



CATALYST FUND
Applicant Guidance Document: 2024 Funding Round

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This document is intended to clarify for applicants whether they are a strong fit with the current Catalyst Fund Request for Proposals, and to enable applicants to understand how best to shape proposals in response to the current Fund parameters.

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SECTION 1: WHAT MAKES A STRONG CATALYST FUND PROPOSAL?

Strong proposals to the Catalyst Fund will be clearly structured around advancing specific elements of collaborative capacity within a Landscape Partnership (see SECTION 2: COLLABORATIVE CAPACITY to better understand what we mean by collaborative capacity). Furthermore, strong proposals will demonstrate how a modest strategic investment in collaborative capacity will have significant impact in solidifying momentum, building a more robust Partnership, and accelerating progress towards achieving the group’s conservation and/or stewardship goals.

A portion of the Fund is dedicated to supporting Tribal-led Partnerships. A strong Tribal-led Partnership proposal will:

- Emerge from and be supported by Tribal and/or Indigenous community(s)—its purpose, design, and actions will originate from the Indigenous peoples the Partnership serves;
- Promote and reflect leadership and decision-making that directly serve the Tribal community(s) involved in the Partnership;
- Integrate and support Indigenous Knowledge and the cultural lifeways of the community;
- Build capacity in the Tribal community(s) to advance the conservation and stewardship goals of the Partnership in the longer term.

Strong Tribal-led Partnership proposals will be submitted by Federally-recognized Tribes (or designated departments or offices), and/or from organizations that are governed and operated by Tribal or Indigenous communities/community members. Strong Tribal-led Partnership proposals may also be submitted by non-Indigenous entities IF the submission includes a letter of support from a Tribe and/or Tribal or Indigenous organization (as indicated above) that affirms that the Partnership is being catalyzed by and emerging from the Tribal community.

FOR ALL PROPOSALS TO THE CATALYST FUND: The Fund makes investments in (a) Landscape Partnerships that are (b) at pivotal points in development, and strong proposals will reflect these parameters. The following offers further depth to help potential applicants understand whether they will fit these parameters:

A. LANDSCAPE PARTNERSHIP CHARACTERISTICS

As noted in the RFP: *The Catalyst Fund seeks Landscape Partnerships that reflect the following characteristics: place-based; long-term conservation purpose; collaboratively governed; community-grounded and inclusive; and informed.*

ADDITIONAL BACKGROUND

The emphasis on “Landscape Partnerships” is not indicative of a specific focus on a fixed type of inter-organizational structure; rather, “Partnership” is used as an umbrella term to represent a variety of differing structures and degrees of formality for individuals and entities coming together in an enduring partnership, collaborative, or network to advance conservation and stewardship outcomes. The Fund focuses on groups of partners coming together in ways that transcend individual organizations’ efforts and that are working towards a shared, long-term conservation and stewardship vision for a landscape. The emphasis is on fully collaborative, long-term endeavors, rather than on organizations that “partner” with other entities or organizations to achieve its own work.

Each of the five Partnership characteristics that reflect in successful applicants are explored in greater detail here:

PLACE-BASED: *Focuses on a geographically explicit landscape.*

The emphasis here is on Partnerships that are working within a readily identifiable and specific *landscape*—an interconnected geographic area that exceeds jurisdictional boundaries yet functions as and is perceived as a single unit because of ecological, geographical, cultural and/or other social reasons. There is no fixed criterion for how large a landscape should be; However, the landscape should be sufficiently large in scale to span parcel and political boundaries; encompass a diversity of landowner types, conservation issues, jurisdictions, and stakeholder interests; and allow for conservation and stewardship impact at ecological scale. Yet the landscape should be specific and contained enough that a community-grounded approach is feasible, and partners can work in ways that build enduring social capital within the geography. We welcome proposals from Partnerships working in all types of landscapes, including urban, suburban, rural, working, wild, etc.

Examples of Partnerships that WILL NOT successfully align with this place-based characteristic:

- A Partnership that focuses on a general geography (e.g., “across the western United States,” “throughout the Northeast,”) or that is defined by the boundaries of a single state (e.g., “within Connecticut,” or “throughout Wyoming”).
- A Partnership that focuses on a single issue or solution (e.g., building wildlife crossings, increasing green infrastructure, creating model planning or easement language) irrespective of geography.
- A Partnership that focuses only on a specific “type” of land within a landscape (e.g., working only on public lands within the landscape).
- A Partnership that focuses exclusively on a single property or unit (e.g., a state park).
- “Umbrella” proposals from an organization or collaborative that supports/serves a number of place-based Landscape Partnerships.

