



## The Future of Landscape Conservation – Forum on Pathways to a Just and Equitable Conservation Future March 31, 2021

The Network for Landscape Conservation’s (NLC) third virtual policy forum featured a diverse and distinguished speaker panel of conservation leaders and policy makers. This forum explored opportunities and examples for building a broad-based and enduring constituency for landscape conservation, and for the many essential services nature provides for all people, in all places. Over 900 people interested in equity and landscape conservation participated from an array of sectors and geographies of the US and Canada, and some as far away as Brazil, the UK, India, Kenya, Poland, Mexico, and Tanzania.

Stay tuned for additional forums at [www.landscapeconservation.org](http://www.landscapeconservation.org).



The modern conservation movement in the US has had many celebrated successes: The National Park system, preservation of other public lands, private land acquisitions and easements are a few examples.

But some of this success has come at the considerable expense of underrepresented populations. It also benefited some populations far more than others. It is past time to correct a historic imbalance and recalibrate the land conservation movement as one for all people.

**We must move beyond the concept of nature as exclusive for a few to nature as essential for all.**

### Event Objectives

- ✚ How can we accelerate progress towards a conservation movement that is more just, equitable, and inclusive of diverse communities?
- ✚ How do we capitalize on the Biden Administration’s leadership to secure environmental justice and equitable economic opportunity?
- ✚ What policies, programs, and practices are needed to embrace justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion as a fundamental pillar of our collaborative conservation work?

### Event Participants

**Beth Conover**, Director of the Salazar Center for North American Conservation at Colorado State University, member of the NLC Executive Committee, and former co-chair of the DEI committee, opened the session. She provided introductory comments about the Network, the purpose of this forum, the report: Weaving the Strands Together (discussed below) and offered summary observations to close the session.



The forum featured keynote speaker, **Dr. Mamie Parker**, Virginia’s Department of Wildlife Resources Commissioner and former Head of Fisheries at US Fish and Wildlife Service. Four conservation leaders spoke about how they are advancing equity, inclusion, and justice initiatives and policies in their programs.

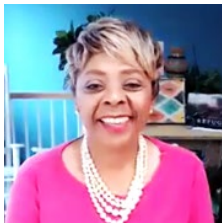
- ✚ **Martha Williams** – Principal Deputy Director, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
- ✚ **Patrick Gonzales Rogers** – Executive Director, Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Coalition
- ✚ **Curtis Bennett** – Director of Equity and Community Engagement, National Aquarium, and steering committee member of Greater Baltimore Wilderness Coalition
- ✚ **David Lamfrom** – Vice President of Regional Programs, National Parks Conservation Association

## Weaving the Strands Together

This recently released [report](#) illustrates case studies in inclusive and equitable land conservation and how values of diversity, equity, and inclusion have strengthened landscape conservation projects across the US. These stories, drawn from interviews with leaders and stakeholders within four landscape conservation initiatives, show inspiring conservation successes sparked by leadership from historically marginalized communities—and demonstrate how inclusive collaborative approaches not only advance conservation goals but also foster mutual respect, community autonomy, and cultural recognition.



## Keynote Address



**Dr. Mamie Parker**, professional biologist and leadership coach, was the first African American Regional Director for U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). Her whole career has been about building bridges to non-traditional partners.

We have to have all hands on deck to strengthen landscape conservation across North America. The old saying goes: “When America sneezes, the world catches a cold. So, this is important! She quoted her mother who said, “Nothing happens unless something moves. When we think about landscape conservation, something must move. This is a new chapter in America.”

Parker connected herself to the arc of history with a personal story of her great grandmother, Ann Rawlings, who lived half her life as a slave and the other half as a free woman. The example of the resilience of her grandmother’s grandmother is not simply a story, but one of lived experience that connects her to the strength of her ancestors.

She continued her historical perspective on diversity with a poignant reference to the revered E.O. Wilson, “the father of biodiversity who was born not too far away from Robert Bullock, the father of environmental equity and justice. Their work illuminated our need for a stronger more diverse portfolio as we deal with the future of landscape conservation with diverse people in the game.”

