

A Call to Action for Land Conservation in America

By Andrew J. Bowman

This past June, I visited Austin, Texas, to meet with a group of land trust executive directors to learn about the challenges they face and how the Alliance can help them. We had a great meeting, but I'll admit that I found myself a bit distracted. I kept thinking ahead to a trip I had planned for that evening to a place on my bucket list—Bracken Cave—which is about an hour south of Austin.

More than 15 million Mexican free-tailed bats make Bracken Cave their summer home. It's the world's biggest bat colony and one of the largest concentrations of mammals on earth.

I've been determined to visit Bracken Cave for a long time due to my personal fascination with bats and because its protection is the result of private land conservation at its best. The Nature Conservancy, Bat Conservation International and other conservation partners have worked tirelessly for decades to protect not just the cave but 1,500 acres of critical surrounding habitat.

Visiting Bracken Cave at dusk allowed me to witness millions of bats emerging to hunt for insects. The show did not disappoint. The sheer abundance of life moved me deeply. The sound and sight of millions of bats soaring overhead was awe-inspiring. It was beautiful. Stunning. Life and career-affirming. And to think that this process unfolds for hours and hours, every summer night, as it has for thousands of years.

The Real Story of Our Time

I share this experience with you not only to highlight what motivates so many of us to do our work and to celebrate what our community has achieved. I am also using this example of species and ecosystem health as a foil for what I see as the real story of our time.

Since last year's Rally, we have been inundated with scientific evidence that the natural world is emptying and unraveling.

In May, the United Nations Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and

Ecosystem Services published a report about the frightening loss of wildlife, warning that, on a global basis, a million species of plants and animals are at risk of extinction.¹

In August, the Center for American Progress published research showing that from 2001 to 2017, the footprint of development in the continental United States expanded by more than 24 million acres.² That's roughly a football field of natural area disappearing every 30 seconds, most of it on lands in private ownership.³

And in September the journal *Science* published a study showing that, since 1970, North America has suffered a loss of 29% of its bird population.⁴ That means that since about the time I was born, as many as 3 billion birds have gone missing from the continent's skies.⁵

Shocking as they are, these sobering statistics don't surprise those of us in this room tonight. We see with our own eyes the disappearance of wildlife, whether they are insects, birds or charismatic megafauna.

Paraphrasing Aldo Leopold, one of the penalties of working in our field and having deep knowledge of ecology is that one lives in a world of wounds. And he made that observation decades before climate change was even on our radar.

Last October the U.N. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change issued a particularly hard-hitting report. It laid out compelling reasons why the world should aim to keep the increase in global mean temperature from exceeding 1.5°C rather than 2°, and it explained just how difficult that will be to accomplish.⁶ The report asserts that to avoid truly catastrophic climate change, we must cut global greenhouse gas emissions roughly in half by 2030.⁷

And a scientific report released in conjunction with this September's U.N. Climate Action Summit revealed that emission reduction commitments of nations under the Paris Climate Agreement are woefully inadequate.⁸ The level of commitment needs to triple to achieve a 2°C limit and must be increased fivefold to reach a 1.5°C limit.⁹



**The awe-inspiring show
at Bracken Cave in Texas.**

JONATHAN ALONZO /
BAT CONSERVATION INTERNATIONAL

Many similar, sobering studies and scientific pronouncements over the past year demonstrate the urgent need for actions to save the biosphere. But as depressing as the news has been this past year about impending ecological collapse, there are silver linings in these dark clouds.

For one, these pronouncements are causing the world to wake up to the threats we face. Frustrated, frightened and angry people—especially young people—are speaking up, demanding action and seeking ways they can make a difference and protect the most vulnerable among us.

Just as important, these studies make crystal clear that, for the world to address successfully the biodiversity and climate change crises, it must take full advantage of solutions offered only by the land sector.¹⁰

And those solutions absolutely depend on the work of land trusts. That is why your steadfast conservation efforts matter more than ever.

This new reality presents us with a tremendous opportunity but also imposes a solemn responsibility. The fate of our nation's wildlife, humanity and the planet is in our hands. Will we rise to the occasion and protect land at a rate and scale demanded by today's realities?

