



Western Conservation Communications Hub: Evaluation and Recommendations for Improved Impact

Updated May 2023

Introduction

The Resources Legacy Fund's (RLF) Western Conservation Communications Hub (Hub), funded by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, supports nonprofit organizations in building communications capacity and advancing narrative change around conservation issues in the West. Over the last four years, the Hub has awarded nearly \$700,000 to provide capacity support to 30 organizations working to advance conservation policies and priorities. Grant decisions made by the Hub are informed by a participatory grantmaking process, in which an Advisory Board of nonprofit communications experts reflecting the

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identities and experiences of the grantee community reviews proposals and provides recommendations to Resources Legacy Fund staff.

Resource Media, a 501(c)3 nonprofit communications firm, conducted an evaluation of the Hub to learn from grantees and partners the impact of funding and capacity support. The evaluation reflects input from grantees collected via survey and one-on-one conversations, in addition to learnings from conversations with Hewlett Foundation and Resources Legacy Fund staff, Hub Advisory Board members and consultant partners, and a review of relevant materials. Our findings also build on Resource Media’s two decades of experience supporting conservation advocacy in the West and our team’s direct experience supporting participatory grantmaking approaches.

The purpose of this report is to help stakeholders better understand the impact and value of the Hub’s work relative to its stated goals and objectives.

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Methodology

Resource Media reviewed high-level outcomes and insights over the past 4 years of Hub funding, from 2019 to 2022. Our evaluation process included:

- Kickoff calls with the Hub Advisory Board (See [Appendix A](#) for an overview of the Advisory Board and its role) and RLF and Hewlett Foundation staff
- Interviews with Hub grantees representing all years of Hub funding (See [Appendix B](#) for an overview of funding approaches for each year of funding).
- Two paths for grantee input opened to all Hub grantees, including a survey and an invitation to provide input through one-on-one interviews.¹ (See [Appendix C](#) for a copy of the grantee survey).
- A review of materials, including:
 - RLF 2018 proposal to the Hewlett Foundation for funding for the Western Conservation Communications Hub
 - RLF Interim grant reports/results from 2020, 2021
 - RLF California Conservation Innovations: Constituency Engagement Strategy Evaluation

¹ In line with Resource Media’s ethical research practice, participants were given honoraria following the interviews.

- Select Hub email communications (notifications of grant awards/rejections, etc.)
- Do Big Things curricula from 2020, 2021 (Do Big Things is a creative agency retained to support the Hub grantees. See Appendix B for an overview of their role)
- Do Big Things Learning Cohort Discovery reports 2021, 2022
- Hewlett Foundation Western Conservation Strategy Implementation Markers 2021-2022
- Hewlett Foundation evaluation checklist and editorial guidance for evaluators

This evaluation reflects inputs from 12 organizations (slightly over a third of total Hub grantees and more than half of grantees from the most recent three years of funding), including:

- Two thirds of 2022 grantees
- Half of 2021 grantees
- Half of 2020 grantees
- One grantee from 2019

This evaluation reflects both qualitative and quantitative inputs. For quantitative findings, it is important to keep in mind the relatively small sample size (12 organizations) when reviewing data. Looking at crosstabs, we do not see significant correlation between evaluation findings and organization size and budget. We do, however, see correlation between responses and year of funding as it pertains to benefits associated with the 2022 cohort approach (all five organizations representing the 2022 cohort referenced unanticipated benefits—such as relationship-building, information-sharing, and shared learning—associated with the cohort approach).

Key Observations

The Hub has achieved outsized impact with modest funding.

Multiple inputs demonstrate that through the Western Conservation Communications Hub, the Hewlett Foundation and RLF are providing **outsized communications impact relative to the modest investments made**. Hub funding is helping organizations that otherwise have very little access to dedicated communications support build out their communications infrastructure in ways that provide lasting benefit and strengthen narratives in support of western conservation.

