Conservation Leadership Capacity Building: a Landscape Study

Summary of Key Findings

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Brett Bruyere[1], **Nora Bynum**[2,3], **Jamie Copsey**[4], **Ana Porzecanski**[3], and **Eleanor Sterling**[3]

[1]Colorado State University, Human Dimensions of Natural Resources Department; [2]Amazon Center for Environmental Education and Research, ACEER; [3]Center for Biodiversity and Conservation, American Museum of Natural History; [4]Independent Consultant

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1. Study Context and Design

Responding to a desire to work together to improve capacity for leadership in the field of conservation, three collaborating organizations, National Geographic Society (NGS), Global Wildlife Conservation (GWC), and the Smithsonian Institution (SI; collectively referred to as the "Collaborators" in this report), commissioned a landscape study of capacity development initiatives focused on conservation leadership and available to early and mid-career professionals. The goals of the study were to understand what is currently available, identify needs and gaps, and inform the development of potential future initiatives.

The study was designed to respond to the following specific questions:

·   What conservation leadership training and learning opportunities are currently available for early and mid-career professionals?
·   What existing training programs are most successful and what are the drivers of their success? What are outstanding or emerging needs that are not currently well addressed?
·   What are the most critical leadership capacity needs to accelerate global progress in meeting conservation goals? What training modalities, content, and core audiences(s) are important at this time?

Based on discussions with the Collaborators and a review of the literature we adopted the following definition of leadership to apply in the context of conservation practice:

Leadership is the influencing of others, by means of reason and inclusion, and based on a critical and systems understanding of context, to achieve organizational goals that are in the long-term best interest of all involved, with the wellbeing of society in mind (modified from Drouillard & Kleiner, 1996 as cited in Mango 2018).

2. Main Findings

We compiled information from more than 100 relevant programs and initiatives focusing primarily on training conducted in English, from online and literature sources. We conducted surveys targeting over 170 relevant actors including program staff, alumni, and partners, and led close to 60 interviews with individuals from specific programs. More details on the methods are provided below and in the companion Appendix.

·   We found a number of unmet or insufficiently met needs, including a need for long-term support of conservation leaders, especially at mid-levels of experience.

·   Our analysis also revealed a need to foster leaders with a diverse breadth of knowledge and skills, as well as significant depth in skill development. Given the complexities of conservation, the uncertainties typically found around conservation issues, and the rapid pace of change, the sector needs leaders who are self-aware, systems thinkers, adaptive learners, conveners, network builders, collaboration brokers, effective communicators, and innovators.

·   We found a need for more robust evaluation of program outcomes, more cross-sectoral collaboration, and a deeper consideration of diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice in both the content and design of training programs.

Below we elaborate on our findings regarding effective program design, program content, and critical audience needs.

2.1 Elements of effective program design

Based on input collected from representatives of programs in the study, effective program design in conservation leadership should include a number of important elements:

· Experiential and applied learning, including peer-to-peer and collaborative learning, and the establishment of communities of practice,[1] are highly effective strategies for knowledge development and interaction. These approaches afford an opportunity for social or collective learning that goes beyond individual learning.

· In-person, or face-to-face interaction, is a highly favored learning format, and the format believed to be most impactful. In-person training in which individuals are part of a cohort is recognized as being particularly effective, as cohorts support community- building, create an environment for intensive group learning, and establish professional networks that participants can use throughout their careers.

· Mentoring can help promote continued personal and professional development following trainings, as well as serve as a strategy to provide long-term support of individuals. In addition, mentoring can facilitate mutual two-way benefits, providing opportunities for exchanges in which the mentee receives professional guidance and the mentor benefits from new perspectives and insights shared by mentees.

· Distance learning[2] and/or engagement can be a viable strategy to extend impact, and can be most beneficial when used in combination with face-to-face (e.g., as a follow-up). While the appeal and perceived effectiveness of some distance methods, such as online modules and courses, is mixed, we noted successful examples of how they are used to enhance outcomes and sustain engagement with and the cohesion of the participant community. The lessons from these examples are that distance learning requires thoughtful development and facilitation, and in particular, online platforms should not be seen as a strategy to achieve similar outcomes for less effort.

· Diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice (DEIJ)[3] are important considerations from the outset in program content and design. DEIJ were frequently cited as needs across the global conservation community. For example, in open-ended survey questions, diversity, equity, and inclusion aspects were the top items needing more emphasis. In programs that include DEIJ, we found the focus to be predominantly on gender, unconscious bias, and working across difference/cultures, with very little work on inclusion/exclusion, power issues, and the systemic changes needed in conservation itself.