Monumental Progress Needed

I argue tonight that the land trust community must move beyond making a generalized case for wildlife habitat conservation and natural climate solutions.

We need to be fluent in just how much can be achieved in the United States and

aware of how much land conservation is required in the country to squeeze the full potential out of the land sector. We then need to commit to those goals and strategize how we will reach them. And because time is of the essence, we need to make monumental progress over the coming decade.

Let's first examine the role that land conservation can play in mitigating climate change, both by preventing the conversion of intact natural lands and through land management practices, such as reforestation and active soil management on working lands.

A 2017 study published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* concluded that the world's natural and working lands could reduce greenhouse gas pollution in quantities large enough to deliver 37% of the global emission reductions needed by 2030 to keep the mean global temperature increase below 2°C.¹¹

A follow-on study released late last year and led by The Nature Conservancy found that natural climate solutions deployed at a national level could remove up to 21% of annual carbon pollution in the United States.¹² That's the equivalent of the pollution from *all* U.S. cars and light trucks—approximately 263 million vehicles.¹³ And some scientists and NGOs argue that the potential in the United States is actually closer to a third of annual carbon pollution.

To contribute meaningfully to these results, our community needs to help prevent the conversion of almost a million acres of forestland a year and approximately 1.7 million acres of grasslands a year.¹⁴ And for the more than 22 million acres currently under stewardship by land trusts, we must actively manage them in new ways to absorb and sequester greater amounts of carbon.

These are solid, concrete goals, but I want to provide more of a roadmap of just what our community should aspire to protect.

A Roadmap

Tonight, I'm pleased to unveil The Nature Conservancy's new Resilient and Connected

Network for the contiguous United States.¹⁵ The product of years of work led by Dr. Mark Anderson at The Nature Conservancy, this map provides a new way to look at the landscape for purposes of prioritizing lands for the conservation of biodiversity. I've watched this work take shape over the last decade and I truly believe it marks a paradigm shift in how we think about large landscape conservation.

The methodology behind this map looks at physical characteristics of the land and identifies areas that will continue to support abundant biodiversity as the climate changes. This map depicts those climate-resilient lands—in both public and private ownership—and then adds an additional data layer to indicate the location of current biodiversity. Additionally, the map displays lands that will provide critical connections for species to move across the landscape as they adapt to climate change.

Collectively, the map identifies the 33% of the lower 48 states that is most critical to protect—a figure that is close to what many conservation biologists have set as a rule of thumb for the globe and individual nations: that we should aim to save 30% of natural lands by 2030.¹⁶

Of course, land trusts may choose to protect wildlife habitat outside of this network, and I want to stress that The Nature Conservancy's data can help determine the climate resiliency of any parcel of land. And I'm not saying that protecting lands with biodiversity conservation in mind will satisfy all of our environmental goals, including keeping carbon out of the atmosphere. But, fortunately, there is quite a bit of overlap. For instance, conserving the areas shown on the map for the 18 eastern-most states would protect 56% of existing above-ground carbon.¹⁷

What is also fortunate is that our society has made significant progress toward protecting this Resilient and Connected Network. Of the total acreage represented in the network, approximately 301 million acres are already in protected status, leaving a gap of 352 million acres.

If we round up that number for the acres we want to conserve for important reasons other than biodiversity conservation—such as for additional carbon sequestration, the protection of working lands and the creation of urban parks—one could argue that we are looking at the need to conserve at least 400 million additional acres. That's a daunting number, but one we need to face.

The land trust community doesn't need to do all of this work, but let's face it: We are the primary means by which the nation's conservation estate grows. And as government land acquisition efforts remain constrained, we must continue to lead the way.

Not all of this conservation needs to be accomplished within the next decade, but a significant portion must be completed in order to tackle the extinction and climate crises in time.

An Audacious Goal

Based on the Alliance's 2015 Land Trust Census, our community protects between 1 and 2 million acres a year.¹⁸ My sense from traveling the country and seeing the work of land trusts firsthand is that reality is closer to the lower-end of this range.

