

ADVANCING DURABLE AND RELEVANT PROTECTED LANDS

ENVIRONMENT PROGRAM REFLECTION



The S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation envisions a California that manages, stewards, and conserves its water and land to support a resilient environment and healthy communities. As the Foundation approaches conclusion in 2020, staff are documenting strategies from priority program portfolios. Access the series of Foundation reflections at sdbjrfoundation.org.

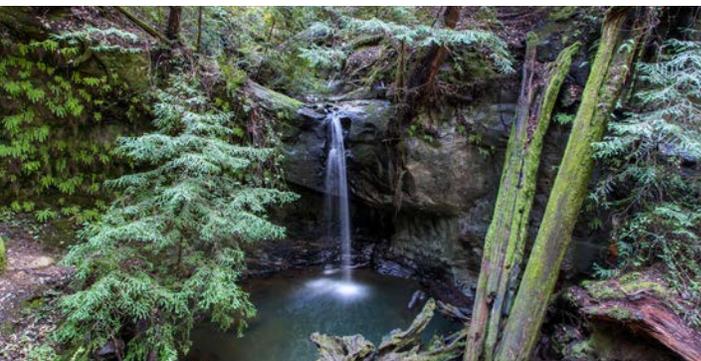
OVERVIEW

The S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation sought to advance the durability and relevance of California's protected lands network to support a resilient environment and healthy communities.

As the Foundation pursued this goal across the decade beginning in 2009, its work built on increasing awareness of the opportunity for cross-jurisdictional partnerships to steward protected lands at large scale – and on the need to rethink management of California's spectacular state parks system. The state parks came under significant threat as the state faced a budget crisis in 2009; the Foundation became a major funder beginning in 2013 when that system's future remained in question. The Foundation's protected lands strategy would come to be defined by these twin approaches – investing in partnerships to steward large landscapes in California, and in transforming the California Department of Parks and Recreation, the agency responsible for state parks. These elements overlapped and were integrated over time. The strategy also featured capacity-building grants to key organizations, with a particular focus on land trusts.

The Foundation approach was facilitative and adaptive, continually enhanced through learning. Grantees were encouraged to identify the supports that would make the greatest difference based on their respective circumstances, assets, and aspirations. Foundation strategy drew on available evidence to combine bold thinking with pragmatic practices. Overall, the Foundation's work was relationship-centric, with program staff spending substantial time with grantees as well as other organizations and groups important to stewarding public lands in California.

This reflection includes background on Foundation investments in the protected lands portfolio. It further describes context and strategy for the work of the Foundation and its grantee partners. It concludes with key takeaways, formulated by Foundation staff, that might benefit other funders, policymakers, and organizations pursuing effective, large-scale stewardship of protected lands.



Foundation investments helped transform the California system of state parks and advance the number and effectiveness of cross-jurisdictional collaborations that steward protected lands across the state.

BACKGROUND

Foundation spend-down investments in protected lands were inspired by its founder's interests in seeing open spaces protected and stewarded for the benefit of all Californians. This work drew upon and complemented Foundation grantmaking for science education, environmental literacy, and character development. Foundation program strategy was anchored in the belief that nature is a classroom for learners of all ages, and should be protected and accessible for all.

Another major influence for the protected lands strategy was an appreciation for the role of nonprofit organizations, particularly land trusts, in effectively managing conservation lands. Exemplifying its support for land trusts, the Foundation played a pivotal role in bolstering the Land Trust Alliance's capacity-building work in the western United States.

The year that California's governor Schwarzenegger threatened to close 70 of California's state parks to help mitigate a severe budget crisis, 2009, coincided with the Foundation's adoption of a spend-down model. The Board of Directors decided to spend down all assets based on the belief that California faced critical challenges requiring resources and creative solutions that merited investment sooner rather than later. Ultimately, the Foundation set 2020 as its final year of operations.

The Foundation's process for honing priorities and program approaches in its concluding years was dynamic – informed by context, activated through the discovery of windows of opportunity that were ripe for philanthropic investment, and ever adapting to the experiences and needs of grantees and funding partners as their work unfolded.



SHIFTS IN CONTEXT SPELLED OPPORTUNITY

The Foundation strategy responded to two circumstances that offered significant possibilities to influence improvements in California protected lands management.

