

# WHY RESILIENCY? A GRANTEE STORY

PERSPECTIVE FROM ASHLEY BOREN, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, SUSTAINABLE CONSERVATION

*Sustainable Conservation partners with some of California's most vital industries – including the \$4.5 billion dairy and \$2.6 billion horticultural industries – to make clean air and water, thriving wildlife, and a healthy climate business as usual. The organization works with private-sector leaders, scientists and academics, government agencies, and other nonprofits to develop and expand promising solutions that can be implemented across entire industries. The S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation has supported Sustainable Conservation programs since 1999, and in recent years, has made grants to build its capacity to expand impact – developing staff and financial resources to design, launch, and conduct the Making Big Ideas Work campaign.*

*Consultant Ruth Norris interviewed Ashley Boren about assessing and investing in resiliency at Sustainable Conservation.*

## **What did you find valuable about a funder's focus on capacities contributing to resiliency?**

**ASHLEY BOREN:** To have a funder invest in organizational capacity so that you are better able to carry out your programs is so helpful and so smart. Building an organization's capacity inevitably means the organization can use funding more effectively by being more strategic, ensuring it has the right people in the right places, and investing in staff development. The capacity building the Foundation enabled us to do was transformative for Sustainable Conservation. It enabled us to raise more funding, hire additional, very talented staff, and invest in systems that have taken our effectiveness to a significantly higher level. As a result, we have taken on much more ambitious program goals and been successful in reaching them.

## **Would you share an example of change in your organization as a result of the Foundation's attention to resiliency issues?**

**AB:** I can think of several examples. For starters, leadership. It's not healthy for an organization to be overly dependent on a single person. The Foundation's support enabled Sustainable Conservation to both bring on additional staff in key leadership positions for the organization and to invest in the professional development of existing staff. We now have a number of key people recognized both within and outside the organization as leaders. That's been huge.

The Foundation's announcement of its spend down happened to coincide with Sustainable Conservation's desire to take more of a leap in increasing our impact as opposed to steady progress. Our board and staff were ready to launch a campaign to increase our capacity and impact, raise the visibility of the organization, and increase the number of donors to a level where we could sustain a bigger agenda and a team of people to achieve it over time. The Foundation invested in our work to develop capacity, both with staff and expert consulting. Knowing the Foundation was supportive of our campaign idea enabled us to develop a bigger vision: if money weren't such a constraint, what would we take on? We could then staff to our new vision, and support it through more aggressive prospecting – developing and nurturing relationships that have built our donor base. We just finished the third year of our five-year campaign. We've already reached our financial goal, and plan to spend the next two years building our donor base to sustain the organization at this level even after the Foundation is gone.

On the program side, the Foundation encouraged us to leverage capacity we already had working with the agricultural sector – to go beyond our focus on water quality and begin to look at water quantity issues. We weren't sure there was a value-added role for Sustainable Conservation on water supply and use issues given the many organizations engaged in California's long-standing water debates. But the Foundation nudged us, and provided funding to explore whether there were roles we might play in improving California water management. Having the resources, time, and space to consider options and scenarios has resulted in some really exciting strategies.

## **Your recent work has focused on the resiliency factors of Talent & Leadership and Financial Footing. Are there other resiliency factors you find it important to assess on a regular basis?**

**AB:** Both learning and collaboration – including partnerships and alliances – are embedded in Sustainable Conservation's organizational core values. We consider ourselves a learning organization, open to different points of view and always looking for what we can learn.

## **What advice might you offer to other funders considering using the *Resiliency Guide* to explore resiliency issues with their grantees?**

**AB:** Focus on organizations and their success, and not just on programs. The more flexibility the better. Things happen and don't always go as expected, and there may be different paths to addressing issues. I think the strategy should be on capacity building without creating dependence. Be open to additional capacity-building support. It's a smart investment. Look at more than the overhead percentage and work to understand what it takes to run an effective organization. Use a tool like the *Guide* to show opportunities to be effective, and highlight areas where lack of investment might be hurting overall success.

### **ASHLEY BOREN, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, SUSTAINABLE CONSERVATION**

Ashley Boren has directed the strategy, growth, and operations of Sustainable Conservation since 1997. Ashley received a 2007 James Irvine Foundation Leadership Award for her unwavering commitment to innovative, balanced problem-solving to address a variety of critical environmental problems facing California.

Prior to Sustainable Conservation, Ashley spent eight years at Smith & Hawken, a mail order and retail gardening company, where she worked in finance, new business development, inventory planning, and retail merchandising. She began her career at The Nature Conservancy in program development and fundraising. In addition to her work at Sustainable Conservation, Ashley serves on the California State Board of Food and Agriculture, on UC California's President's Advisory Commission on Agriculture and Natural Resources, and on the Executive Committee of the Agricultural Sustainability Institute's External Advisory Board at UC Davis. Ashley served on the Board of the Robert and Patricia Switzer Foundation from 2002 to 2011, the last two years as Chair, and on Stanford Business School's Alumni Consulting Team Board from 1995 to 2002, the last three years as Chair.

Ashley is a graduate of the Marlborough School in Los Angeles, which awarded her their 2008 Woman of the Year Award, and has a BA in human biology, an MA in applied economics, and an MBA from Stanford University.