Consider the following:

- A 2022 cohort member organization was able to include several staff and members in training opportunities, resulting in **a deeper bench of communications-savvy staff and volunteers and a shared language and strategic approach** for the organization. In addition, this organization was able to strengthen its digital communications approach and use additional funds to bring on three paid interns to staff digital communications.
- Another organization from the 2022 cohort took the learnings from its participation in trainings focused on Google Ads and shared them with several member groups, resulting in **several organizations with capacity to strategically leverage the power of Google Ads** for their priorities.

- A 2021 cohort member organization described the many ways the holistic effort to create engagement pathways for key audiences that they were able to develop thanks to Hub support has benefited the organization, resulting in **more members, more donors and more engagement in support of their work.**

Considering the modest investments the Hub is making each year, these anecdotes describe an impressive level of impact.

“Our team learned tremendous skills through this process. We learned as staff, but we also have a communications committee with members and have had representatives from the committee accompany us in the process in learning and strategizing. As we develop our staffing capabilities. We’ll be able to really ramp up in terms of living the vision.”

–2022 grantee and cohort member

“The digital audit opened our eyes to the need for a comprehensive marketing plan for all of our communications tactics (not just digital) and thinking through our engagement pathways holistically.”

–2021 grantee and cohort member

“We continue to witness volunteer leaders and community participants re-imagining Blackness in the outdoors and connected to protecting the outdoors.”

–2022 grantee and cohort member

“Many of the recommendations had implications for other teams in our organization beyond communications.”

–2021 grantee and cohort member

Hub support is catalyzing narrative shift.

In the evaluation, we explored several potential impacts of Hub funding and support. Evaluation data (see [Grantee Survey Detailed Findings, Appendix C](#)) overwhelmingly show that among the many ways to measure impact, from the perspective of grantees, **Hub funding and support has contributed most positively to narrative impact on issues important to their work.** These findings are reinforced by information gathered through interviews.

[Our organization] “is able to disrupt the false perception that [people of color] have not and do not play a role in the stewardship of our lands, wildlife, and waterways or in outdoor recreation, education, and conservation. Our organization is also able to shift the representation of who can lead and inform natural resource management and outdoor creations.”

–2022 grantee and cohort member

“Ultimately, the time to focus on our external communications benefited us as a team and helped us rethink our story and, more importantly, how we are telling it.”

–2020 grantee and cohort member

“I appreciate that the Hub fund Advisory Board and the staff understand and support the need for storytelling in conservation work. It is increasingly evident in [our] campaign work that our storytelling is what engages audiences. And that is much more than storytelling. We are providing a counter-narrative to industrial resource extraction, which is desperately needed in rural communities today.”

–2022 grantee and cohort member

Hub staff receive high marks for the grantmaking experience.

Detailed findings below (see [Grantee Survey Findings](#)) demonstrate the extent to which grantees appreciate the grantmaking experience with the Hub, with high marks across a range of metrics. We also heard this point through one-on-one conversations. We encourage RLF and Hewlett Foundation staff to continue to be relational and human-centered in their interactions with grantees and keep the grant proposal and reporting processes clear, simple and straightforward, for these aspects are deeply appreciated by grantees.

“Our relationship with RLF staff was extremely collaborative. We appreciated the time they took to talk through our project, including the unexpected challenges caused by Covid-19.”

–2020 grantee

“[Hub staff] have been great at listening and understanding and supportive.”

–2020 grantee

“The relationship from RLF and Hewlett that said, ‘it’s okay for [our organization] to prioritize community building as the foundation of their strategy.’ This was surprising because philanthropy wants to always act and move fast. Really appreciated that RLF/Hewlett were okay slowing down and asking how they’re doing—being human.”

–2020 grantee

“It was a really easy process of applying for funds, probably the easiest process, really straightforward.”

–2022 grantee and cohort member

Strategic Opportunities

A choice: Double down on capacity-building or evolve to anchor investments more firmly in shared narrative strategies.

In reviewing materials that articulate the purpose of Hub funding and capacity support, including RLF's original proposal for funding to the Hewlett Foundation and subsequent communications (interim reporting documents, requests for proposals), we find a variety of ways the need and goals are articulated. At the highest level, the goals of the Hub are described as:

"Work strategically with Hewlett grantees across the West to develop communications capacities, messages, and tools that advance protection of priority fish and wildlife corridors, build enabling conditions to secure conservation policy and funding wins with diverse coalitions at the state and local level, train spokespeople to better communicate on behalf of their causes and interests, and develop ways to share success stories to new and broader audiences."