Parker spoke of the need for the federal government to establish programs that make a difference coupled with social movements to change how we do business. She said the heart of this movement is vested in four things – the first is silence is no longer an option. We need to challenge our practices and policies to make sure they are just and equitable. Secondly, she spoke of the need for equitable collaboration within our organizations and within the federal government with a focus on truth seeking and attention to the role of trauma. Thirdly, she spoke about creating pathways for sustained funding, allowing youth to come in, and keeping them there” with hiring and retention practices. Fourth, she emphasized the benefits and need for more green spaces in communities where there are none.

Her keynote acknowledged the efforts to restore, repair, and honor the relationships with our nation’s first people. She said, “Conservation is about all people in all places to get things done and for work in our urban and rural communities.” Leaders within U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) are changing the way they do business. It takes work, time, and perseverance. However, they’re staying engaged and not coming into a community and leaving it.

She concluded by saying, “It’s important keep going and growing and thinking individually and collectively about what WE can do to make sure we have a future in landscape conservation.”

### **Martha Williams – Principal Deputy Director, USFWS**

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Williams spoke of E.O. Wilson who revealed the power and awe in our natural world. She said, “This time calls for us to be better at telling our stories in a way that invites us all to feel the awe of nature and to create the pathways and movement toward including everyone in building a stronger conservation community.”

Williams spoke of President Biden’s message to his administration on day-one setting the tone for the importance of HOW we show up and how we comport ourselves; that we work with humility, with inclusion, and with collaboration. This matters above everything else.” This coincided with an Executive Order that all federal departments would advance racial equity and support for underserved communities pursuing a comprehensive approach through every federal program. She said, “equal opportunity is a fundamental promise of America... but the promise has been out of reach for too many people.” She acknowledged the role of the USFWS in combating systemic racism.



She acknowledged that wildlife conservation in the US has been successful due in large part to support from hunters and anglers. But with demographics changing, natural resource managers and the conservation organizations need to adapt and collaborate with local communities and partners “that have different experiences and haven’t had rural and urban community voices included.”

She spoke of the President’s ambitious conservation goal to address climate change with a commitment to protecting 30% of our land and waters by 2030. To be successful, this goal will require “All hands, all lands, all people, all places” and includes rural, urban, private, public, and tribal lands that contribute to a thriving and interconnected network of conserved areas with communities empowered in conservation practices to complement state and federal conservation efforts.



One program she highlighted was the [Urban Wildlife Conservation Program](#) which embodies the ethic to better serve communities that have been left out of past conservation conversations. It’s community-focused, inclusive, intentional, collaborative, and rooted in local engagement and action guided by a standard of excellence. These urban refuges are managed as a community asset based in community needs “operating under a different paradigm in partnership and first asking the community what they want.”

She closed by expressing the goal to “leave a legacy of abundant and healthy wildlife and wild lands for future generations. This requires establishing long-term and meaningful connections to people no matter their background while assuring environmental justice and racial equity in all of our work and tackle the most urgent challenges – including the climate crisis and global threats to biodiversity.”

➤ **How can federal agencies convene entities to embrace this concept?**

Williams noted the critical need for a standard of excellence. Regarding the backlash to some conservation efforts, she said it's not dissimilar to people's need to know that we are really listening, appreciate their communities, and feel what people are going through. We need to pay attention across the board.

**Patrick Gonzales-Rogers – Executive Director, Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Coalition**

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Gonzales-Rogers commenced his talk with a question: What does equity parity mean? When we talk about the Bears Ears, we think about the vast trove of cultural and sacred sites cataloging over 100,000 years of history. Last year we were recognized as a World Monument Site. And yet he asked, was the Bears Ears afforded the same deference as the Notre Dame Cathedral? He noted the disparity in thought that establishes a specific fund to restore churches and structures. And yet, for most Tribes, the landscape is their cathedral but aren't included in funding nor are they a part of the historic preservation paradigm.

While we may not know how long a New England church will stand, we do know that the Bears Ears will stand for thousands of years. The five tribes of the Bears Ears Consortium are working with conservation, green groups, outdoor retailers, and are underwritten by foundational communities because the federal government wouldn't support them in spite of the federal trust relationship and their enumeration as a cooperative manager. He said, the [Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Coalition](#) is an example of a structure for why tribes should lead. First, they are political entities. Secondly, 99% of public lands are west of the Mississippi which means that most of these lands are in or intersect against Indian Country amounting to 76 million acres which would make it the 6<sup>th</sup> largest state!