So, tonight, I assert that our community must increase the rate of conservation by an order of magnitude by 2030, from 1 million acres a year today to at least 10 million acres a year by 2030.

And just how do I propose that we achieve that audacious goal? After all, it will require billions of additional dollars to cover the cost of these land acquisitions, land restoration activities and stewardship of these parcels in perpetuity.

As you know, the Alliance has a long-standing, successful advocacy operation to protect the federal tax incentive for conservation easement donations and to secure federal appropriations through the Farm Bill, the Land and Water Conservation Fund and other legislative vehicles. But we need to do more to help the land trust community markedly increase its rate of land conservation, and we are undertaking a number of new initiatives to do just that:

- Thanks to the generosity of the J.M. Kaplan Fund, we are on the cusp of hiring an Energy and Climate Policy Advisor to join our government relations team to identify federal and state climate policy opportunities that can drive resources to the land sector. This staffer will educate, mobilize and coordinate land trusts in selected states and at the national level to go after the resources land trusts need to bring natural climate solutions to scale. And we will do so by “staying in our lane”—we can champion the potential of the land sector without taking on such a broad climate agenda that we put at risk the strong bipartisan support we enjoy.
- As part of our Land and Climate Program, we are already assisting land trusts that have large portfolios of conserved lands to access carbon offset markets, enabling them to monetize the carbon sequestration capacity of the lands they steward. We plan to launch in 2020 a pilot aggregation platform to help land trusts with smaller holdings access those markets.
- We will publish a primer for land trusts on carbon offset markets in early 2020 that will include guidance on how land trusts can draft conservation easements in a way that will ensure that their protected lands will be attractive to those markets.
- And we launched a land capital regrant operation this year that enables us to collect large amounts of land capital from foundations and government agencies, and then distribute those funds to land trusts following criteria set by the donors. We are currently regranteeing land capital generously provided by the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation to protect climate-resilient lands in the Pacific Northwest that advance wildlife conservation, and we hope to expand our land capital regranteeing to new locations and new sources of funding in 2020.

These programs will deliver significantly greater resources to land trusts so they can accelerate the pace of their land conservation work. However, for our advocacy efforts to succeed, and for us to tap into the financial and political support from the public that we will need to reach the necessary rate of land conservation, we need to do more. Just as we need to contemplate a completely different scale of land acquisition transactions and land restoration activities, we need to vastly increase the number of people engaged with the land trust community—a number which currently totals about 5 million people.¹⁹

The Relevance Campaign

Last year I told you of our intention to design, launch and lead a nationwide public engagement campaign to elevate the importance of land conservation as a priority in every community. This “relevance campaign” will go beyond the rural and exurban areas that have been our community’s historic focus and turn our attention to urban communities as well. Framed explicitly as a “call to action” campaign rather than a public awareness campaign, the ultimate measure of success will be that land and water conservation become a priority issue of public concern, with a commensurate investment of public resources.

Over the past year, the Alliance retained professionals to study the viability of the campaign and design it. I’m heartened to report that our market research has identified millions of individuals committed to taking action and ready to be activated.

Specifically, our research reveals that 13% of the U.S. adult population—or approximately 33 million people—are interested in land conservation and land trusts and are highly motivated to engage:

- They are emotional about land and its personal, profound value in their lives. On a fundamental level, they inherently and completely understand the critical need for land conservation.
- They are interested in issues like biodiversity conservation, children’s health,

safe water supplies and climate change—all things that land trusts address through their work.

- They are well educated and many have significant financial resources.
- They are young and diverse, living in urban and suburban areas.
- They are wired for political engagement and action in that they are registered to vote, they actually do vote, they lead and they organize.
- They are well suited to digital campaign outreach and activation—in other words, they spend a lot of time online.

Most important, they want to make a difference—in their communities, in their country and in the world.