Also included in the original proposal for the Hub are several statements about the value of communications work - that it can unite disparate groups with a common narrative; increase the odds western communities recognize threats to their way of life; help quantify what's at stake; build public pressure for policy changes; and inform & inspire other conservation advocates.

What we don't see in documents describing the Hub's purpose and approach is **a distillation of the communications challenges and opportunities faced by organizations** advocating for conservation policies and programs in the West and **the kinds of narrative strategies and tactics that would help them address those challenges or take advantage of opportunities**. This information could provide a strategic anchor to link the Hub's communications funding and capacity support more explicitly to grantees' and Hewlett Foundation's **shared** conservation priorities.

Our observations of the Hub's funding processes—especially in the last two funding cycles—suggest an orientation toward communications capacity-building. Furthermore, they seem to focus on historically-marginalized organizations, and anchor to grantee needs as identified through both an audit and grantee input. This approach meets a very real and acute need among nonprofit advocacy organizations. And from a grantee perspective, this approach has been hugely successful and provided real value to their work. But, **for future rounds of funding, we see opportunities to more strategically connect this work to the conservation goals shared between the Hewlett Foundation and its community of grantees.**

As Hewlett and RLF consider possible adjustments to the Hub to improve its impact, we recommend consideration of two paths:

- **Path 1: Rearticulate the Hub's purpose and goals to be explicitly anchored to capacity-building support** for historically-marginalized organizations working to advance conservation priorities in the West. This would better align recent practice with stated purpose.
- **Path 2: More explicitly link funding and support to narrative strategies designed to support Hewlett Foundation and grantees' shared conservation priorities.** This could be accomplished

through a high-level narrative strategy developed in deep collaboration with grantees to guide communications investments, which could then be integrated into the Advisory Board's criteria and vetting processes. For example, a narrative framework might identify that building out new communities to support conservation (like hunters and anglers, moms, or Latinx communities) is a strategic imperative to change narratives and build power, and Hub funding and capacity support opportunities could then be focused on supporting organizations that engage those communities.

It's worth noting that the opportunity to make Hub capacity support more strategic in the context of shared goals was also flagged by grantees, for example:

“Creating a web of organizations that can implement the communications strategies collectively and reinforce/help amplify each others’ messages would help the cohort be greater than the sum of its parts.”

–2022 grantee and cohort member

“A lot of work needs to happen with the organizations, a complement to that I would love to envision would be collaborating with others ... can we come with ideas about how we ... maximize those opportunities as individual organizations and as a collective? How do we elevate our strengths as a community?”

–2022 grantee and cohort member

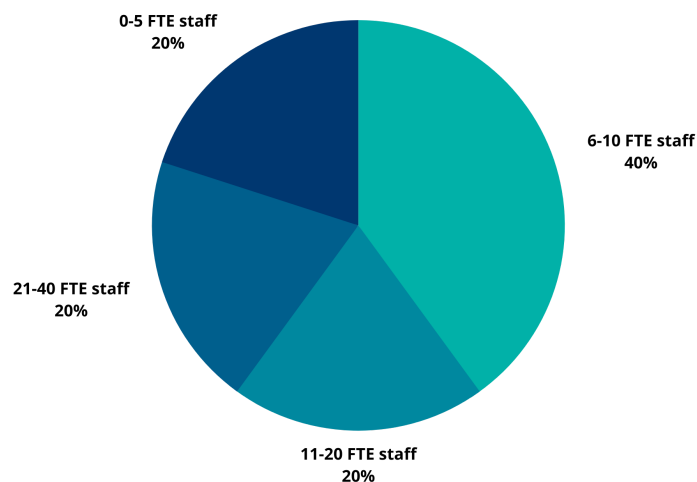
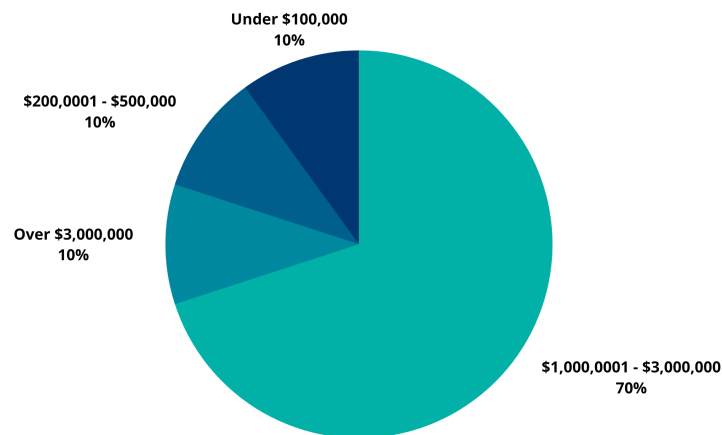
While we see both paths as having merit, we believe Path 2 provides a powerful opportunity to increase the Hub's impact in the context of narrative change in support of conservation priorities in the West while also addressing very real communications capacity needs experienced by nonprofit advocacy organizations doing this work.

