

Connecting Conservation Leaders to Advance Policy and Practice: The Practitioners' Network for Large Landscape Conservation

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LARGE LANDSCAPE CONSERVATION OFFERS ONE OF THE BEST HOPES for addressing a range of critical conservation challenges facing people and nature. But it is difficult work, and existing organizations and jurisdictions do not have the ability or authority to undertake large landscape conservation efforts on their own. Rather, working at the large landscape scale relies on a network of people and organizations with the capacity, authority, and civic will to understand a complex web of overlapping and intersecting jurisdictions, sectors, issues, and scales. It requires thoughtful, informed, and coordinated action.

The Practitioners' Network for Large Landscape Conservation is a voluntary network of conservation leaders who are focused on making the promise of large landscape conservation a reality. Participants in the network have had practical success in overcoming problems, motivating citizens, and creating large-scale conservation projects that work for people and nature. Individually, these large landscape conservation successes are achieving tangible, place-based results; together, they are re-shaping the way people work together to address some of the most pressing conservation challenges of our time.

Participants in the network are now focused on establishing a robust community of learning and practice that can provide ongoing support to those navigating the complexity of large landscape conservation on the ground. The goal is to help even more people work effectively across boundaries to develop innovative strategies, programs, and practices to protect, restore, or connect natural systems at the large landscape scale for the benefit of people and nature.

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This article describes the origins and early efforts of the network, highlights its current activities and efforts, and notes future ways it can continue to shape and support the critical shift to large landscape conservation.

Origins of the Practitioners' Network for Large Landscape Conservation

In response to increasing efforts across sectors to understand and address resource conservation issues at the large landscape scale, the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy and the University of Montana's Center for Natural Resources & Environmental Policy convened leaders from the public, private, and nongovernmental sectors in two national policy dialogues in 2009. At these dialogues, participants sought to synthesize what was known about large landscape conservation and to identify the most important needs facing the field. Ultimately, those dialogues informed the content of a 2010 Lincoln Institute policy focus report, "Large Landscape Conservation: A Strategic Framework for Policy and Action" (McKinney et. al. 2010). The report provides a high-level summary of large landscape conservation and five core recommendations to continue to inform the theory, practice, policy, and performance of large landscape conservation:

1. Gather and share information to improve the science and governance of large landscape conservation.
2. Encourage a network of practitioners to build capacity.
3. Establish a national competitive grants program to catalyze, enable, coordinate, and sustain promising efforts.
4. Improve the policy toolkit to achieve large landscape conservation.
5. Facilitate innovative funding opportunities to support large landscape conservation.

Noting the decentralized nature of large landscape conservation initiatives emerging across North America, the report states "it would be extremely valuable to create a network to bring them all together." Moreover, the report provides some early objectives of a network of practitioners:

The primary objective of such a network or alliance is to improve large landscape conservation projects by providing some or all of the resources and services identified above [understand and refine key elements of success, acquire new skills and tools, network with other large landscape leaders, share lessons learned, coordinate across efforts, etc.]. A secondary objective is to build a national constituency to advocate for large landscape conservation into the future.

In May 2011, leaders of 19 large landscape conservation initiatives joined ten resource professionals and nine members of the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy's executive committee on large landscape conservation (collectively, the Founders Group) to explore whether and how to create a network of practitioners working at the large landscape scale. At the end of the two-day session, these leaders decided to launch a new "Practitioners' Network for Large Landscape Conservation" and organized themselves into a coordinating committee—

which would provide leadership and direction to the network—and working groups focused on capacity building, public policy, and networking.

Additionally, the Founders Group affirmed the following over-arching objectives and began to articulate a series of tasks that formed an emerging work plan for the network.

- Build capacity for large landscape conservation at various scales and across sectors.
- Promote and support large landscape conservation efforts.
- Link existing and emerging large landscape conservation initiatives.

Early years

With convening and organizational support provided by the Lincoln Institute–University of Montana partnership, volunteer leaders of the network developed a charter to guide it. An important first decision was to determine how broad the network should be, with leaders deciding that it would be best to include a broad range of people and organizations engaged in all manner of efforts related to large landscape conservation. As such, the charter describes the network as “an alliance of people and organizations engaged in leading, managing, researching, advocating, funding, educating or setting policy to advance large landscape conservation initiatives.”