To capture the attention and interest of this audience, we will launch a campaign around the theme of Gaining Ground. Personally, I love the theme. It’s positive. It’s proactive. It encapsulates what we do every day. And I believe it will inspire people to investigate further and hear two essential messages:

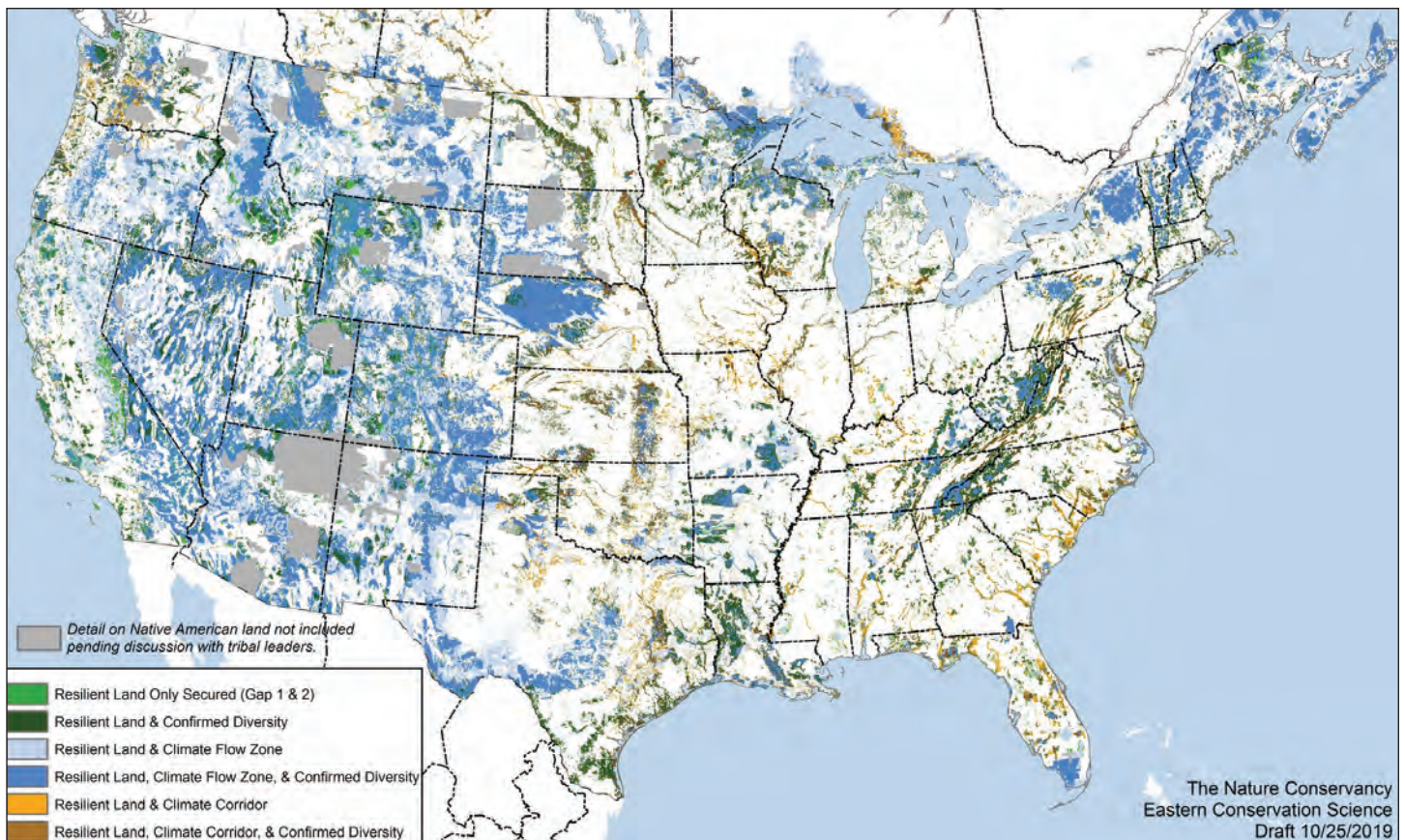
First, making progress on today’s daunting environmental problems—like the decline of wildlife and worsening climate change—seems out of reach for any one individual.

Second, supporting and engaging in private land conservation, including supporting local land trusts, provides a straightforward and tangible way for an individual to have a positive impact.