By the Numbers: Grantee Survey Findings

The insights in our report draw from an interpretation of materials, interview content and a survey (see [Appendix C](#) for survey questions) distributed to all Hub grantees. The survey findings presented here give a direct and detailed window into how evaluation themes show up across grantees.

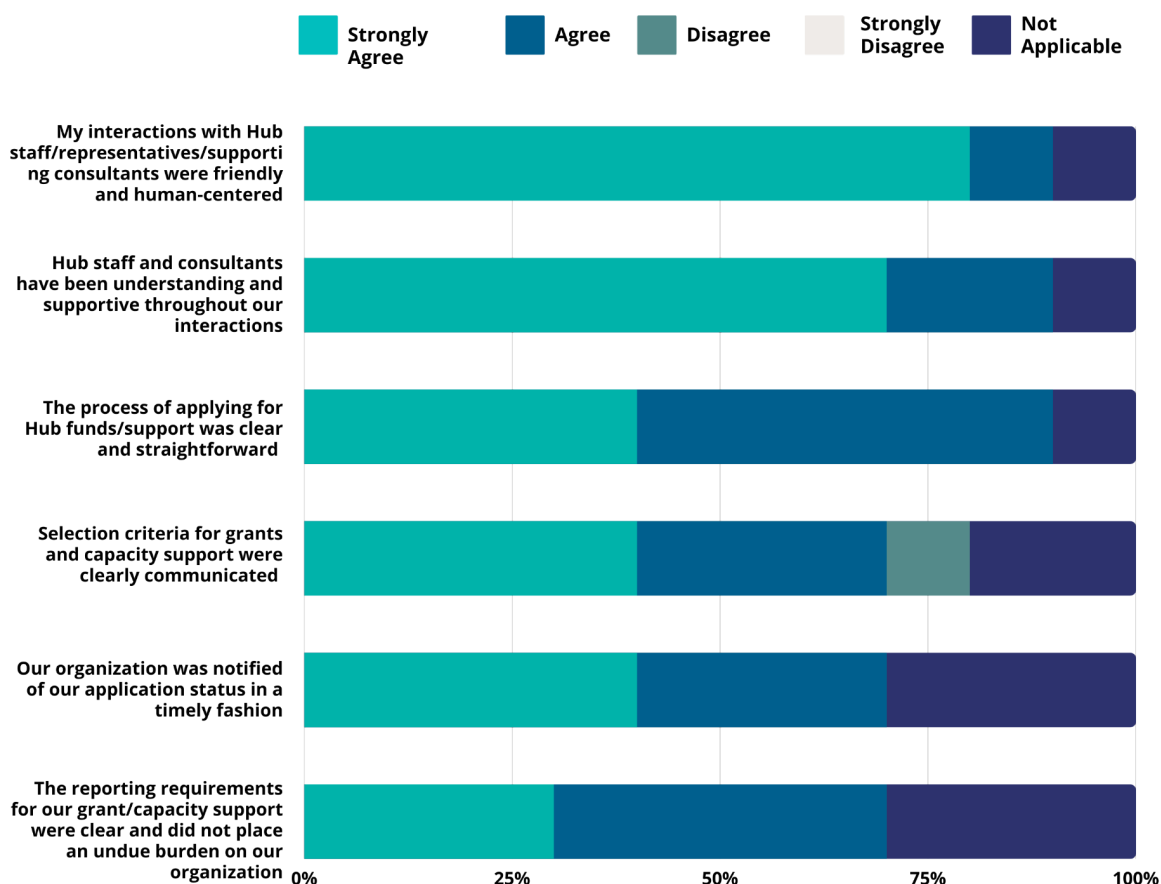
Most respondents are from medium-sized organizations.