From 2011–2013, the network evolved from a loose group of people and organizations into a nationally recognized “big tent” forum and collective voice for advancing the theory and practice of large landscape conservation. The network grew to include conservation and community leaders from the nonprofit, academic, private, philanthropic, and public sectors. It gained additional support from the US Forest Service and US Fish and Wildlife Service through agreements with the University of Montana and the University of Arizona. Moreover, the network focused on “right-sized” efforts that enabled it to achieve several quick successes while it continued to grow, evolve, and find its niche within the large landscape conservation field. Among the notable, early achievements of the network during this period:

Organizational milestones

- Developed a charter that outlines governance structure, membership, and central objectives;
- Established a coordinating committee, policy working group, communications working group, and capacity building working group to organize and lead activities;
- Developed and launched a website; and
- Developed and maintain a master mailing list of large landscape conservation leaders and practitioners for e-newsletters and announcements (500+ subscribers as of November 2013).

Contributions to the field

- In coordination with the Regional Plan Association and other partners, developed an inventory and map of large landscape conservation initiatives in the Northeast and the Rocky Mountain states as well as a preliminary list of large landscape efforts across North America;

- Facilitated a series of conversations with the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, Partners for Conservation, Landscape Conservation Cooperatives, US Forest Service, US Geological Survey, Bureau of Land Management, and other federal agency officials on establishing a competitive grants program to promote and support large landscape conservation (ultimately, the Fish and Wildlife Foundation moved forward with a pilot grant program);
- Organized and led full-day seminars at the Land Trust Alliance Rally on large landscape conservation and the role of the Practitioners' Network in 2011 and 2012;
- Organized and convened a full-day seminar on large landscape conservation policy, practice, and performance at the US Institute for Environmental Conflict Resolution's Seventh National Conference, "ECR2012: Working Across Boundaries";
- In September 2012, facilitated the development of a position paper outlining federal policy positions that can support large landscape conservation over the next four years;
- Organized a track on large landscape conservation at the Rocky Mountain Land Use Institute conference in 2013;
- Organized and led a full-day workshop on large landscape conservation in metropolitan America in conjunction with the American Planning Association Conference in Chicago in 2013;
- Developed and administered a national survey on large landscape conservation policy; and
- Organized and convened a three-day workshop for large landscape conservation practitioners in the Intermountain West focused on building knowledge and transferring lessons.

These early efforts resulted in a better understanding of how many people and organizations were engaged in large landscape conservation, where, and for what reasons; how they were working with multiple organizations in pursuit of their goals; what was working; what barriers existed; and what challenges and opportunities remained largely unexamined.

While these efforts revealed many new insights into the practice of large landscape conservation, they also highlighted two overarching characteristics of the field that were particularly compelling. First, in both the Northeast and Rocky Mountain region, large landscape conservation was a relatively new approach to conserving natural and cultural heritage for the benefit of people and nature. Second, people were reorganizing themselves in innovative ways—largely through ad hoc and fluid networks—to achieve shared objectives at the large landscape scale (Figure 1). Both of these characteristics call attention to the emergent nature of the field and the need to capture and share early lessons and best practices across these disparate and widely varying efforts.

Growing in scope and scale

Following these early efforts, the network pursued two higher-profile efforts that sought to engage even more people and organizations and to expand its reach beyond in-person meetings and workshops: (1) an online learning and knowledge sharing tool, "Taking Conserva-

The Conservation Network in the Connecticut River Valley

In the Connecticut River Valley, federal, state, and civic initiatives work with each other as well as with local government and academic institutions.

