

Three Transformative Ideas to Save the Planet



Mark R. Tercek

President and CEO
The Nature Conservancy

Closing the gap between knowledge and action will depend on affirming the value of nature and cultivating collaboration.

The environmental movement has a lot to be proud of — accomplishments ranging from a dramatic increase in protected areas around the world to critical legislation safeguarding our land, water and air.

Yet take a step back and it's clear that we are at risk of winning many battles but losing the war. Everything we want more of — healthy forests, grasslands, coral reefs, biodiversity itself — is in decline. Everything we want to reduce — deforestation, overfishing, carbon emissions, unsustainable development — has increased. And climate change will only exacerbate existing threats.

Thanks to advances in science and technology, we now know more about these challenges than ever

before. And we mostly know how to solve them. But knowing is very different from doing. Saving the planet will largely depend on our ability to close this gap.

Here are three ideas for translating what we know about current environmental challenges into tangible — and meaningful — progress.

Find common ground with diverse parties:

Some environmentalists tend to view the private sector as an opponent. To be sure, some bad actors exist, and there is sometimes a need for confrontational strategies. But the private sector's substantial impact on nature also generates significant opportunity. The bigger a company's environmental footprint, the bigger the opportunity to benefit

nature by helping the company reduce its impact. And the private sector can be a great source of innovative ideas to accelerate and scale up environmental progress.

One of conservation's greatest success stories in recent years stems from an unlikely collaboration. About a decade ago, agribusiness giant Cargill committed to stop buying soy grown on land deforested after 2006. Cargill pushed fellow soy traders to do the same, resulting in an unprecedented moratorium on the purchase of any soy from newly deforested land. The company joined forces with the Nature Conservancy and other organizations to develop monitoring systems and incentives for farmers who comply with Brazil's environmental regulations.

The result of this unlikely collaboration: Deforestation of the Amazon due to soy expansion has come to almost a complete halt. This could not have been accomplished without private-sector collaboration. And the strategy is now influencing similar efforts to address the very serious challenge of deforestation from palm oil production in Indonesia.

Of course collaborations like this need to go beyond the private sector to include governments, community groups and other NGOs, including development and environmental justice groups. Likewise, we need to reach out to all sectors of society. In the U.S., that means finding common ground with both Republicans and Democrats, red states and blue, and urban and rural communities. Creative collaboration accelerates progress.

Emphasize the value of nature: Environmentalists generally believe in the inherent value of nature. However, we can't persuade

everyone to think like we do. Focusing instead on the benefits nature provides — clean air, healthy soil, fresh water, coastal buffers from storms — can attract people to our side and unlock new sources of funding for protection.

In Quito, Ecuador, for example, the Nature Conservancy developed a model in which water customers downstream — hydropower plants, brewing companies and municipal agencies — contribute to a fund that protects natural lands and helps ranchers implement conservation practices upstream. These relatively inexpensive investments lead to cleaner water, helping the city avoid more expensive investments in water treatment facilities. And the upstream conservation activities protect wildlife habitat and reduce the risk of droughts.

We now have more than 30 similar funds across Latin America covering 7 million acres of watersheds. We just launched the first water fund in Africa, and we are exploring the potential to bring the concept to Asia and Australia. Replicable, scalable projects like this that emphasize nature's value can transform conservation around the world.

Invest in green infrastructure:

The Quito Water Fund demonstrates one of nature's most valuable benefits: its role as natural infrastructure. Healthy forests filter our drinking water, control floods and sequester harmful carbon emissions. And mangroves, reefs and wetlands help protect coastal communities from floods and storms — hazards that are worsening in the face of a changing climate.

Protecting nature's role as infrastructure is a smart investment. In the Gulf of Mexico, for example, the Nature Conservancy is

restoring 100 miles of oyster reefs at a cost of about \$1.5 million per mile — comparable to the cost of a manmade seawall. The oyster reefs perform just as well as seawalls in protecting coasts from storms and sea level rise. Yet healthy reefs offer many additional benefits. They not only reduce risk from natural hazards but also improve water quality, support fisheries, provide wildlife habitat and promote recreation and tourism. And unlike seawalls, oyster reefs appreciate in value over time. It's a win-win for both nature and people.

As governments, businesses and communities seek cost-effective ways to prepare for and respond to the impacts of climate change, we have an enormous opportunity to make the case for natural solutions — and to shift an unprecedented amount of public and private investment from gray infrastructure to green.

The Takeaway:

Too often, environmentalists stick to preaching to the choir — our core supporters. We love our "choir" and we need its passion and commitment. But we also must convince others to prioritize protecting nature. These three strategies will unlock crucial progress by bringing more people to the side of conservation, channeling more to investments in nature and fostering a more robust and productive dialogue about the environment.

There's no one-size-fits-all method to fixing environmental problems. We won't be able to solve every conservation challenge with these approaches, but a small shift in perspective could go a long way.