There is a "lack of dexterity around the federal trust relationship with Indian law and policy." Additionally, the "nutshell of what black, Indigenous and people of color (BIPOC) groups face – lack resources and connectivity. The seven largest conservation groups represent 70% of the funding or 2.5 billion dollars vested in big conservation groups. Only \$25 million is shared among hundreds of BIPOC groups.

"We have to place the most impacted communities at the heart of problem solving and decision making," he said. "It's not just listening. There are no more impacted communities than communities of color. They have to be at the primacy of the decision making. If we don't do that, you fail in your basic mission. There is no dearth of talent in the BIPOC community. Most of our colleagues are qualified; they just aren't being found and included."

In conclusion, he said, "Place these communities at the heart of your decision making and problem solving, and your yield and deliverable will exponentially grow."

➤ **Talk more about funding. How do we get the BIPOC community to the table for grant opportunities?**

Patrick said that "we have to let loose the purse strings with more unrestricted dollars, more confidence in BIPOC groups, and greater technical assistance" to meeting metrics. The other side of accountability is "we need to give them latitude, flexibility and autonomy that they can run their own kinds of business." This also means providing very specific kinds of technical assistance to meeting metrics.

**Curtis Bennett** – Director of Equity and Community Engagement, [National Aquarium](#) and steering committee member of [Greater Baltimore Wilderness Coalition](#)

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I am very inspired by these transformational conversations. “We’ve got to do better to improve the functionality of our systems in our most vulnerable communities.” It’s from a learning and growth mindset that our work can weave and connect a different type of being and doing in our conservation work. Engagement is inherently linked to learning, growing, and activating intentionally while centering transparency, openness, and authenticity. We then can effectuate and sustain transformational, systemic change.

The Greater Baltimore Wilderness Coalition launched in 2015 as a central hub to improve quality of life and expand into our metropolitan counties and central Maryland region. Coalition building is a value-added process. One way that intentionality plays out is in being the convener; it is a complimentary role and strategically not about competition. “Partnership is leadership. In order for us as a collective to dismantle inequitable systems, it takes everyone – working together and best leveraging capacities and shared goals.”



“Our work is about transformational partnerships rather than transactional ones.” We’re talking about longevity and about building trust and moving at the speed of trust... When we go through transformation, we learn, we change, we do better, and do things differently.”

Their programmatic pillars make sure work is centered around resiliency, equity, biodiversity, discovery, and health. Results show in community projects that create and maintain greenspace, community charrettes, community action plans, as well as community science, bio-blitzes, and debris cleanups to bring people together.

Curtis concluded with a shout out to [Nature City Forum](#) which has actively worked toward a Maryland that is vibrant, green, and strong fostering conversations at the intersection of diversity, equity and inclusion as connected to economic viability and transportation so we can co-create the most impactful solutions.

➤ **People are afraid to broach racial equity and move from commitment to action. There are a lot of reasons they tread lightly and don’t know where the resources are. Have you seen this fear?**

Curtis replied that it starts with unpacking and relearning. This takes time. We’re human and we’re going to make mistakes as we grow. He suggested, “Start with intentional conversations. Put together core plans and know priorities. Don’t spread yourself too thin – the depth of the issues requires space, time, money, to really dig into these things. Communities of practice are incredibly beneficia, they create space and opportunity to engage with peers, supporting one another in shared learning and growth. This isn’t a competition.”

**David Lamfrom** – Vice President of Regional Programs, [National Parks Conservation Association](#)

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Lived experience comes from impact, trauma, and pain not just from joy. It’s about a focus on lenses which come from a life of not knowing much and learning from others. We have to build a movement with tenacity. Different people bring different values. Let’s just breathe in grace and model it. Recognize we are all needed in this journey. Feel that and feel good. Do it for everyone. If anyone slips, we help them.

For folks reluctant to move into this space, the bottom line is we can’t stop moving. “We are enough if we are willing to be enough. What if truth were not a suitcase, but a journey together where we all have a part in coming together?”