2.2 Program design needs

We identified the following as unmet, or insufficiently met needs within the sector:

· Very few programs provide long-term support; the duration of most programs span one year or less. In the cases where programs extended further, they were often two-year graduate programs with no follow-up after graduation.

· Evaluation of program outcomes is weak or lacking; most evaluation protocols use surveys of alumni, and focus on program outputs such as number of participants, geographic reach, and similar variables that fall short of describing outcomes or impacts. There are important efforts to learn from, however, such as the Conservation Leadership Programme (CLP) and the Conservation Leadership through Learning (CLL) and Center for Protected Area Management (CPAM) at Colorado State University (CSU).

- While mentoring is integrated into a number of programs, there is a need for 'mainstreaming' it as an effective learning approach. There is an opportunity to learn from experience that exists both within and beyond the conservation sector to determine the most effective mentoring approaches.

- There is little evidence that diversity and inclusion within program design (e.g., the extent to which programs have diverse participation and establish inclusive environments) has become a normalized process. Across our survey, DEIJ was the top need identified in open-ended questions, and many expressed a desire to effectively address it, or shared pilot, initial experiences.

2.3 Critical program content needs, and gaps

Our findings from the literature, surveys, and interviews align with evolving views in which conservation practice and effectiveness is predicated on engaging with social-economic contexts - and ultimately transforming the societal systems that drive biodiversity loss (see, for example, UN Global Assessment on Biodiversity, by Diaz et al. 2019).

In line with this, our analysis reveals a need to foster leaders with both a diverse breadth of knowledge and skills, as well as significant depth in skill development. Given the complexities of conservation, the uncertainties typical in many aspects of social-ecological contexts, and the rapid pace in which circumstances can change, the sector needs leaders who are self-aware, systems thinkers, adaptive learners, conveners, network builders, collaboration brokers, effective communicators, and innovators.

Furthermore, while leadership continues to be seen by some as an individual endeavor defined by one's position, contemporary views consider leadership as a behavior that can be exhibited by anyone from any position in a group, which ultimately influences and motivates others to act as leaders as well. This more contemporary view of leadership can emerge from environments that are inclusive, innovative, and collaborative, and therefore, more effective. Organizations still need executive directors and managers, but these are increasingly seen as positions with a larger responsibility for influencing organizational behavior or group performance, and for creating the conditions that allow leadership to emerge beyond authority. Our findings show that access to learning in the following areas of content is a critical need in conservation leadership capacity development, across all career levels:

- Recognizing the importance of self-awareness[4] for personal growth, self-care, learning, and positively influencing others
- Applying systems thinking[5] to conservation challenges and practice
- Listening, facilitating, and managing conflict through empathy and respectful communication
- Establishing environments that encourage and support creativity and innovation[6]
- Creating empowering environments in which the strengths and contributions of stakeholders are valued and acknowledged, and there are opportunities to fully participate in decision-making
- Integrating diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice for meaningful collaboration
- Collaborating with non-conservation sectors to foster new ideas and opportunities
- Developing monitoring and evaluation processes that focus on outcomes and impacts.

We reviewed the websites, annual reports, promotional materials, and similar resources of 40 core programs and organizations in our study to assess the extent to which these topics were addressed. We determined that:

- Collaboration among organizations within the conservation sector stood out in terms of how many programs address it. Nearly every one of the core programs include it.

- Conversely, Innovation/Creativity, Empowerment, DEIJ, and Collaboration with non-conservation sectors stood out in terms of how few initiatives included content from these topics in their programs. While some programs appear to touch on some of these topics, few appear to elevate these topics prominently in their content and/or desired learning outcomes.

- The number of programs that integrate the remaining topics - Self-Awareness, Systems Thinking, Communication, and Monitoring and Evaluation - was about the same as the number of programs that do not.

- The content areas with more frequent coverage by existing programs should not be ignored; all of the listed topics were included in our analysis because they are important for effective conservation leadership, regardless of the extent to which the current landscape of programs address it. Rather, these more common topics indicate opportunities for partnerships, learning from others' experiences in teaching the content, and/or content in which a new program can build from participants' likely prior knowledge in a topical area.

2.4 Critical audience needs

Potential target audiences can be characterized multiple ways: demographics, geographic location, sector of work, career stage, among many others. Here we focus on needs based on level of experience.