Nearly three quarters of grantee respondents work at organizations with an annual budget between \$1 and \$3 million, and nearly two thirds have fewer than 10 staff.



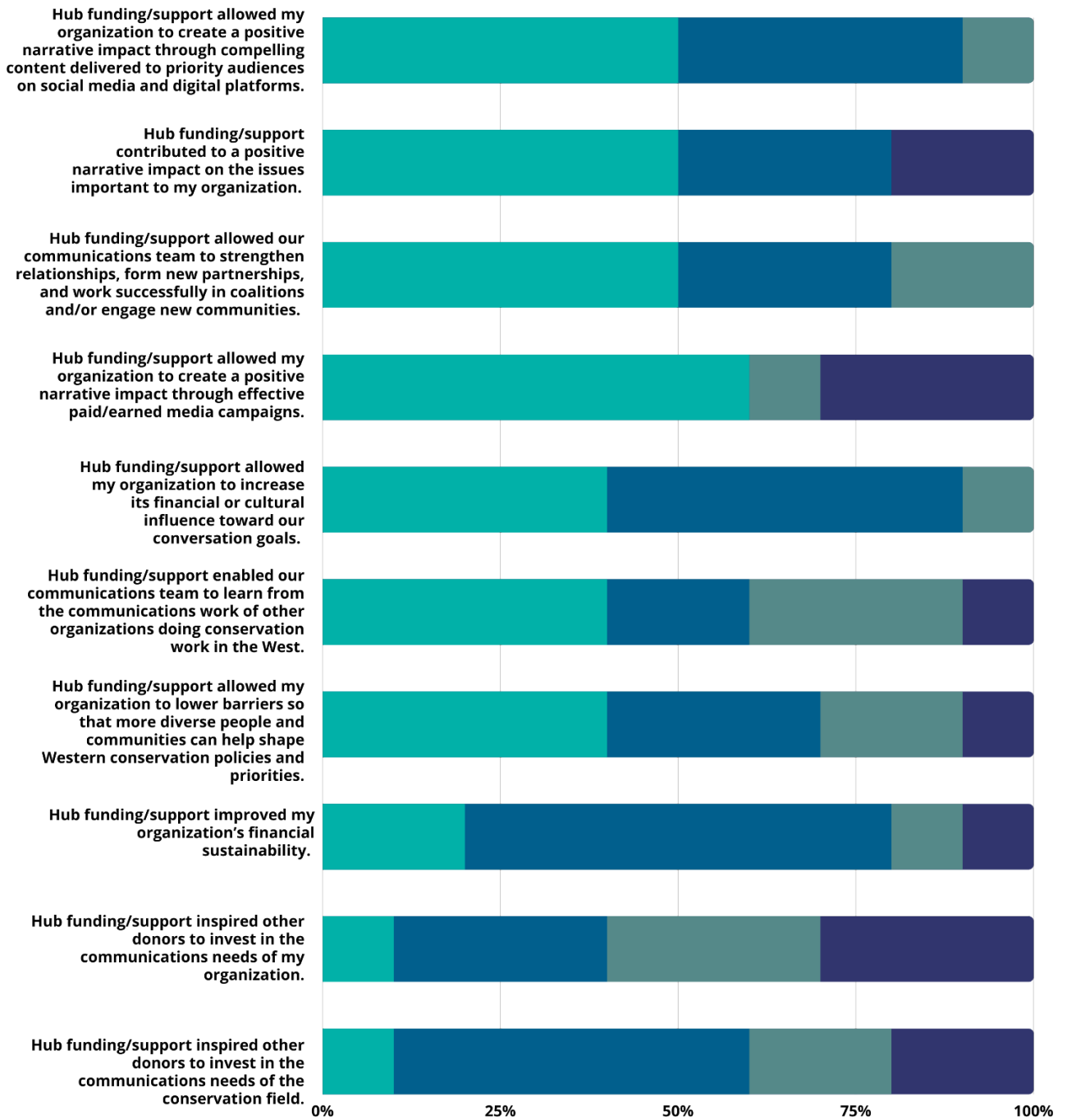
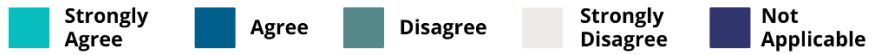
The Hub grantmaking experience honors relationships and organizations' limited capacity.