NOTE: Tribal-led Partnerships defined by the political boundaries of a Sovereign Tribal Nation ARE eligible for funding.

LONG-TERM CONSERVATION PURPOSE: *Pursues a long-term and multi-issue conservation and stewardship vision and purpose, with clearly identified goals and outcomes that encompass people and nature.*

The emphasis here is on Partnerships that are positioned to be enduring vehicles for achieving conservation and stewardship goals in a landscape. Key here too is an emphasis on Partnerships that are multi-issue, focusing on sustaining the ecological integrity and resilience of the landscape and its communities as a whole, rather than focusing on a specific, narrow interest or aspect.

Note: We use “conservation and stewardship” in the broadest sense, to be understood as a focus on sustaining or improving ecological integrity and functionality. The Fund is open to proposals from Partnerships that are working across any dimension of conservation, stewardship, and restoration.

Examples of Partnerships that WILL NOT successfully align with this long-term conservation purpose characteristic:

- Short-term, project-specific collaborations (e.g., created to achieve a specific parcel acquisition or implementation of a specific land management activity).
- A Partnership convened for a specific, narrowly defined conservation objective, e.g.:
 - Advancing a single solution (e.g., building wildlife crossings) or objective (e.g. increasing wilderness designation) within the landscape;
 - Conserving a single species or ecosystem type (e.g., subalpine meadows) within the landscape;
 - Addressing a single, specific threat (e.g., invasive species) within the landscape.
- Partnerships structured solely around campaigns opposing specific actions (e.g., opposition to a proposed mine or pipeline).

Note: single species conservation and stewardship efforts ARE eligible for funding for Tribal-led Partnerships.

COLLABORATIVELY GOVERNED: *Embraces collaborative leadership and participatory engagement and decision-making.*

The emphasis here is on Partnerships that work in a fully collaborative fashion. While one (or a few) organizations may play a lead convening or coordination role, inter-organizational leadership and proactive participatory engagement should be clearly evident, with the breadth of partners co-creating vision, purpose, and progress.

Examples of Partnerships that WILL NOT successfully align with this collaboratively governed characteristic:

- Programs of a single organization, even if additional partners are engaged to achieve program objectives (e.g., a land trust that regularly partners with other organizations and entities to complete conservation deals).

COMMUNITY-GROUNDED AND INCLUSIVE: *Engages a breadth of collaborators and partners on the landscape, bridging interests, perspectives, and cultures to find common ground.*

The emphasis here is on Partnerships that are working *within* landscape and place, engaging authentically in a community-grounded fashion to build a collective voice for the future of the landscape. The emphasis too is on Partnerships that strive to be inclusive, and that are proactively engaging the breadth of perspectives within a landscape to build bridges across cultures, interests, and sectors in pursuit of a shared conservation and stewardship vision for the future of a landscape.

Examples of Partnerships that WILL NOT successfully align with this community-grounded and inclusive characteristic:

- A Partnership driven by external entities or individuals that do not engage at the community level within the landscape.
- A Partnership that is primarily comprised of a narrow range of stakeholders, and does not work to build connections to other interests, entities, and communities within the landscape.

- A Partnership comprised of too few partners. [Note: there is not a precise fixed size criterion here (the context of any landscape is unique) but the Partnership should engage a broad range of groups, interests, and perspectives.]

INFORMED: *Uses ecological, cultural, traditional, and/or social information to inform its work and build a shared foundation of knowledge.*

The emphasis here is on using knowledge to inform action. The expectation is that a Partnership’s conservation and stewardship work should be grounded in robust science and knowledge—recognizing that knowledge sources are not limited to western ecological sciences but include Indigenous Knowledges and additional cultural and social knowledges.

Examples of Partnerships that WILL NOT successfully align with this informed characteristic:

- A Partnership that focuses primarily on research (as opposed to the action-oriented implementation of a science- and knowledge-informed landscape vision).

B. TRANSFORMATIVE COLLABORATION

As noted in the RFP: *Landscape Partnerships that embody transformative collaboration—by sharing power with those that have been historically excluded and building understanding and connection across difference—can be essential vehicles for sustaining the ecological integrity of our landscapes in ways that foster a more just and equitable future for our human communities.*

ADDITIONAL BACKGROUND

It is increasingly clear that the conservation movement has historically marginalized and excluded groups of people and has perpetuated colonialist mentalities—as practitioners, it is no longer acceptable for us to hide behind the pretense that we are doing “good” simply by conserving, stewarding, and/or restoring lands and waters. Conservation and stewardship at the most basic level is a human decision about how we interact with land: How we make such decisions—and who is granted power to make them—matters.