Emerging conservation leaders (generally with less than ten years of formal training or relevant experience, and typically referred to as "early-" or sometimes "mid-career") are served by multiple programs in the existing landscape; we found that most programs target individuals at this level of experience (26 programs or 65% of the core or primary programs list). However, this audience also needs more opportunities for sustained long-term learning and development of the key leadership themes described above, and to explore application of the themes to their own personal and professional growth and their systems of influence.

Mid-level conservation leaders are defined here as those with generally 10 or so years of formal training and/ or comparable intermediate level work or leadership experience, with some expectation that the individual has attained increased responsibility for management and strategic decision-making in their professional or practitioner experience. We find this to be a critical focal audience for new efforts, for a number of reasons:

- It is essential to retain these individuals and mitigate attrition; when someone at mid-level leaves conservation (compared to emerging/early levels), considerable knowledge, resources, experience and future potential are lost.

- We found a lower number of opportunities exclusively targeting these individuals. More immersive learning modalities including peer networks, communities of practice, and experiential learning for adaptive conservation and leadership practice (experimentation, learning, and improvement) are critical at this stage.

- Many of our interviewees viewed mid-level conservationists as comparatively more aware of their limitations and obstacles, and ready to deepen their development and self-awareness, which is likely to be an important antecedent to learning about innovation, DEIJ, and other key topics and practices.

- Mid-level conservationists are seen as having broader networks, the experience to more effectively recognize and engage with complexity, and a desire to apply new skills and professional growth in work settings.

Finally, while *experienced* or senior conservation leaders (generally with 20 or more years of experience and responsible for leading/sharing leadership on the strategic direction of groups, organizations, and/ or collaborative networks of partners) were not a primary focus of this study, some of the programs are available to them, and a few of the providers run programs that target senior level leaders. We note that these more experienced leaders hold the ability to create the needed enabling environment and organizational capacity building systems that are critical for individuals and organizations to thrive and innovate towards social and environmental change. We see a need to increase their capacity to develop systems for organizational learning, build inclusive leadership cultures, as well as processes for encouraging innovation, building empathy, and empowering others.

3. Recommendations

The conservation leadership capacity development field is a vibrant space with many competent and innovative actors, yet there are multiple gaps for ongoing or new efforts to address, as described above. For those considering pursuing development of a new program, we recommend:

- Leverage the existing capacity development efforts in the themes of collaboration, monitoring and evaluation, communication, and self-awareness, and build programs that increase the focus on critical but less-offered areas related to innovation and creativity, collaborating across sectors, DEIJ, and systems thinking.

- Build opportunities around in-person learning and exchange that integrate applied, cohort-based, and experiential elements. Link in-person trainings with distance learning, such as online training, virtual mentoring and similar support to sustain participant engagement.

- Consider supporting regional cohorts of mid-level conservation leaders for multiple years to foster deep development of leadership skills, promote peer-to-peer learning, and provide mentoring for sustained development in situ and in context. The communities emerging from these could be connected regionally.

- Consider strengthening leadership development for emerging conservation leaders, through distributed virtual opportunities such as scalable online courses. The desired learning outcomes for these efforts would be for participants to gain awareness and a basic understanding of the fundamental concepts within each of the key leadership topics described earlier (a "21st century leadership toolkit").

- Promote convening activities for experienced conservation leaders, with an emphasis on advancing skills within topics that are either relatively new to conservation or for which there are few learning opportunities currently, such as creativity/innovation, building empathy, DEIJ, and how to influence organizational culture to create a more enabling environment and innovative culture.

As discussed above, the learning that must occur to develop highly effective conservation leaders draws from a number of topics. In particular, we recommend programs build competence in fundamentals of self-awareness, communication, collaboration, and monitoring/evaluation, while also pushing participants into less familiar and more complex territory of systems thinking, creativity and innovation, communicating and collaborating with empathy, and addressing critical DEIJ issues. Program participants should be encouraged to examine their personal career trajectory, ambitions, needs, and barriers for personal and

professional growth, and how to best be agents of change in their systems of influence.

Expected learning outcomes for participants can vary in terms of depth, based on the participants' level of prior experience and current or forthcoming responsibilities. For example, emerging leaders would be expected to become familiar with concepts and methods, and explore its application to their personal and professional growth, and systems of influence; mid-level leaders would be expected to apply this body of knowledge to their conservation work, including how it could influence responsibilities such as strategic management and facilitation of teams or organizations, as well as their personal growth as leaders; and experienced leaders would be expected to be able to do all that and more - to use these topics as lenses for establishing a positive organizational climate, promoting deep cultural learning, and catalyzing societal change.