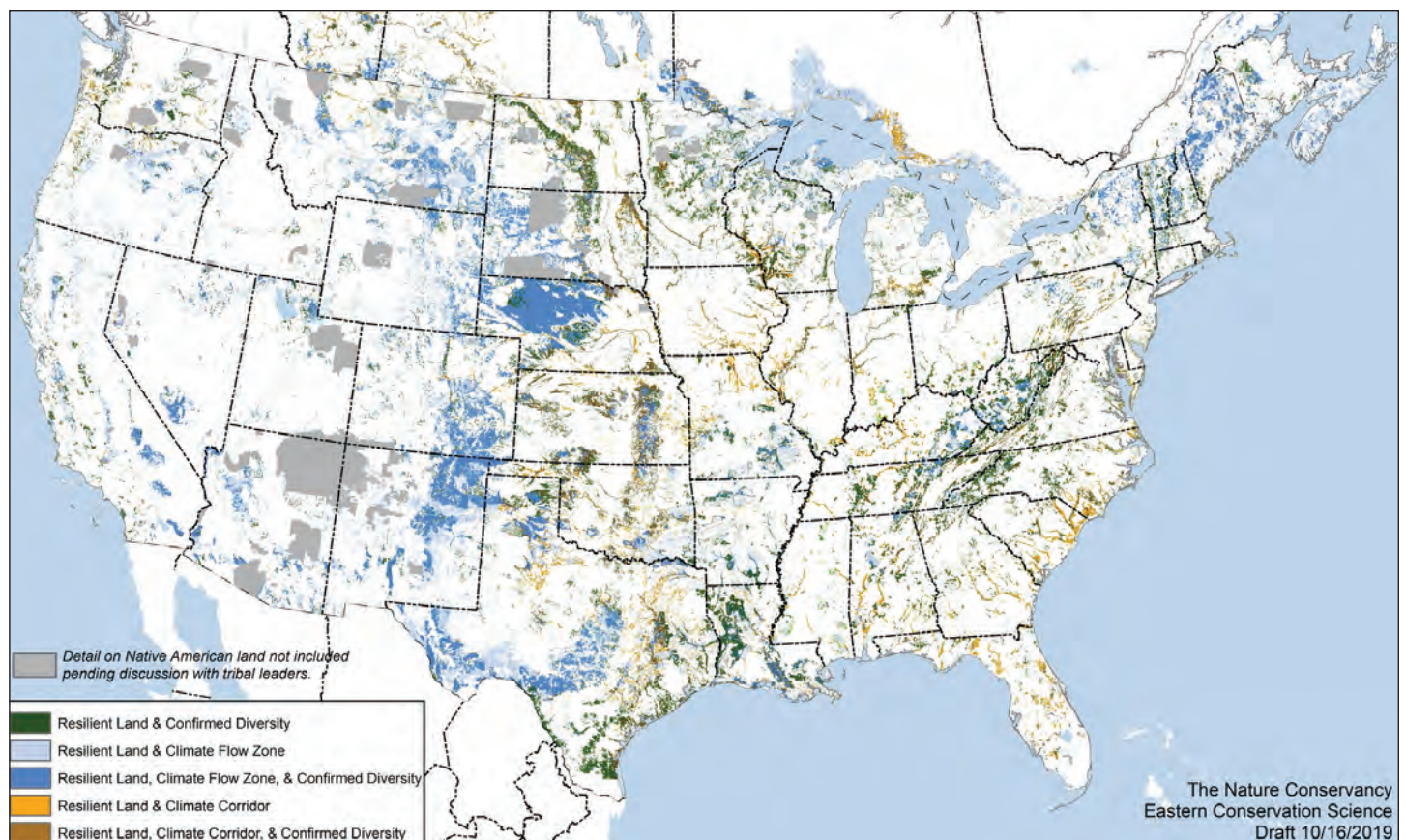
There’s so much more to tell you about the campaign—much more than I can cover tonight. For now, I just want to whet your appetite and note that we will be ready to launch a pilot of the campaign in 2020. We just need to secure the necessary funding for the launch, which we estimate to be approximately \$2 million.

