



INTERNATIONAL
LAND CONSERVATION
NETWORK

Students of the Global Landscape Stewards' Peer Learning Exchange built human and natural connections on a tour of Australia

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In the words of Benjamin Franklin, “Tell me and I forget, teach me and I may remember, involve me and I learn.”



Global Landscape Stewards' Peer Learning Exchange cohort; Photo courtesy of James Hattam, Tasmanian Land Conservancy

In the conservation sector, it is increasingly clear that immense environmental challenges will only be solved through regional, national, and international collaboration. It was in that spirit, that representatives from the [California Landscape Stewardship Network](#), the [Center for Large Landscape Conservation](#), the [Network for Landscape Conservation](#), and the [International Land Conservation Network](#) (ILCN) traveled to Australia in October to undertake a global landscape stewards' peer learning exchange (GSE).

The GSE team spent three weeks traveling across eastern Australia to learn and share experience tackling overlapping challenges. The trip was assisted by the [Australian Land Conservation Alliance](#)—Australia's peak body for private land conservation—and the conservation group [Great Eastern Ranges](#). It also involved many other organizations, including [Bush Heritage Australia](#), the [Tasmanian Land](#)

[Conservancy](#), [Trust for Nature](#), and [Landcare Australia](#). Learning priorities included Indigenous co-creation of stewardship strategies, working at scale and across jurisdictions, and collaborative leadership approaches.

Strategies for Indigenous collaboration were a core part of the GSE curriculum. Recognizing and addressing historical exclusion and injustice in the field are increasingly coming to the forefront of conservation management. In parts of Australia, land trusts are exploring how permanent protection mechanisms, like covenants, can be adapted to recognize and embed cultural values, while still supporting conservation goals. Participants in the GSE learned about the context and priorities in which cultural covenants could occur in Australia. The group shared examples of best practice, as well as avoidable mistakes, from their own regions.

Shelana DeSilva, policy and advocacy strategist for the California based agency SdS Consulting, reflected on this:

“Science and our lived experiences tell us that culture and ecosystem health are inextricably linked. Across the world, the impacts of settler colonialism on lands and waters are what we, in conservation, are working to address today, from degraded habitat to channelized rivers. Effective restoration and stewardship of nature is possible when we work in true partnership with Indigenous communities and other communities of color to build a justice-focused stewardship movement together.”

Others agreed that it is critical for conservation actors to share power with First Peoples, whose voices should drive decision-making around this work.



GSE participants join hands around a tree in the Australian landscape; Photo courtesy of Phoebe Pace, ALCA

A landscape-scale conservation initiative to enable private land protection by Tasmanian farmers served as a case study on conservation finance for the cohort. In 2011, the Tasmanian Land Conservancy and Bush Heritage established the [Tasmanian Midlands Conservation Fund](#) to help finance private conservation initiatives by landholders in native grasslands on farms. The perpetual fund finances stewardship payments to the farmers for periods of five to ten years and aims to protect endangered species across 2,500 hectares.

Travis Anklam, a core coordinator for the GSE, said that the fund is a unique example for those looking to support farmer-led conservation on working land. “By empowering landholders to invest in conservation that benefits their operations, the Midlands fund is not only supporting stewardship, it’s also helping farmers deepen their partnerships with land, water, and wildlife.”

Finding financial incentives to drive conservation was a central focus of the trip. The GSE delegation made significant contributions at the annual [Conservation Finance Intensive](#) and, in conversation with government officials in Australia’s capital, were able to highlight the positive impact of legal reforms from the Biden administration. In a relatively short period, legislation like the [America the Beautiful Act](#) and the [Inflation Reduction Act](#) cleared the way for significant conservation incentives. A key priority of these reforms is to drive collaboration and remove barriers to achieving conservation goals by supporting local, grassroots environmental action, mandating inter-agency cooperation, and ensuring equitable access to resources.



GSE participants rest on a log in an outdoor learning session; Photo courtesy of James Hattam, Tasmanian Land Conservancy

A theme of collaborative leadership underpins each of the ideas the GSE explored over the course of the trip. Shawn Johnson, Director of the Center for Natural Resources & Environmental Policy at the University of Montana spoke to this directly. He was involved in developing the Emerging Leaders program of the Western Collaborative Conservation Network, which seeks to address shortcomings in the field of conservation. The program equips the next generation of leaders with a more holistic skillset by providing peer exchange programs, mentorship, and supporting diversity.

Following the tour, Johnson reflected on that program and the damaging effect of a siloed approach to conservation:

“Just like protected area management, where we have preserved amazing properties that are often isolated dots on a map, we are in an era of protected knowledge/power management, where we have preserved existing knowledge, institutional and political structures that are often isolated from the broader systems in which they exist. Neither existing approach will sustain human or planetary health or well-being over the long term ... Instead, it is critical to build human and natural connections that can facilitate whole, functioning systems.”

Jody Gunn, CEO of the Australian Land Conservation Alliance, said the importance of this mission is only increasing and pointed to priority issues that are shared by many nations. “For example, of the impacts of climate change—the increasing fire and flood frequency and the necessary and critical role of private landholders in protecting, stewarding, and restoring our landscapes. Collaborative learning and sharing of knowledge, expertise, and experience is so important.”

Gunn said she is confident the exchange’s work will continue past the end of the trip and hopes there will be opportunities to host similar events in the future to further catalyze an international ecosystem of conservationists.