

Evolution of a conservation organization

by Scott Sowa

Aerial view of Saginaw Bay shoreline in Lake Huron at the outlet of Mud Creek showing a complex landscape that is emblematic of TNC's evolution as an organization and diverse areas of work such as coastal resilience, protection of migratory bird stopover habitat, regenerative agriculture and reduction of nutrient runoff, and siting of renewable energy. We take an ecosystem approach to conservation where we seek to understand the complex, interconnected challenges we face in order to devise durable solutions that will lead to a world where both people and nature can thrive. Photo credit: Fauna Creative.

The Nature Conservancy is a global environmental nonprofit working to create a world where people and nature can thrive. The Conservancy's roots date to 1915 with the formation of the Ecological Society of America. In 1946, famed ecologist Victor Shelford and 14 colleagues left the ESA to form The Ecologist Union, resolving to take "direct action" to protect threatened natural areas. In 1950, the Ecologist Union changed its name to The Nature Conservancy and we incorporated as a nonprofit organization in 1951.

The Conservancy completed its first land acquisition in 1955, purchasing a 60-acre parcel of old growth hemlock forest at Mianus Gorge in New York. Since that time, we have worked with countless partners across the world to protect hundreds of millions of acres of lands and waters. We have over 4,000 staff members—including 400 scientists—working in every U.S. state and 76 countries. Protection will always be a core priority for the Conservancy, but today our strategies go well beyond land acquisition. Over the years, we have grown from a small land trust working to protect separate parcels of land to a global organization that takes a comprehensive systems approach to solving the two greatest conservation challenges we face today: climate change and biodiversity loss.

This evolution has been driven by science, which continues to drive all our work. For our first 20 years we worked with various partners to assemble the data and expert input needed to identify and prioritize places most in need of protection. In 1970, the Conservancy created a new biological inventory of the United States. That inventory led to the creation of the Natural Heritage Network, which is now known as the NatureServe Network. These data brought more scientific rigor to protection efforts and were instrumental to the next big evolution in our approach to conservation.

The 1970s through the 1990s was a period of rapid technological and theoretical advancement across the world of conservation. Remote sensing and geospatial technologies advanced rapidly while new fields of conservation biology and landscape ecology sought to respond to increasing threats to our natural world. The Nature Conservancy embraced these new technologies and concepts in multiple ways, from developing the rigorous conservation assessment and planning process of Conservation by Design in 1995 to creating international and whole system programs like the Great Lakes

Program, which launched in 1996. These assessments offered a more comprehensive view of threats facing complex ecosystems, while the new programs fostered the collaboration needed across TNC and with peer organizations to address those issues at a scale that leads to tangible and lasting impact.

As the Conservancy invested more heavily in climate change strategies, we piloted successful collaborations working with global supply chains, innovative financing, and market-based solutions. In 2015, a global situation analysis by TNC spelled out the top threats to nature and human communities. This assessment led to four global priorities for the Conservancy: increasing land and water protection, bringing greater sustainability to food systems and water resources, addressing climate change through both mitigation and adaptation, and addressing the global human migration to cities and the interrelated impacts on natural resources and human health.

The Nature Conservancy's efforts to explicitly consider people and communities in our strategies led to recent revisions to Conservation by Design to consider social outcomes in all we do and to work even more intensively with all sectors of society, including Indigenous Peoples, to develop practical conservation solutions. Acting with a more comprehensive view and approach to managing ecosystems, we focus on global goals with specific metrics for land, oceans, carbon, freshwater, and people. We also recognize that at the heart of any ecosystem approach is a shared understanding and vision of a healthy ecosystem. The Nature Conservancy strives to promote and support partnerships and governance structures that foster shared understanding and visions that lead to policies and programs providing durable solutions to achieve them.

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This year marks the 50th anniversary of the Clean Water Act and Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement, both grounded in an ecosystem approach. Many events will celebrate these landmark pieces of legislation and offer an opportunity to reflect on what is and isn't working when it comes to real-world application of the ecosystem approach. I'm hopeful this period of deep reflection will lead to another leap forward in the application of the ecosystem approach to conservation. These times demand nothing less.

Scott Sowa is the Juli Plant Grainger, Great Lakes Director of The Nature Conservancy.





Protection of places like the Shivering Sands Preserve (left) will always be a core priority for The Nature Conservancy to combat habitat loss and fragmentation and create a resilient and connected network of healthy habitats for nature that also provide critical ecosystem services to people. However, we know we must do more, which is why we have expanded the work we do and where we work as is reflected by the photo at right showing Peter Limbu (right), our Lake Tanganyika Fisheries Director, working with two volunteer data collectors who are helping monitor the fish being harvested from the lake to ensure populations remain healthy for future generations. Photo credits: Gerald H. Emmerich, Jr. (left) and Ami Vitale (right).