Growing interest in cross-jurisdictional partnerships

One was heightened awareness – for policymakers, practitioners, and the public – around the importance of cross-jurisdictional partnerships to effectively steward large landscapes. The responsibility for managing expansive landscapes was typically divided among multiple organizations, often including nonprofit organizations as well as public entities such as the California state parks system.

In California, as with other states, contiguous protected landscapes are often under the purview of several agencies – each with its own missions and goals, plans and timelines, and sources and levels of funding. Traditionally, these vast landscapes were managed as discrete, but large, parcels, with each lead agency stopping work at its jurisdictional borders. This practice resulted in the widely acknowledged problem of managing parcels as individual units, like separate postage stamps, across the landscape. That approach is not conducive to the wellbeing of the ecosystems that span the jurisdictional boundaries of these properties. Stewarding the natural resources and wildlife of any individual land requires an integrated strategy that addresses each jurisdiction in relationship to its overarching ecosystem. For example, large-scale forest management in California requires coordinated strategies that traverse jurisdictional boundaries.

Stewarding the natural resources and wildlife of any individual land requires an integrated strategy that encompasses its overarching ecosystem.

Several multi-jurisdictional collaborations had been established in the latter decades of the 1900s. The new century brought a broader appreciation and sense of urgency to the importance of large-landscape management. This interest in turn presented opportunity for the Foundation to catalyze new and stronger partnerships in regions across the state by working with grantees who could demonstrate collaborative approaches that enhanced the durability and relevance of landscapes.

California state parks in crisis

The second window of possibility involved a crisis in California's state parks. The 280 state park units, involving about 1.4 million acres, together represented 2.8% of California's protected lands. These parks are tremendous assets, attracting more than 70 million visitors each year and offering the public access to unique outdoor spaces, recreational opportunities, and cultural experiences. State parks, managed through California's Department of Parks and Recreation, were also essential participants in a majority of cross-jurisdictional partnerships in place during the 2000s.

However, a series of compounding issues had seriously weakened the California state parks system in the early part of the new century. The Great Recession hit in 2008, resulting in a freeze on the California bond fund expenditures used to expand the protected lands network, and bringing a financial crisis in the state parks system to a head. By 2009, 70 parks faced closure and the Department was in the eye of a high-visibility storm. Public confidence eroded due to a lack of agency transparency regarding the spending of financial reserves in the system.

Ensuing attention surfaced challenges that went beyond financial constraints – the Department had outdated technology, cumbersome systems, internal work culture challenges, and the accrued effects of unmet maintenance and operational needs. Its top leaders and their decisions were criticized, adding to wide public concern for the future of California’s state parks.

Stakeholder groups mobilized to keep threatened parks open during this period, and an infusion of donor dollars joined new allocations of public funds to buoy the effort. As these groups worked together, they realized that the benefits of effective partnership would serve the system in good times and bad.

In parallel, the Foundation and several funding partners recognized that attention on state parks offered a moment to broadly rethink how the Department could bring its mission into the 21st century. Opportunity was ripe to serve more diverse audiences and adopt innovative approaches to stewarding natural and cultural resources across all park boundaries – be they state, national, or county. A drive was born from inside the Department and its external partners to foster networks, examine current approaches, and bring about improvements that would strengthen the state’s overall system of protected lands management.

Outdated technology, cumbersome systems, internal work culture challenges, and the accrued effects of unmet maintenance and operational needs hampered the state parks system.



California is home to many public park spaces; state parks are often central in partnerships formed to steward large tracts of land that cross jurisdictional boundaries.

ADAPTIVE PHILANTHROPY

The Foundation was well positioned at a moment in which philanthropy could be a catalyst for change.

The state parks system wanted to reinvent itself and knew that it needed outside partners. Cross-jurisdictional collaborations were drawing interest, although participants needed support and the means to experiment.

In response, the Foundation sought a posture that was facilitative and supportive, conversing and planning with partners based on their needs and priorities, and avoiding funder-prescribed solutions.

Work with the California Department of Parks and Recreation became the centerpiece of Foundation investments to advance durable and relevant protected lands, and program staff came to view state parks as anchors in the collective land management effort. Multi-year commitment from the Foundation and other funders would bring dividends: When the Department rebounded from crisis and embraced improved, sustainable practices, it made cross-jurisdictional landscape management core to its approach.