On metrics used to evaluate the process of applying for and receiving funds/support and interactions with Hub staff, grantees generally indicate a very positive experience, especially when it comes to interactions with Hub staff and consultants.



Hub support led to stronger relationships, cultural power, and narrative change. The opportunity to influence funders remains.

When it comes to measuring the impact of Hub funding and capacity support, grantees give the highest marks to indicators related to positive narrative impact, strengthened relationships and improved cultural influence. They give the lowest marks to indicators pertaining to fundraising, including the extent to which Hub funding contributed to other donors supporting individual grantee work or communications in support of the conservation field.



Stronger communications muscle is the Hub's most important impact.

When asked to characterize the most important impact from receiving Hub funding and support, respondents point to strengthened digital strategies and approaches; higher awareness of priority initiatives and campaigns; better engagement with priority audiences; and stronger communications capacity overall.

A surprise benefit for the grantees? Deepening relationships.

When asked about unanticipated or surprising benefits due to participation in the Hub, respondents pointed to the value of the cohort (relationships, networking, shared learning), the collaborative and generative relationships with RLF and Hewlett Foundation; the application of digital recommendations to offline tactics; and the additional funds to support implementation of recommendations.

Not surprising? COVID-19 and political volatility were among grantees main challenges.

When asked about unforeseen challenges and barriers, respondents pointed to the COVID pandemic; capacity constraints (related to participation in trainings, etc); challenging political context; and turnover at Do Big Things that disrupted one organization's audit process.

The Hub avoided perpetuating harm in the grantee community

No respondents reported experiencing harm as a result of participation in the Western Conservation Communications Hub.

Grantees are eager to share and implement what they've learned.

When asked about any learnings respondents wish to share with other organizations and/or Hub staff, respondents highlighted the benefits of the cohort model (shared learnings) and suggested how helpful it would be to have access to additional funds and longer-term support for implementation of recommendations.

Appendices

Appendix A: Grantmaking and the Hub Advisory Board

The Western Conservation Communications Hub utilizes an inclusive grantmaking approach in which an Advisory Board composed of volunteers with communications expertise work with Hub staff to design RFP requests for each year of funding; develop criteria for vetting proposals; discuss applications for funding and capacity support; and make recommendations to Hub staff for grants and cohort membership. Advisory Board members, who are recruited by RLF staff, have changed over the four years of grantmaking, and Hub membership is summarized below.

Advisory Board Membership: 2019 and 2020

- Alistair Botsóí, then Communications Director for Utah Diné Bikéyah
- Matt Nelson, Executive Director, Presente.org
- Liz Judge, then Environment Communications Officer, William and Flora Hewlett Foundation
- Katie McKalip, Communications Director, Backcountry Hunters and Anglers
- Aaron Weiss, Deputy Director, Center for Western Priorities
- Andrea Keller Helsel, Western Conservation Program Officer, William and Flora Hewlett Foundation

Advisory Board Membership: 2021, 2022, 2023

- Matt Nelson, Executive Director, Presente.org
- Pilar Montoya, Executive Director, Resource Media
- Robert Fanger, Chief Operating Officer, Hispanic Access Foundation
- Yanira Castro, Communications Director, Outdoor Afro
- Andrea Keller Helsel, Western Conservation Program Officer, William and Flora Hewlett Foundation
- Edit Ruano, Communications Officer, William and Flora Hewlett Foundation

Appendix B: Hub Grantmaking over Time

The approach to funding and capacity support has evolved in the four years the Hub has been in operation. Below is a summary of each year's approach and grantee / capacity support recipients from each year.