Finally, regardless of which of the ideas above are the best fit for your organization, we encourage all capacity development providers to design, implement, and adequately resource robust systems for monitoring and evaluating long-term outcomes and impacts of new initiatives, from the start. This will allow us, as a community, to advance evaluation in conservation leadership capacity development, and develop dynamic programs that adapt to evaluation findings and contribute to the wider community of practice of conservation leadership capacity building.

Pursuing these activities will require not simply new investments but also new approaches, mindsets, collaborations, and learning from each other. Despite the high investments needed, these efforts also have the potential to add significant value, create important synergies, and serve the conservation community in transformative ways.

Methods

The study was carried out in two phases. During Phase 1 (March-June 2019), we compiled information about more than 100 programs focusing primarily on training conducted in English through online and literature sources to produce a "Landscape Map" of relevant programs and initiatives; conducted a survey targeting 168 staff, alumni, and partners from 86+ programs; led 38 interviews with individuals from specific programs; and carried out preliminary analyses of findings from these efforts.

During Phase 2 (June-August 2019), we solicited insights and perspectives through exchanges with capacity development practitioners during the Symposium on New Directions in Conservation Leadership (June 25-27, Cambridge, UK), and the international conference on Capacity Building for Conservation (July 30-August 1, London, UK). We also updated the Landscape Map with additional programs based on these efforts, and conducted 21 additional interviews with representatives of programs from specific areas of interest (e.g., online instruction, innovation, mentoring). We analyzed and synthesized the findings to derive general recommendations for current and future initiatives.

As of the writing of this report (August 2019), the Landscape Map (Figure 1) encompassed 98+ organizations providing capacity development in conservation or conservation leadership, representing 110+ programs or training opportunities. Of these, we identified 40 providers and their programs as core to this analysis, given that their programmatic focus (i.e., conservation leadership), language of instruction (English), and target audience closely parallel the interests of the Collaborators. The map includes an additional 58 providers of training and learning opportunities that are also relevant to conservation practitioners, and have either a conservation focus or a leadership focus but typically not both. An online version of this map will soon be available to allow visualization of different program types and information on the programs, as well as future updates.

Conservation
Leadership
Programme

Tropical Biology
Association
(UK location)

The Zoological
Society of London

Cambridge
University

Future for Nature

UN System Staff College

International Academy
for Nature Conservation

Oxford University -
Environmental Change
Institute

EuroPark
Federation

Intrac for Civil Society

Durrell Wildlife
Conservation Trust

ProPark

United
Nations
UNITAR

Carinthia University
of Applied Sciences

MAVA
Foundation

International
Union for the
Conservation
of Nature

India Ministry
of Environment,
Forests and Climate
Change

Ecole de
Faune de
Garoua

Africa Wildlife
Foundation

PRIDE Lion Guardians /
Colorado State University
(Kenya location)

BirdLife
International

Tropical Biology Association
(Kenya location)

LEAD Ranger

African Leadership University - School
of Wildlife Conservation (also S)

EarthWatch

Organization for Tropical Studies
(South Africa Location)

South African
Wildlife College

Figure 1. Landscape Map

● Core Program Providers

■ Additional Program Providers

Figure 1. Landscape Map

● Core Program Providers

■ Additional Program Providers

Duke Kunshan University (China location)

Hau'oli Mau Loa Foundation

KUPU

Center for People and Forests

Assocation of Southeast Asian Nations

National University of Singapore

Carrasco Bioecon Lab

Asia Protected Areas Partnership

Charles Darwin University

Reef Ecologic

International Water Centre

International River Foundation

University of Murdoch

Blue Mountains World Heritege Institute

Australian Indigenous Leadership Center

Australian Rural Leadership Foundation

University of Tasmania

Figure 1. Landscape Map

● Core Program Providers

■ Additional Program Providers

US Fish and Wildilfe - National Conservation Training Center

National Conservation Leadership Institute (WV location)

Conservation Coaches Network

Robert & Patricia Switzer Foundation

University of Rhode Island Coastal Resources Center

Wilburforce Foundation

University of Washington

University of Montana

Great Lakes Leadership Academy, Michigan State University

University of MIchigan

EarthWatch

Maliasili

CUNY - Lehman College

Center for Diversity and the Environment

Quebec-Labrador Foundation

Open Space Institute

National Conservation Leadership Institute (WY location)