People think about the pace of progress. He said, “If you were backpacking, you could get 30 miles in a day. But what if you had to move your whole community, then how fast could you go to make sure we all get there?” In some ways, we have a map where we can go together if we are inspired and hopeful.

He acknowledged that conservation work can feel lonely and hard. Nearly every country on Earth has a conservation community and ethic. We don’t have to think just about the United States. “You aren’t just connected to your ancestors. You are connected to the whole world.” Conservation work can also be dangerous. Some people are dying to protect the land. “It’s hard to fight billion-dollar corporations in other countries, and you could lose your life for it.”

We must grapple with fundamental questions: Who owns the truth? Have we already decided what the answers are? How do we come to a community? Do we have the emotional capacity to actually listen? Can we recognize there are other ways of knowing and other people have different experiences? Do we recognize that place means different things to different people? Have we already made financial deals to tell our community about later? How do we look at animals? Can we work on a plan for conservation? Can we say we must learn more to do the work?



David concluded by saying, “We talk about wanting to connect people to the land. Instead, we must recognize that all people are connected.” We can support folks to surface and remember their connection.

- **Can you speak to non-verbal exclusion and micro-aggression and how this this prevents us from getting equitable collaboration?**

David confirmed the fear and “culture of perfectionism where folks don’t want to show any of their soul. The reality of this work is about ego-deflation. Many people find it difficult to reduce their ego sufficiently to participate and lead with values instead of transaction. It comes down to fear of not wanting to make a stake in the game. People only want to invest when they want to make a profit. This is the exact opposite of what it will take to heal.”

## Dialogue

- **What steps must be taken to bring equity to this work and change this culture? How do we get progress and net-gain? How do we retain BIPOC representation?**

Patrick replied that part of emotional intelligence is the recognition of historical and generational trauma. Essential to the process is to create a safe place for the catharsis of trauma. On an institutional side, it takes sustained action. It takes time. Think about how fear coalesces power. Perfection is the enemy of good.

- **How can climate change accelerate minority inclusion?**

Curtis felt the answer was to create welcoming spaces for communities of color. This inclusivity requires specific care and intentionality about dismantling barriers that stand in the way of people showing up as themselves. We must intentionally and collectively create pathways to ensure seats at the decision making table, and if the table isn’t the right table, then make the shift. Related to expertise, there can be a perception that the knowledge and the solutions aren’t at the community level, but this couldn’t be further from the truth. When you consider lived experiences, contextual awareness and content knowledge, communities are experts in their own space.

- **Can you speak to the \$2 trillion green infrastructure package?**

David expressed concern about being behind the curve on funding and how disproportionate this is. This is an opportunity to think about cycles we must interrupt. The Federal contracting cycle lacks representation.

We need to ensure accountability in sharing of resources and benefits. A lot of us don't want tokenism. Hiring is difficult because there hasn't been enough integration of community and there are blind spots.

## Ideas and Opportunities for Moving Forward

**Martha Williams** – “There is an appetite to take 30x30 seriously. Enough investment in infrastructure could stop the infighting about sharing the small pieces. Have place-by-place discussions and combine efforts.”

**Curtis Bennett** – “When we think about transformational shifts, we have to have the will and desire, and drive to change the status quo. The status quo wasn't working, and we need to push forward in the difficult spaces.”

**Patrick Gonzales-Rogers** – “If I can trust our relationship and our ability to potentially disagree, at the end of the day, you've got me. We'll go back and forth, but we'll have communion.

**David Lamfrom** – “We need the ability to hold discomfort and not shut down or shut up. Do we have the space in ourselves? Move into a growth mindset to create space within ourselves.”

**Mamie Parker** – “Silence is no longer an option. Accept imperfection in ourselves in this process to create pathways to just and equitable solutions. We have to stay in the game to make progress.”

**Beth Conover** – “A whole range of perspectives is critically and existentially important any conservation success in the future. Thanks to our sponsors. We all need to work together to create a new paradigm. We're lucky to have such thoughtful and experienced folks with us here today.”