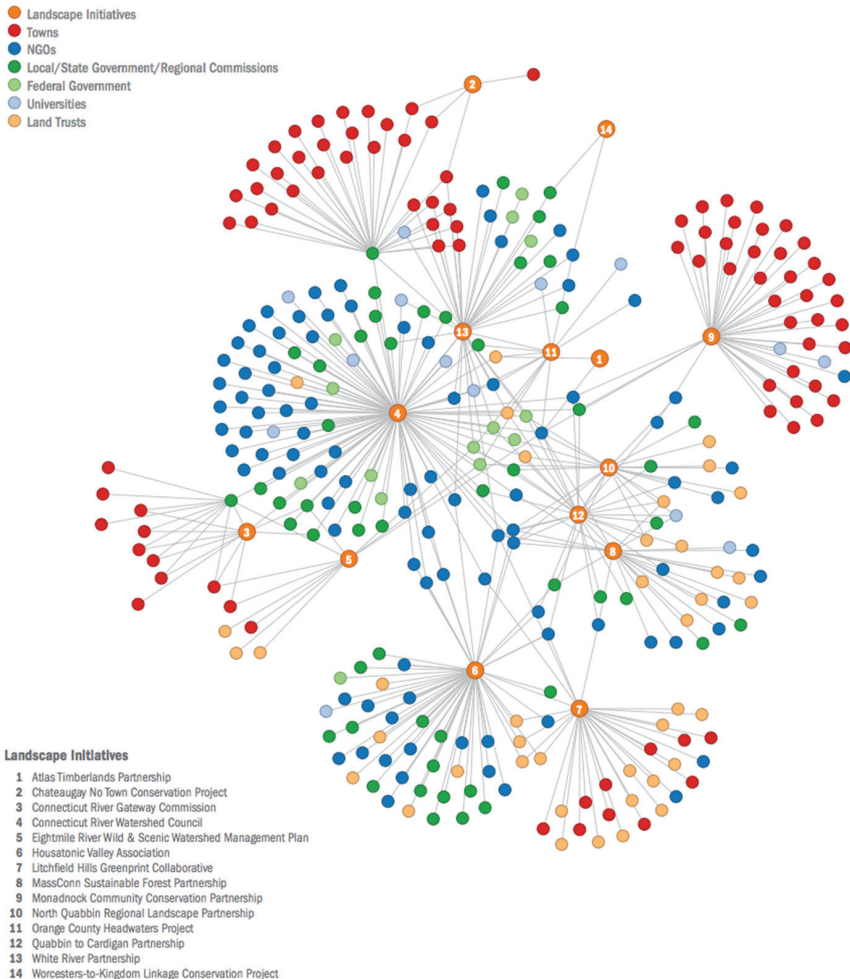


Figure 1. The Conservation Network in the Connecticut River Valley. Source: Regional Plan Association 2012.

tion to Scale,” and (2) the first-of-its-kind National Workshop on Large Landscape Conservation—one that would be organized and convened by a number of public, private, nonprofit, philanthropic, and academic partners interested in the promise and practice of large landscape conservation.

The 2014 National Workshop on Large Landscape Conservation focused on a key question for the field as a whole: *Given more than a decade of promising work, what course should*

we set for large landscape conservation over the coming decade? To guide this overarching conversation, the workshop asked participants to focus on a number of critical questions facing the large landscape conservation community, including:

- How can “*mitigation at the landscape scale*” foster land conservation and economic development?
- How can we effectively *invest for measurable results and environmental resiliency* in the context of climate change?
- How can we, *across the continuum from urban areas to wilderness areas*, engage diverse communities in the green spaces outside their doors?
- How can we *leverage advanced technologies and innovative financing tools* to dramatically advance the practice of large landscape conservation?

Following more than a year of active and engaged planning, conservation practitioners and policy-makers from across North America met at the National Workshop on Large Landscape Conservation on October 23–24, 2014, in Washington, DC, to share ideas on the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead in implementing large landscape conservation, as well as to explore the most effective tools, strategies, and science available to inform large landscape initiatives.

The outcomes of the workshop are well-documented in the report *Expanding Horizons: Highlights from the National Workshop on Large Landscape Conservation* (Mitchell et. al. 2015). They are expansive and impressive, spanning issues from diversity and inclusion to engaging the next generation, incorporating ecosystems services frameworks and approaches, integrating climate change, and articulating best practices for partnerships and collaboration. In addition, the report highlights the number of participants, sponsors, and organizers of the event—all of which exceeded expectations in sheer size and all of which point to the need for ongoing coordination across the many people and perspectives involved in the field. For purposes of the network, the workshop underscored the need to revisit and refine its role as an ongoing forum to examine, explore, experiment, share, and engage on all issues related to large landscape conservation. The National Workshop’s summary report articulated this call to continued action as follows:

Most of all, the conference pointed up the need for greater human and organizational connectivity. Network and networking were among the most frequently used words to appear in post-conference evaluations, (fourth in frequency after sessions, conservation and landscape, excluding prepositions, basic verbs, and other common words). *Large landscape practitioners are asking for more opportunities to forge connections....* The tangle of obligations, expectations, reputations and mutual interests inherent in integration require a non-hierarchical organizational approach, with longterm, recurrent exchanges that create interdependencies. *In short, large landscape conservation requires a diverse networked professional community, people from many walks of life connected by common necessity. Such a complex web must be*