Aldo Leopold Foundation

UNDP

PRIDE Lion Guardians / Colorado State University (USA location)

University of Wisconsin-Madison

Yale University

UNITAR

University of California - Berkeley

Colorado Open Lands

Wildlife Conservation Society

University of California-Davis

Colorado State University Center for Protected Area Management

Kinship Foundation

Center for Health Care Strategies (CHCS)

Aspen Institute

Clemson University

Environmental Leadership Program (also S)

University of California-Merced

University of Colorado - Boulder

Institute for Conservation Leadership

Stanford University (also S)

Emory University

The Nature Conservancy (also S)

Conservation International

Rice University

Association of American Medical Colleges

Conservation Strategy Fund

Society for Conservation Biology

NOAA

University of Florida

Women in Nature Network

Natural Resources Leadership Institute

WWF

Mexican Fund for the Conservation of Nature

Emerging Wildlife Conservation Leaders

Smithsonian Institution

Duke Kunshan University (USA location)

North Carolina State University

Women in Nature Network

Organization for Tropical Studies

● Conservation Leadership in the Caribbean

Foundation Center for Research in Sustainable Systems of Agricultural Production - CIPAV

Wildlife Conservation Society - Chile

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Given that our scope was focused on programs in the English language, the majority of the provider organizations (in either set) are located in North America—particularly the United States—and in Europe, but it is important to note that many of these programs serve and collaborate with populations across the globe.

Sixty percent of the core providers (25) state that they target specific regions, while 40% (15) have a global purview, at least in theory; while their programs are available to a global audience, realistically due to costs and delivery format many are only available to a very small portion of potential global applicants. Given the English-language focus, our searches and initial inquiries did not return many programs in South America, but some relevant programs that train in Spanish are included as they were highlighted in surveys, focus groups, or interviews.

For a more detailed discussion of leadership and the methods used in this study, please see the companion Appendix.

Endnotes

1. A community of practice can be defined as "a group of professionals informally bound to one another through exposure to a common class of problems, common pursuit of solutions, and thereby themselves embodying a store of knowledge" (Stewart 2001 in Botha, et al. 2008).
2. Throughout this report, "distance learning" refers to any capacity-building activity other than face-to-face, such as formal online courses/modules, virtual mentoring, formal and informal discussion groups and less structured interactions between program staff, participants, mentors, and others.
3. We recommend the Chesapeake Bay Trust (2019, pg. 6) as a useful reference for these terms. "Diversity: the demographic mix of a specific collection of people, taking into account elements of human difference. Equity: the promotion of justice, impartiality and fairness within the procedures, processes, and distribution of resources by institutions or systems, including by addressing the present-day impacts of past inequities in order to achieve equity going forward. Inclusion: the degree to which diverse individuals are enabled to participate fully in the decision-making processes within an organization or group. Social Justice: equal access to wealth, opportunities, and privileges within a society."
4. We use the term self-awareness to refer to the awareness that one is a thinking, acting creature, and one can reflect about thoughts and actions. A self-aware person has a good understanding of how their mind works, and takes time to understand and question why they think, feel, or behave the way they do. This self-awareness is akin to "mindfulness," and supports self-efficacy.
5. "Systems thinking" came up regularly across our study. Systems thinking is both a set of methods and tools and an approach to seeing the world in a way that makes connections more visible and improves problem solving abilities. A systems thinking leader will: pay attention to the parts and the whole; ask about relationships to other events; look for patterns over time (trends); and seek root causes--the connections between events and the underlying structure of the system, which may be driving behavior. To explore further you can begin at the Academy for Systems Change (https://www.academyforchange.org), the Waters Center (https://waterscenterst.org), and the Cabrera Lab (https://www.crlab.us).
6. The term "innovation" is often used to refer to technology-oriented solutions, but it can also, and perhaps more importantly, be applied to new ideas, thinking, and behavior, such as habits related to observing, questioning, learning - including what and who we learn from. Additional elements include networking and experimenting, which in turn can lead to new processes, approaches, and systems that address or fulfill an identified need in previously unexplored ways. Creating an environment that supports innovation, creativity, and entrepreneurship requires valuing collaboration, visioning, and a tolerance of risk. Conservation leaders need self-awareness of their level of risk comfort or risk aversion. This factor will greatly influence the extent to which organizational cultures that promote new ideas, processes, and products can evolve.

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