Collaboration is widely recognized as an essential element of conservation and stewardship at the landscape scale, yet the conservation movement has become very comfortable with a ‘transactional’ approach to collaboration: come to our table to help us solve the problem(s) that we want to solve. Such collaboration largely does not push beyond or overcome conservation’s historical legacy, nor does it truly share power—formally or informally—in any real manner. A deeper, more authentic, and ‘transformative’ approach to collaboration is rooted in bringing people together to co-create ‘the table.’ Such collaboration builds first a shared and inclusive understanding of the problem(s) that need to be addressed and considers a shared vision for what the future could look like—and only then turns to consider possible solutions and pathways forward.

The Catalyst Fund recognizes that Landscape Partnerships that embody transformative collaboration—by sharing power with those that have been historically excluded and building understanding and connection across difference—can be essential vehicles for sustaining the

ecological integrity of our landscapes *and* fostering a more just and equitable future for our human communities. As the Network itself works to become more inclusive of historically marginalized and excluded voices and explores how collaborative landscape conservation and stewardship can be a tool in service of a just and equitable future, we see the Catalyst Fund as an opportunity to elevate Partnerships that are striving for transformative collaboration as well. Our hope is that we can together join in contributing to shifting the culture of conservation and stewardship from transactional to transformative collaboration.

C. PIVOTAL POINTS IN PARTNERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

As noted in the RFP: *The Fund seeks Partnerships at pivotal points in their development where modest investments in collaborative capacity can shift the trajectory of conservation and stewardship outcomes over time in the landscape.*

Specifically, the Catalyst Fund prioritizes the transition from collective vision to collective action. The shift from vision to implementation/action often requires increased time and energy, and investments in coordination and collaborative capacity at this point can be critical to significantly accelerating forward progress on conservation and stewardship outcomes.

ADDITIONAL BACKGROUND

Although every Partnership must respond to the unique biophysical and sociopolitical context of its landscape (there is no cookie-cutter solution to building a Partnership), many follow similar progressions of development. A generalized framework can be drawn of three idealized developmental stages for Partnerships (see diagram below). ***This framework is offered primarily as a heuristic, as in practice the stages are unlikely to be entirely discrete nor is the relationship between stages necessarily linear.***

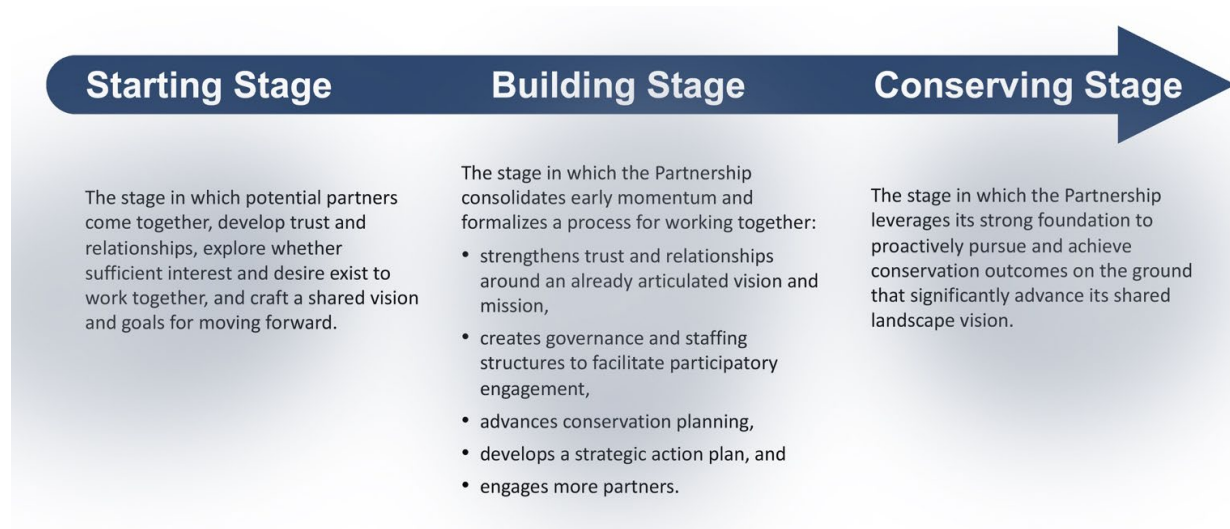


Figure 1: *An overly-generalized framework for understanding idealized stages of Partnership development.*