**Theme around perfection or lack thereof:** Dr. Parker and Mr. Lamfrom both spoke about fear of imperfection. Every speaker reinforced the message that we have to start somewhere and not let a desire to be perfect or flawless be the enemy of the good. While this can be hard work, overwhelming, and lonely, when communities do the hard work and are willing to stay in the game, the benefits are worth the effort. Curtis spoke about being human is about making mistakes and learning from them. Ms. Parker referred to this as “jumping and growing wings on our way down.” The work is happening, and fear of exposure is part of the process but should not stop people from starting or continuing their engagement.

**Theme around intention:** Another theme that came up again and again was about intention as a key ingredient in this work. Authentic commitment, honesty, and transparency are requirements for the conservation community to advance conversations below the surface where the tough history, racism, colonialism, and inequitable practices have led to harm and disenfranchisement. This movement requires people to be real, transparent, and open to listening in order for the healing to happen. Processes require time, patience, tenacity, and a lot of heart in order to address the healing.

**Theme of connection:** Another key theme was about the importance of connection – connection to earth and the awe of nature, to ancestors, to community, and across sectors in order to get to more inclusive conversations. While it may seem obvious, everything actually IS connected, but our thinking has encouraged silos, manifested as “othering,” and played out in the absence of representation. This connectedness calls for seeking out and listening to traditionally unheard voices, putting those voices at the head of decision making, and including rural and urban voices in conversations about conservation. Many speakers used words like weaving, collaborating, and partnering to create an image of the integrated nature of conservation conversations.

**Theme around how we see the land:** The concept of land conservation should include urban and rural lands where green spaces should be ever-present to better connect communities to nature. While

conservation implies connection with the land, it should also include our need to connect humanity to each other.

**Theme about setting the tone:** Ms. Williams underscored the current administration's emphasis on setting the tone for leadership, conduct, and integrity. Ms. Parker addressed the need for government to fund programs so that communities can engage in the work. All of the speakers talked about the importance of HOW we show up and that it matters above all.

**Theme around shifting paradigms:** Mr. Gonzales-Rogers noted that preserving and protecting natural splendors and sacred natural places should be afforded the same deference (and funding) reserved for man-made monuments. Another paradigm shift he called out requires we question things accepted as truth, which aren't. For instance, he argued the dearth of people of color in leadership roles isn't about a lack of skill, but a lack of inclusion. Also, he questioned the paradigm around funding which dramatically favors large conservation organizations and provides miniscule funding in conservation for communities of color. Mr. Bennett noted the need for a paradigm shift from transactional ways of doing things in the past which often leave communities stranded when partners leave. He advocated for a shift to partnerships over time committed to local action and longevity.

## Thank you to our virtual policy series sponsors

- ✚ U.S. FWS Science Applications Program
- ✚ Network for Landscape Conservation
- ✚ Center for Large Landscape Conservation
- ✚ Salazar Center for Center for North American Conservation

We acknowledge the guidance and support from Rebecca Stanfield McCown, the chair of the Network's DEI Committee and Bob Bendick, Policy Co-chair, and this Forum's Co-chair.

Recording: <https://landscapeconservation.org/our-work/policy-initiatives/virtual-policy-forum/>

## Special Note

The Network for Landscape Conservation's Coordinating Committee is committed to addressing social injustices and economic disparities and breaking down barriers that have too often excluded or trampled the voices, needs, and rights of Black, indigenous, and other historically excluded communities. We have heard the calls to be transparent internally as the working body of the Network and externally in our broader engagement with conservation organizations and practitioners.

To address these goals and put intention behind our values, NLC is actively working on equity and justice issues in the following dimensions:

- Offering DEI training to committee members and staff to improve equity competencies and cultivate an inclusive work climate,
- Working to increase representation and diversity within NLC and our various committees, work groups, and associations,



- Advancing policy forums and webinars that are representative of a variety of topics with panelists and speakers who can speak to the nuances of landscape conservation across diverse landscapes, communities, and constituencies,
- Evaluating and developing internal policies and procedures that address inequity including honorariums policies and compensation strategies, and
- Ensuring the Catalyst Fund promotes landscape conservation across all landscapes, cultures, and communities and that grantee programming is diverse and inclusive.

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