2019

In the inaugural year of funding, the Hub solicited proposals to support communications initiatives via an open Request for Proposals (RFP) with a focus on innovative digital projects; equity-centered projects that strengthen coalitions and empower people to tell their stories; and surge funding for defensive fights in key geographies.

Nine grants were awarded in April 2019 to:

- Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Coalition
- Colorado Plateau Foundation
- Conservation Lands Foundation
- Hispanic Access Foundation
- Latino Outdoors
- Outdoor Afro
- United Tribes of Bristol Bay
- Western Landowner Alliance
- Wild Salmon Center

2020

In 2020, the Hub issued an RFP for project-based grants focused on supporting diverse voices using digital tools to tell their conservation stories with a cap of \$30,000 for proposal requests. The Hub awarded six grants in May 2020:

- Amigos Bravos
- Grand Canyon Trust
- Utah Diné Bikéyah
- Hispanic Access Foundation
- Western Native Voice
- Natural History Museum and Lummi Nation

2021

In 2021, Resources Legacy Fund and Hub staff moved away from project-based grantmaking and toward direct capacity support. RLF contracted Do Big Things (DBT)—a diverse, women-led creative digital agency that provides tools and trainings on the strategic use of digital storytelling—to support selected grantees in amplifying their voices and stories and empowering their communities. A 2021 RFP issued by the Hub solicited applications for participation in a cohort, with cohort members receiving a digital communications

audit (evaluating such things as software, systems, processes, etc.) as well as pro-bono assistance with the top digital need identified in each audit.

RLF selected six cohort members in 2021:

- Montana Wilderness Association (now Wild Montana)
- Justice Outside
- Salmon Beyond Borders (a campaign by SalmonState)
- Save California Salmon
- Sustainable Northwest
- Nuestra Tierra Conservation Project

2022

In 2022, the Hub Advisory Board and Hub staff revised the cohort approach, removing the audit (which feedback had shown inadvertently contributed to silos and had not proved as useful as originally hoped) and instead provided a six-course curriculum designed by Do Big Things based on interviews with grantees about their priority digital communications needs. Cohort members participated in the coursework together over the course of several months. RLF selected seven cohort members in 2022:

- Heart of the Rockies
- Hispanics Enjoying Camping Hunting and the Outdoors (HECHO)
- Ecoflight
- Green Leadership Trust
- Montana Racial Equity Project
- WORC Education Project
- Whiteswan Environmental

Appendix C: Grantee Survey Questionnaire

An online survey was distributed to all Hub grantees in November 2022. Text from the survey is replicated below.

Introduction

The Resources Legacy Fund's Western Conservation Communications Hub, funded by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, supports non-profit organizations in building communications capacity and advancing narrative change around conservation issues. Over the last four years, the Hub has funded over \$688,500 in grants and capacity support to 30 organizations working to advance conservation policies and priorities.

Resources Legacy Fund and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation have engaged Resource Media, a nonprofit communications organization, to conduct an evaluation of the Hub to learn from grantees and partners how the Hub might be improved to strengthen its impact on the communications capacity and narrative framing of conservation in the U.S. West. Once complete in early 2023, the evaluation report will be shared publicly.

We greatly value your feedback and input. Below, you will be asked to provide your name and your organization's name for Resource Media's internal tracking purposes, but that information will be kept confidential and all inputs and feedback provided through this survey will be anonymized for the evaluation and learning report generated through this evaluation.