The Catalyst Fund prioritizes the transition from collective vision to collective action. At this inflection point, participants have made a significant investment of time and energy in building relationships and establishing foundational trust; early forward momentum is evident in the developing of shared purpose and establishing vision/mission and goals. At this point, it is clear that the sociopolitical context and conditions are conducive to allowing productive and impactful long-term collaboration, and that partners are committed to exploring this opportunity. Carrying this momentum forward into implementation and action can require increasing time and energy though, and a barrier to success here very often is the lack of coordination capacity and backbone organizational support. In the generalized Partnership development framework above, this is the “Building” stage. Again, this is the stage of Partnership development that the Catalyst Fund typically targets.

Because Partnership development IS individualized, Partnerships are welcome to submit proposals designed to accelerate progress through other pivotal points in development. Applicants are encouraged to reach out to the [Program Associate](#) prior to doing so to ensure fit. A critical question—for any proposal but especially proposals from Partnerships in more advanced stages of development—will be whether a modest investment will have significant impact on the Partnership’s capacity to achieve its conservation and stewardship goals over the long term.

The Catalyst Fund does not currently consider proposals for the launching of new Partnerships. Partnerships currently in the process of forming and coming together—that is, Partnerships in the Starting stage—should look to the Catalyst Fund in future years when forward momentum has accrued and when a small investment can accelerate the Partnership forward on its path to conservation and stewardship impact.

SECTION 2: UNDERSTANDING COLLABORATIVE CAPACITY

Collaborative capacity can be understood as the elements that allow groups of partners work together effectively across organizations/entities and be able to function collectively to achieve a shared purpose. Robust collaborative capacity is what allows a group of partners to successfully produce more impactful and durable conservation and stewardship outcomes than can arise from any single organization working on its own.

A recent publication from the California Landscape Stewardship Network ([Increasing Collaborative Capacity and Infrastructure for Landscape Stewardship](#)) captures a framework for clarifying the needs that allow collaboratives to perform for landscape outcomes. This framework describes six structural elements of collaborative capacity:

- Collective purposes and goals;
- Shared strategies and priorities;
- Collaborative practices, skills and tools;
- Systems and infrastructure;
- Decision-making structures; and
- Coordination capacity.

The framework also identifies three binding elements of collaborative capacity:

- Inclusive culture;
- Meaningful relationships, and
- Collaborative mindset.

The structural elements of this framework are the specific—and fundable—needs that create the “scaffolding” that allows a collaborative to function effectively over time. The binding elements reflect the quality of the scaffolding and are the enabling conditions that can set the collaborative alight: experience suggests that a collaborative can persist at a basic functioning level with the structural elements in place, but it is the concomitant development of the binding elements that allows a collaborative to fully actualize and optimize performance.

Collaborative capacity can be thought of as a keyhole: when the structural elements are resourced and developed, and when the binding elements are attended to and intentionally cultivated and stewarded, a suite of partners can come together and turn in lockstep to unlock the door of potential for accelerating conservation and stewardship outcomes over time in the landscape they care for.



Figure 2: A Collaborative Capacity Framework (adapted from "[Increasing Collaborative Capacity and Infrastructure for Landscape Stewardship](#)")

STRUCTURAL ELEMENTS: The following¹ provides greater clarity on the six structural elements of collaborative capacity, and specific examples of fundable components of each element:

- **Coordination Capacity**—the basic staffing support and coordination “glue” for holding together the logistics of the Partnership. Examples include:
 - Dedicated staff time and/or contracted services for essential backbone coordination and administrative support, including facilitation, meeting management, communications, progress tracking and measurement, collective administrative needs, etc.

- **Systems and Infrastructure**—the basic operational and communication structures that allow for internal connectivity, alignment, and information flow. Examples include:
 - Communications and data-sharing systems for dissemination of resources (e.g., information and tools).
 - Partnership connectivity structures, including meetings/convenings.
 - measurement tools to gauge and grow partnership impact and health.
 - Fiscal management support to oversee collective business needs.
 - Fundraising and grant-writing support to enable planning, design, and implementation of collective goals.
 - Technical services and support to meet science, technology, engagement, and other project- and program-specific needs.