A THREE-PRONGED STRATEGY

The Foundation approach evolved over time – adapting in light of field dynamics, new relationships, and lessons and experience gained. What began with an intent to leverage knowledge and networks to improve stewardship of protected lands led to a three-part grantmaking approach:

1. Revitalizing state parks.
2. Supporting experimentation in cross-jurisdictional and cross-sector partnerships.
3. Building the capacity of core organizations such as land trusts and national parks to expand partnerships.

REVITALIZING STATE PARKS

In July 2013, the California Secretary of Natural Resources empaneled the Parks Forward Commission to assess the unique challenges facing California’s state parks and identify ways to solidify the future of the Department of Parks and Recreation.



California’s State Park System is a world-class network of incomparable lands and features that are vitally important to the well-being of our state’s environment, economy, and people. However, our parks are under serious stress, and these problems are not new. The Parks Forward Commission was established under statute by Governor Jerry Brown to examine the steady deterioration of state parks over many years and to make recommendations to the governor and legislature on how to reverse that course.

A NEW VISION FOR CALIFORNIA STATE PARKS
February 2015

A call for sweeping change

The Commission was a “blue-ribbon” panel of respected experts and advocates who represented an array of perspectives across sectors. In 2014, the Commission brought forward a sweeping set of recommendations in its report, “A New Vision for California State Parks.”

In 2015, the Commission released final recommendations in an updated report, calling for major changes to ensure the park systems’ long-term sustainability. Specifically, the Commission recommended a fundamental transformation of the Department, a rededication to working with park partners drawn from all sectors, and an expansion of park access to reach all Californians.



Markers of transformation

The Foundation invested \$4 million, through multiple grants, to support the formation of the Parks Forward Commission and subsequent implementation of its recommendations. The state parks system underwent fundamental transformation based on the new paradigm presented by the Commission. After a century of operations, the Department of Parks and Recreation revamped its leadership structure and style, infrastructure, programs, and relationship with communities to gain new relevance and abilities to meet 21st century challenges. By March 2017, the Department had achieved major milestones including:

- Modernized financial and operations systems.
- Expanded access to leadership positions for candidates from broader and more diverse professional backgrounds.
- A staff Leadership Development Program established in partnership with California State University of Sacramento.
- Improved relations with community groups and organizations through a new Partnership Office.
- Multiple community liaison projects conducted to improve parks based on the needs and preferences of local audiences.
- New methods to showcase California’s public outdoor places, including use of popular media and approaches intended to engage youth, teachers, and all community members.

Creating a permanent partner for the state parks

The final critical element to putting the state parks system onto a sustainable trajectory was the launch of a support organization to carry the vision of California’s parks to a broader audience, buffer the system against changes in political winds and priorities, and recruit new supporters.

In 2018, the Foundation contributed \$3 million to the launch of Parks California – a nonprofit organization focused on supporting state parks and ensuring continued progress on Parks Forward Commission recommendations. Parks California will continue to advocate for needed structural reforms as well as attract donors and contribute to a financially sustainable park system that is accessible to all Californians.



Emerald Bay State Park



Torrey Pines State Natural Reserve

SUPPORTING EXPERIMENTATION OF CROSS-JURISDICTIONAL AND CROSS-SECTOR PARTNERSHIPS

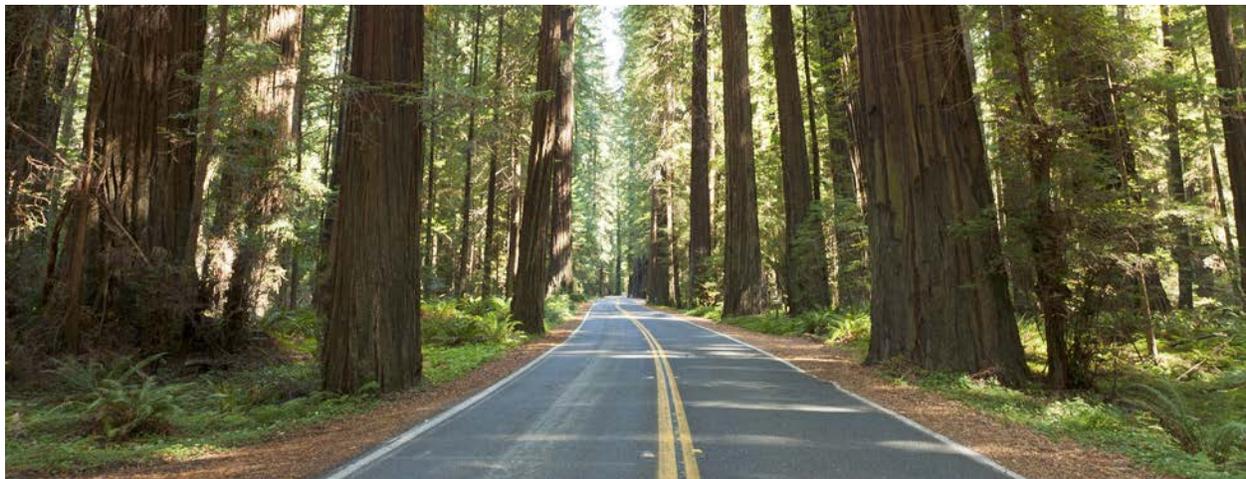
To advance large-landscape collaboratives across the state, the Foundation seeded four cross-jurisdictional partnerships.