Our Real Work

In closing, I have to be honest and admit that what I’ve just laid out likely won’t be enough. The Alliance and I don’t have all the answers or resources to get the land trust community to where it needs to be



The Nature Conservancy's Resilient and Connected Network map covers 33% of the conterminous U.S. and is designed to sustain biological diversity and ecosystem services by allowing species to adapt to climate change and thrive. The map is the product of 13 years of work by over 150 scientists. (final maps available early 2020 at <http://maps.tnc.org/resilientland>)



This map shows the portion of The Nature Conservancy's Resilient and Connected Network that has no permanent protection (GAP Status 1, 2 or 3) and could be converted to development. It highlights where more direct protection is needed, and conversely where improved land management and restoration are the main issues.

over the next decade to meet the unfolding, intertwined extinction and climate crises, not to mention satisfy other important societal demands while reaching a totally new level of community engagement.

At the Alliance's all-staff retreat this summer, a staffer asked what I'm reading these days. I admitted that my bedside table is cluttered with books with titles like *The Uninhabitable Earth*, by David Wallace-Wells

and *We're Doomed, Now What?* by Roy Scranton. I explained that I read these books not simply to educate myself about the severe environmental challenges we face, but to understand how those who have peered into the abyss keep fighting and remain engaged.

One of those writers is journalist and climate activist Dahr Jamail, author of *The End of Ice*. In one of his writings, he invoked a poem from Wendell Berry to help explain

how he keeps going. The poem, titled "Our Real Work," reads as follows:

*It may be that when we no longer know what to do
we have come to our real work,
and that when we no longer know which way to go
we have come to our real journey.*

*The mind that is not baffled is not employed.
The impeded stream is the one that sings.*

We now face that impeded stream—help me to listen and figure out what its song tells us; help me figure out where we go from here; help me figure out how our community will pick up the gauntlet and rise to the challenges of our time.

Together, we must find a way to seize the opportunity before us to demonstrate, more than ever, that land is the answer, and then deliver on our solemn responsibility to enable the land to reach its full potential.

Granted, land is not the only answer to solving the global climate crisis—we are clearly in an "all of the above" situation when it comes to climate mitigation strategies. But it is the answer that this community is able to provide through your unrelenting efforts to conserve and restore America's incredible landscape.

Last year I challenged you to go out and practice fearless conservation. Tonight I implore you to also act with urgency, audaciousness and zero apologies for insisting on the resources our community needs to maintain a stable climate, to ensure abundant biodiversity and to create a sense of empowerment and hope in our fellow citizens. 🍂

There's nothing better this land
could be than what it is right now.

Let's keep
GAINING GROUND

 Land Trust Alliance

ENDNOTES

- 1 www.ipbes.net/system/tdfs/ipbes_7_10_add1_en_1.pdf?file=1&type=node&id=35329
- 2 www.americanprogress.org/issues/green/reports/2019/08/06/473242/much-nature-america-keep
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 <https://science.sciencemag.org/content/365/6459/1228>
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 www.ipcc.ch/sr15
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 https://ane4bf-datap1.s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/wmcomms/s3fs-public/ckeditor/files/United_in_Science_ReportFINAL_0.pdf?XqIG0yszsU_sx2vOehOWpCOKm9RdC_gN
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 See, e.g., www.ipcc.ch/report/srcc1
- 11 www.pnas.org/content/114/44/11645
- 12 <https://advances.sciencemag.org/content/4/11/eaat1869>
- 13 www.nature.org/en-us/what-we-do/our-insights/perspectives/a-natural-path-for-u-s-climate-action
- 14 See <https://advances.sciencemag.org/content/4/11/eaat1869>
- 15 Final maps will be available in early 2020 at <http://maps.tnc.org/resilientland>
- 16 See <https://advances.sciencemag.org/content/5/4/eaaw2869>
- 17 http://easterndivision.s3.amazonaws.com/Resilient_and_Connected_Landscapes_For_Terrestrial_Conservation.pdf, pgs. 110-113
- 18 www.ita.org/census
- 19 Ibid.