- **Decision-Making Structures**—Partnerships exist and operate in the space between organizations, which necessitates transparent and commonly understood pathways for reaching and executing decisions. Examples include:
 - Development of a governance model to steer a co-created vision and ensure equity and accountability.
 - Support for equitable participation and engagement to ensure responsive, durable project or program design.

- **Collaborative Practices, Skills, and Tools**—working in the space between organizations requires a unique skillset, and this knowledge and expertise differs from what we have traditionally been called to deliver in our conservation and stewardship backgrounds. Examples include:
 - Skill-building and competency-based training opportunities to build key collaborative leadership abilities and culture.

- **Shared Strategies and Priorities**—a shared and clear understanding of how the Partnership is going to work together and what it will strive to do. Examples include:
 - Strategic plan and/or roadmap development to outline the collective vision, goals, work plans, actions, and activities that provide a shared understanding of partners’ roles, resources, and capacities.

¹ Adapted from Appendix A of [Increasing Collaborative Capacity and Infrastructure for Landscape Stewardship](#).

- **Collective Purpose and Goals**—the “north star” or the animating purpose that is holding the partnership together. Examples include:
 - Development of agreements (e.g., MOU, charter, etc.) to outline Partnership's collective vision, purpose, and desired collective impacts, including partner roles.

BINDING ELEMENTS: The three binding elements are qualities to be embodied in all aspects of collaborative work and can be thought of as enabling conditions for effective collaboration. These are interwoven and support/build from one another:

- **Collaborative Mindset**—comprised of a deep belief in the power of collaboration, a commitment to working through collaborative approaches, and an understanding of—and ability to benefit from and/or overcome—the unique opportunities and challenges that arise in working through collaborative rather than organizational pathways.
- **Inclusive Culture**—comprised of fostering a common sense of belonging across all participants and the valuing of all voices and perspectives within the landscape—with clear understanding that many voices and communities have been systematically marginalized historically in conversations around land and water, and that legacies of distrust persist.
- **Meaningful Relationships**—comprised of a recognition, honoring, and celebrating of the “humanness” that we all carry with us, and an intentional and caring exploration of how our individual humanness intersects with and connects to the humanness of those around us. It is, after all, through human relationships that collaboration is manifest.

Together the nine elements of collaborative capacity are what allows a partnership or collaborative to achieve durable and inclusive environmental and social outcomes over the long term in the landscape in which it operates. In preparing your proposal for the Catalyst Fund, we encourage you to **consider how you see your Partnership in its current form reflected in this collaborative capacity framework, and where you are hoping to utilize Catalyst Fund support to strengthen or build new collaborative capacity that will move your Partnership forward in specific ways.**

APPENDIX: ADDITIONAL BACKGROUND ON FUND PURPOSE

As noted in the RFP: *The Catalyst Fund aims to accelerate the pace and practice of collaborative landscape conservation and stewardship across the United States. The Fund makes strategic investments in strengthening the collaborative capacity of place-based, community-grounded Landscape Partnerships. These investments are intended to better position Partnerships to achieve long-term conservation and stewardship success, building in landscapes across the country the enduring collaborative capacity needed to address systems-level challenges like the interwoven biodiversity, climate, and environmental injustice crises.*

ADDITIONAL BACKGROUND:

Landscape conservation and stewardship is an approach that brings people together across geographies, sectors, and cultures to collaborate on conserving and stewarding our important landscapes and the myriad ecological, cultural, and economic benefits they provide. This innately collaborative practice embraces the complexity of working at scale to connect, protect, and care for irreplaceable landscapes—across public and private lands, and from our cities to our wildest places.

The Catalyst Fund emerged from a series of observations:

- Our 21st Century challenges— biodiversity loss, climate change, systemic environmental injustice, and more—are existential and systems-level, and working at the landscape scale is essential for scaling our response to the match the scale of these challenges;
- Broad, enduring collaboration is essential to achieving lasting conservation and stewardship success across whole landscapes;
- Building and sustaining effective collaboration requires dedicated time and resources, and a specific skillset and approach—all of which requires strategic and dedicated investments;
- Yet funding to directly support and advance collaboration is scarce and difficult to find.

This is the collaboration disconnect: it has become almost universally understood that successful landscape conservation and stewardship is predicated on collaboration, and yet little funding is available to landscape initiatives for strengthening their process of collaboration. The Catalyst Fund is designed to address this critical disconnect directly, providing financial and capacity-building support to allow broad-based, enduring Partnerships to strategically invest in their collaborative capacity. These investments are intended to catalyze growth and better position Partnerships to achieve landscape conservation and stewardship success over the long term.