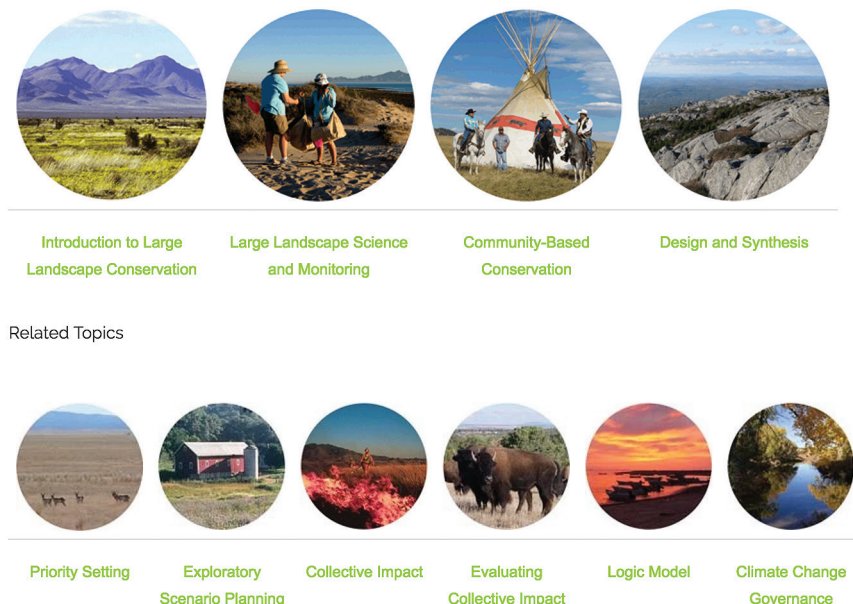
built with great intention. It must be convened by a facilitative structure, informed by science, and supported as a natural solution to issues of human, wildlife, cultural and ecological health (Mitchell et. al. 2015, emphasis added).

Following the workshop, leaders within the network sought to take stock of the outcomes and chart a meaningful and purposeful path forward. That effort started with a call to all interested workshop partners and past leaders of the network to a meeting at the Field Museum in Chicago in 2015. The results of that conversation mark the beginning of the network's current stage of development.

The other large-scale effort during this period, Taking Conservation to Scale, ultimately launched in the spring of 2015 with a series of modules, webinars, and print resources to inform the policy, practice, and performance of large landscape conservation. It includes four core modules and six sub-modules, the latter of which draw upon the insights, experience, and expertise of network partners and affiliates (Figure 2).

While Taking Conservation to Scale provides a new and useful source of information, developing the online tool in a way that would serve as a dynamic portal for both sharing information and gathering new insights from users proved difficult. These challenges, which included both content-design and user-interface obstacles, highlighted how much organizational capacity and technological know-how are required for larger-magnitude projects.

Figure 2. Screenshot of “Taking Conservation to Scale,” the online learning platform; online at www.largelandscapenetwork.org/taking-conservation-to-scale.



Current areas of focus

As noted above, the January 2015 meeting of the network's leadership in Chicago marked the start of the current era. At the meeting, the network affirmed its role as a community of conservation leaders focused on connecting, educating, influencing, and inspiring fellow conservation practitioners to create a dynamic and innovative community of large landscape conservation practice. The network also set about to develop its first multi-year strategic plan and to articulate vision and mission statements to guide its work:

- **Vision:** A broadly supported and enduring system of connected and protected ecological systems across the globe that sustain vibrant human and natural communities for current and future generations.
- **Mission:** To help people work effectively at large scales, across boundaries to develop innovative strategies, programs, and practices to protect, connect, and steward natural systems at the large landscape scale for the benefit of people and nature.

Continued focus on “how” questions

While 2015 marked a re-boot of the network following the 2014 national workshop, many of the core ideas and inspirations remained. Notably, there was a continued focus on the *how* of large landscape conservation, including *how* to collaborate effectively across institutional and geographic boundaries and *how* to incorporate the best science at the landscape scale. There was also recognition that convening and connecting were paramount roles for the network to play, recognizing that large landscape conservation practitioners largely work in isolation at the initiative or sub-regional levels. Moreover, by playing a linking and connecting role, the network can leverage and amplify the efforts of individuals and organizations focused on a diversity of issues across a multitude of geographies rather than be limited to the efforts it coordinates and directs.

In the fall of 2015, the network's coordinating committee identified the following five specific objectives to advance the mission over the near term in practical and tangible ways:

1. Publish an educational and inspirational *primer on large landscape conservation* for conservation professionals, community leaders, and other key practitioners in the field.
2. Conduct a *detailed survey of large landscape conservation activity* across the US to deepen understanding of this rapidly evolving field and to help develop the most effective tools and strategies based on practitioners' needs.
3. Work with the Bureau of Land Management and other land management agencies on an *assessment of large landscape conservation* efforts and their impacts.
4. Launch a carefully planned and researched *exchange program* to bring practitioners together to assist in problem-solving within specific landscapes, sharing results with the entire community of large landscape conservation practitioners.
5. Expand the network's *website and associated communications* (learning modules, e-news, webinars, resource library, LinkedIn Group, and presentations) as vehicles for sharing ideas and inspiring innovation.