Section 1: Tell us about your organization and the funding / support your organization received through the Hub

1. What is the name of your organization? (Feedback will be confidential and anonymized)
 - [open comment box]
2. What is your name and role? (Feedback will be confidential and anonymized)
 - [open comment box]
3. What is the size of your organization
 - 0-5 FTE staff
 - 6-10 FTE staff
 - 11-20 FTE staff
 - 21-40+ FTE staff
4. What is your organization's annual budget?
 - Under \$100,000
 - \$100,001 - \$200,000
 - \$200,001 - \$500,000
 - \$500,001 - \$1,000,000
 - \$1,000,001 - \$3,000,000
 - Over \$3,000,000
5. Please indicate the year you received funding / capacity support through the Resources Legacy Fund's Western Conservation Communications Hub:
 - 2022

- 2021
 - 2020
 - 2019
6. Please briefly describe your work supported by the Resources Legacy Fund's Western Conservation Communications Hub. Feel free to link to work examples, for example materials, social media content and visuals below.
- [open comment box]

Section 2: Tell us about the impact of work supported by the Resources Legacy Fund's Western Conservation Communications Hub

Please indicate the extent to which funding and support provided through the Hub enabled you to achieve the following:

7. Hub funding/support allowed my organization to create a positive narrative impact through compelling content delivered to priority audiences on social media and digital platforms.
- Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Not applicable
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree
8. Hub funding/support inspired other donors to invest in the communications needs of the conservation field.
- Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Not applicable
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree
9. Hub funding/support contributed to a positive narrative impact on the issues important to my organization.
- Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Not applicable
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree
10. Hub funding/support allowed my organization to increase its financial or cultural influence toward our conversation goals.
- Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Not applicable
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree
11. Hub funding/support enabled our communications team to learn from the communications work of other organizations doing conservation work in the West.

- Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Not applicable
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree
12. Hub funding/support allowed our communications team to strengthen relationships, form new partnerships, and work successfully in coalitions and/or engage new communities.
- Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Not applicable
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree
13. Hub funding/support improved my organization's financial sustainability.
- Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Not applicable
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree
14. Hub funding/support inspired other donors to invest in the communications needs of my organization.
- Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Not applicable
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree
15. Hub funding/support allowed my organization to lower barriers so that more diverse people and communities can help shape Western conservation policies and priorities.
- Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Not applicable
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree
16. Hub funding/support allowed my organization to create a positive narrative impact through effective paid/earned media campaigns.
- Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Not applicable
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree
17. How would you characterize the most important impact on your organization's mission and conservation work from receiving Hub funding/support?
- [open comment box]

18. Did you receive any unanticipated or surprising benefits from participation in the Resources Legacy Fund's Western Conservation Communications Hub?
19. Did participation in the Resources Legacy Fund's Western Conservation Communications Hub cause your organization any harm or difficulty?
 - [open comment box]
20. In conducting the communications work funded through the Resources Legacy Fund's Western Conservation Communications Hub, did you encounter any unforeseen challenges or barriers? If so, please describe, including any workarounds or changes in approach your organization adopted as a result.
 - [open comment box]
21. Are there any learnings from your organization's participation in the Resources Legacy Fund's Western Conservation Communications Hub that you would like to share with other organizations and/or Hub staff?
 - [open comment box]

Section 3: Please tell us about your experiences interfacing with Resources Legacy Fund, Hub staff and the Hub Advisory Board

Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements pertaining to the process of applying for funds, receiving funds/support and working with Hub staff and representatives.

22. The process of applying for Hub funds/support was clear and straightforward
 - Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Not applicable
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree
23. My interactions with Hub staff/representatives/supporting consultants were friendly and human-centered
 - Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Not applicable
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree
24. Selection criteria for grants and capacity support were clearly communicated
 - Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Not applicable
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree
25. The reporting requirements for our grant/capacity support were clear and did not place an undue burden on our organization

- Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Not applicable
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree
26. Our organization was notified of our application status in a timely fashion
- Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Not applicable
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree
27. Hub staff and consultants have been understanding and supportive throughout our interactions
- Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Not applicable
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree

Section 4: Improving the Hub's Impact

28. What advice would you give Resources Legacy Fund Hub staff and the Hub Advisory Board to improve the Hub's impact?
- [open comment box]
29. Are there any specific changes to the Hub's design and approach that you would recommend?
- [open comment box]

Thank you for completing this survey about the impact of your grant funding from the Resources Legacy Fund's Western Conservation Communications Hub. We appreciate your time.