Significant momentum and energy emerged from these experiments, leading to the formation of new state and national networks – and helping catalyze a field of actors involved with large-landscape stewardship. The four new partnerships were:

- The Santa Cruz Mountain Stewardship Network, coordinating stewardship efforts among landowners and managers in the Santa Cruz Mountains.
- Tam Lands Collaborative, addressing land management on Mount Tamalpais.
- Peninsula Working Group, convening a Cross-Jurisdictional Management Planning effort in San Mateo and Santa Cruz counties.
- Redwoods Rising, launching a North Coast partnership among Save the Redwoods League, state parks, national parks, and Native American tribes.

Foundation investment helped partners take critical steps to improve their regional efforts, while strengthening statewide networks and knowledge through land manager communities of practice. These partnership grants worked synergistically with Foundation investments in California state parks and connected to support for land management anchor organizations.

The number of important collaborations continued to grow, and each one represented an experiment in developing new and innovative approaches to large landscape-scale stewardship throughout California and nationwide. In 2016, the Foundation provided startup support for the California Large Landscape Stewardship Network (CA Network) and the national Practitioners' Network for Large Landscape Conservation. The grants complemented support for the four cross-jurisdictional partnerships listed above, and seeded a community of practice that continues to build and share knowledge around how partnerships can improve stewardship through technological tools and effective social practices. Findings from collective knowledge sharing yielded tools like the Foundation funded [Partnership Impact Model](#) from the Tam Lands Collaborative, which demonstrated practical implications for collaboratives and funders struggling to identify ways to understand, describe, and optimize partnership impact.



STRENGTHENING FIELDS AND ANCHOR ORGANIZATIONS

The Foundation also invested from the outset in building the capacity of stewardship organizations that were vital to their respective fields.

In 2009, the Foundation launched a Sustainability Cohort of key land trusts across California, with an intent to ensure that this field had capable, technologically advanced, future-focused organizations. Over five years, cohort members received support to enhance their effectiveness, addressing priorities each defined as important to its respective capacity needs and organizational goals.

In 2017, the Foundation provided support to the National Park Foundation for work with the National Park Service. This grant focused on designing and implementing a contemporary model for partnerships between National Parks and entities from across the nonprofit, government, and private sectors. These investments were intended to support National Parks in California, and influence National Parks in other states, through partnerships that helped make these public resources accessible and welcoming, strengthening their offerings and benefits for diverse visitors, and helping them attract sustainable sources of financial support.

Investments in California land trusts and in National Parks were designed to advance and sustain improvements in two of the major systems in place to steward protected lands.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

The Foundation’s multi-year, multi-faceted efforts to advance durable and relevant protected lands in California yield lessons that may be helpful to funders, policymakers, and organizations seeking to affect change at scale. Staff reflection generated four primary takeaways from this work.

FOUNDATION STAFF REFLECTIONS:

- 1. Transforming public agencies requires skilled leaders**
- 2. Systems change in the public sector can be fueled through partnerships, sustained commitment, and innovation**
- 3. Large-scale landscape management collaborations add value and merit investment**
- 4. Philanthropy can catalyze innovation in public agencies and systems**

1. Transforming public agencies requires skilled leaders

The revitalization of the California Department of Parks and Recreation was a major accomplishment, ultimately enabled by executive leaders who:

- Expressed **empathy** for the needs of both external and internal stakeholders
- Demonstrated **openness** to new ideas
- Carried a **realistic understanding** of the unique legal and financial constraints inherent to their public enterprise
- Championed a **compelling vision** that rallied stakeholders to identify and implement innovations that transcended constraints and brought forward greater benefits for all Californians
- Built **trust** through delivering on promises and consistent behaviors over time

Funders and officials seeking to dramatically elevate the impact of agencies should ensure that leaders capable of transformational change are in place, and invest in building leadership capacity as needed.