Each of these efforts is designed to provide real-world help to key individuals who are facilitating large landscape conservation, often in the face of daunting organizational and political obstacles. To move each of these efforts forward, members of the coordinating committee and other large landscape conservation practitioners have formed working groups focused on the design and delivery of each item. In addition, the network is developing a more deliberate and sophisticated organizational structure, including hiring a dedicated coordinator and part-time professional communications assistance. These organizational resources are focused on ensuring that the working groups have the information and resources they need to be successful.

In addition to these efforts, the coordinating committee recognizes there are many important activities related to large landscape conservation occurring outside or tangential to the network itself. Practitioners participating in the network have had practical success in overcoming problems, motivating citizens, and creating large-scale conservation projects that work for people and nature. In addition, complementary and intersecting efforts, like the Landscape Conservation Cooperative network or the Landscapes for People, Food, and Nature initiative, are spearheading important work, generating new knowledge, and connecting even more people to the important conversations shaping the future of communities and landscapes. Networked together, these individuals and initiatives can not only help each other but also provide new information and insights about what contributes to large landscape conservation success in different places at different scales across a diversity of issues.

There are a growing number of examples highlighting the role of the Practitioners' Network as a forum that can both shape and amplify the lessons from this larger community of practice. Over the past couple of years, members of the network helped lead discussions about the role of networked governance in large landscape conservation. Those conversations focused on a number of important characteristics of networks, from the general life-cycle of a network to leadership dynamics to political challenges (including the threat of "network capture" by a particular interest group or sector) to the importance of measuring progress across multiple dimensions. The conversations led to a special issue of the journal *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment* (see Bixler et. al. 2016). In addition, leaders from the network have been building a relationship with the leadership of the Metropolitan Green-space Alliance, which is working to address landscape conservation challenges in urban areas across the United States.

Programs of public land management agencies are playing important complementary roles as well, including the work of the Scaling Up team of the National Park Service, landscape-scale collaborative projects supported by the US Forest Service, and the Bureau of Land Management's recently launched assessment of large landscape conservation efforts, among others. These discussions and activities provide additional layers of depth and richness to the field of large landscape conservation. By connecting these efforts and providing avenues to share their results and insights, the Practitioners' Network is providing access to information, resources, and lessons learned that otherwise would not exist. As a specific example of the usefulness of partner efforts, the Regional Conservation Partnership Network in New England, whose coordinator serves on the Practitioner's Network's coordinating

committee, recently outlined ten steps of collaborative conservation for regional conservation partnerships organized around three life stages—“emerging,” “maturing,” and “conserving” (Table 1; Labich 2015). This handbook can serve as an invaluable resource for others looking for a road map for designing, implementing, and sustaining large landscape conservation efforts.

Future needs

While the network has been successful in many respects, it faces several challenges as it continues to evolve. These encompass both the evolving field of large landscape conservation and the role of the network itself, and include:

- How to identify the greatest needs of the large landscape conservation community and build the most responsive and effective programs and peer connections possible, recognizing the network’s capacity constraints.
- How to build individual leadership and knowledge as a fundamental component of an active and effective large landscape conservation community of practice.
- How to move beyond capturing and sharing experiences and lessons to advancing improved policies, practice, and funding (of both the network and the field as a whole).

Conclusion

The Practitioners’ Network for Large Landscape Conservation holds a unique place in the larger story about large landscape approaches to conservation. The network is not focused on a particular outcome, approach, scale, or geography. Rather, it is born of the idea that

Table 1. Ten steps for landscape conservation and stewardship activities (from Labich 2015).
Emerging
Step 1: Convene and define your regional conservation partnership
Step 2: Further organize your regional conservation partnership
Maturing
Step 3: Increase capacity as you prepare to conserve
Step 4: Plan and map a strategic conservation vision
Step 5: Plan to implement conservation activities
Step 6: Engage potential partners within your region
Step 7: Engage potential partners beyond your region
Conserving
Step 8: Promote your shared conservation vision
Step 9: Raise funds and conserve land
Step 10: Manage transitions

learning is the prerequisite for action and that without tools, information, and a network of people who can share ideas with one another, large landscape conservation will not realize its potential.

Because large landscape conservation is a new, complex, and often challenging paradigm, its practitioners need information, resources, and relationships that can help them develop priorities and take meaningful action across a range of land and water conservation challenges facing people and nature. At the same time, practitioners have a lot of experience and insight to share as they invent new ways of working across boundaries. The Practitioners' Network provides the forum to build and share knowledge, examine trends, explore new tools and ideas, and advance the practice of large landscape conservation in a way that is more informed and ultimately more effective and enduring.

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