for 17 years and I never knew people’s politics. We show up neutral. We don’t have bumper stickers on our cars that inject unnecessary stereotypes into the discussion. The less you know about someone’s politics, the better it is for us to find solutions, because politics should really be irrelevant in water.”*

*“We do everything we can to leave [politics] at the door. You can’t even go to church without being involved in politics, but we keep the Democratic/Republican line out of everything. It should be non-partisan.”*

Interviewees consistently told us they’re proactive about keeping political ideology out of the work by focusing on the highly specific local elements of a given situation. They frame conservation discussions as necessary dialogue to sustain the values and way-of-life of an individual or community.

**Even when conservative rural Westerners see national politics in their favor – for example under a Trump presidency – they are not any less likely to engage on conservation solutions that matter to their way of life and livelihood.** They tend to take the long view that politics will ebb and flow.

*“The timber guys know the pendulum swings all the time. ‘At the end of the day it doesn’t matter who’s in the White House if someone is going to sue us, so wouldn’t it be better if we sat down and agreed to what the project is. Look, we’re Republicans, our President is now in office, but we don’t really see that as changing what’s on the ground here, the local movement, and what’s happening on the day to day basis.’ ... They get it.”*

Macro conservation issues that don’t relate to a person’s individual life or community see more predictable political alignment. There are some clear trigger areas that are innately charged with political ideology – whether specific conservation measures (monument or wilderness designations); land use issues (hunting, the “mountain bike lobby”); or values (prioritizing animals over humans, or when “everything starts and stops with protecting something”). Discussion touching on these trigger issues will be more inherently political until or unless advocates get specific about an individual or community and their way of life and livelihood.

*“There’s a level where [politics] hugely comes into it. In Montana, the ripe conversation topics are chronic wasting disease, the proposed copper mine near White Silver Springs, who is for or against some new national monument, hunting... At that level people really align [politically]. People are looking for home base. But as soon as you bring it down to the less abstract level, where you’re trying to seed fish in*

*the Blackfoot River, or you're the community where the mine is proposed and you're going to have to accommodate the boom and deal with the bust, political stuff starts to dissolve."*

*"Some issues are 'levelers.' Monument designation definitely is a divide."*

One interviewee gave the example of state vs. national parks: With state parks, you can point to a clear local benefit and value. You can look at use patterns and see how and whether locals are using that resource. National parks on the other hand are seen as increasingly expensive and more "other/them" vs "us"; national parks are perceived as something driven by outsiders in Washington, not locals.

*"The more local these efforts are, the more widespread the support across the [political] spectrum. At the state level, state parks are motherhood and apple pie, no matter which side of the spectrum you're on. **National parks may be considered elitist by people who can't afford to go. But state parks are where they come together as families and as communities and take their kids, go hunting and fishing, and carry on the traditions they're proud of.**"*

Advocates should prioritize less abstract problems and solutions and bring conservation issues down to a personal level to neutralize issues that might be triggers, or to advance more palatable conservation goals.

Advocates have to bring issues down to a personal level, because for rural Westerners these decisions *are* personal. Interviewees stressed that there's a deep cultural risk people are taking by engaging with conservation groups or campaigns. In the rural West, people are connected to their neighbors economically, socially, and in other ways that might not make sense to outsiders, we were told. An individual's motivations are going to be deeply influenced by the social risk they're taking when they're asked to go out on a conservation limb.

*"Family and community is really important. When you live in a rural area, you're more dependent on your neighbors to help you out and that's especially true in the cattle business. When you do branding, you have people come over and help, and you serve a big meal to everyone. It's a community thing."*

*"There's a cultural risk that people in rural communities take when they try these new things."*

*"You have to be aware of the social fall-out."*

## Conclusion

There are many ways to achieve land preservation, and many tools in the toolbox to rely on. The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation has supported a range of these strategies and tactics in its efforts to conserve the North American West. One tool is collaborative, on-the-ground work, which this report examined in-depth.

**Today's most successful Western conservation efforts are grounded in an understanding of what drives rural Westerners and motivates them to engage in conservation.** These efforts enter into deep partnership with communities and stay attuned to the economic and socio-political stressors converging on the rural West today. They don't treat conservation as something separate from people's lives but instead ground their messaging and approach in rural communities' culture, values, and needs, especially economic demands. They know the messenger can also matter as much or more than the message.

While the fundamentals of this approach may seem like common sense, it warrants repeating that interviewees resoundingly believe that conservation efforts in the West may not endure because they fail to embody these best practices or establish the baseline conditions for successful collaborative, community-driven conservation.

To build long-term support and achieve sustainable conservation gains, advocates should invest in building long-term, trusted relationships within rural communities that are based on a deep respect for the knowledge, wisdom, values, and culture that reside in those communities. Areas of overlap proliferate so long as there is truly an interest in identifying and pursuing solutions that are mutually beneficial and reflective of the needs of the community.

Different venues and issues will surely require different communications, outreach, and policy strategies. In order to help the rural West find a path through a wave of dramatic changes, with both their economic viability and conservation ethos intact, advocates should learn from the best of what's already working in these communities.

Choosing this route is a hefty endeavor, but based on our conversations, if done right, is likely to lead to years of vibrant relationships and multiple opportunities for mutually beneficial outcomes across the West.

## Appendix

Below is a compilation of additional reading that informed our approach to conversations with interviewees, as well as our recommendations.

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