2. Systems change in the public sector can be fueled through partnerships, sustained commitment, and innovation

California's expansive and troubled network of state parks was largely modernized over a period of five years. The revamping of this large system was fueled through cross-sector partnerships. The California Department of Parks and Recreation was willing to embrace change; nonprofit organizations, businesses, and funders helped the agency adopt new platforms and practices. These partners invested in relationships based on mutual goals, aligning their respective actions, and maintaining dedication to changes that in some cases took several years to realize.

While the Department set policies and held responsibility for management of state parks, external partners proved crucial to the agency's ability to advance innovation. They introduced ideas and pointed to solutions that could be adapted from other arenas, supported learning by the Department, and used their voices to advocate for meaningful and enduring changes. These outside parties also played an important role in holding the Department accountable for milestones and timetables in its transformation plan, and to providing external validation for internal culture shifts pursued by the agency.

Funders and other stakeholders can seek out and engage nonprofit and business entities that can be active, ongoing champions for needed shifts in public systems and in the agencies that serve these systems.

3. Large-scale landscape management collaborations add value and merit investment

The experience in California indicates that independent actors can achieve more effective stewardship of large-scale protected lands through collective approaches. A unified approach can lead to a shared framework for stewardship practices that advance the missions of all participants.

While some collaborations in the state now span decades, the field of cross-jurisdictional landscape management is in many ways still emerging. There is experimentation underway with both public and private funding models. Leaders are generating new knowledge about the principles that promote large-scale stewardship, and learning to address the challenges associated with collaboration – including understanding what it takes to shift mindsets as well as practices in ways that are conducive to joint action. Identifying and adopting new collective paradigms among multiple parties, each with their own respective charters and funding sources, takes time and requires all to see that finding collective solutions will advance their individual missions.

Funders and policymakers can continue to invest in collaborations, including supporting research and evaluation related to approaches for cross-jurisdictional stewardship structures and strategies. Similarly, pursuing new understanding of barriers to collaborative approaches can inform policy changes that address these barriers and create enabling conditions for the success of partnerships.

4. Philanthropy can catalyze innovation in public agencies and systems

Facing severe infrastructure and financial challenges, and public outcry regarding plans to close several state parks, the California Department of Parks and Recreation recognized the need for change. But the agency lacked resources and partners to solve its most pressing challenges.

As the benefits of cross-jurisdictional partnership as means for effective stewardship of large-scale protected landscapes became known, regions and organizations gained interest but lacked supports needed to begin collaborating.

The S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation helped catalyze action in both cases. The Foundation drew from a broad set of tools based on specific situations and opportunities – helping make new connections and nurturing informal conversations among potential partners, funding formal facilitations as organizational leaders explored collaborative strategies, providing multi-year grants for implementation of new strategies, financing needed infrastructure, and supporting organizational capacity building. The Foundation's approach enabled lead players to experiment and take risks that might not have been possible without external support. Similarly, grantee commitments made to the Foundation brought a dimension of accountability that helped internal change agents move their organizations forward.

LOOKING AHEAD

Foundation grantees are leading large landscape-scale partnerships across California and working to overcome barriers to collaboration, develop and share resources and practices, build awareness of the value of working at this scale, and attract investment from philanthropic and public funders for this expanding movement. Their efforts can benefit collaboratives around the state and country.

There is momentum for large-landscape, cross-jurisdictional approaches, especially in an era of climate change that calls for innovation in environmental stewardship. Many experiments are underway among practitioners seeking to improve joint practices that span boundaries, and the California state parks system is testing approaches to propel its relevance in the 21st century. Significant structural policy and technology obstacles remain, including difficulties securing permits at a large scale for restoration efforts that span jurisdictions, directing funding across jurisdictions, and enabling databases to sync up and share information among participating entities. Activity and progress underway hold promise that viable solutions can emerge to address these and other pressing challenges.