Hoonah Native Forest Partnership: Best Practices and Lessons Learned







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Introduction

Land owners and managers, resource specialists, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and communities in Alaska have begun to embrace collaboration as an important way of doing business on public and private lands throughout the state. The Hoonah Native Forest Partnership (HNFP) is a powerful example of a landscape-scale community planning process in Southeast Alaska. It successfully drove collaboration between major regional landowners, land managers, tribes, and the local community to leverage federal funding and accomplish an enormous amount of data collection and analysis. This data led to recommendations for an all lands approach to future conservation, restoration, and natural resources management projects.

In a region characterized by frequent tension and conflict between landowners and management priorities, the collaborative relationships the partnership fostered are one of its most valuable accomplishments. Workforce development and local capacity-building are clear positive outcomes, while limitations with community engagement and ownership, overall project management, and clear expectations, outcomes, and timelines for partners contributed to the HNFP's challenges. To ensure the viability of future collaborative efforts in Southeast Alaska, it is important to learn from these challenges and successes to develop improved partnerships in other communities launching similar landscape-scale planning processes.



HNFP 2017 field crew alpine vegetation survey (Photo : Sustainable Southeast Partnership)

Background

The HNFP initially formed in the fall of 2014, when staff from Sealaska, The Nature Conservancy (TNC), and a local non-profit, SEAWEAD, developed a proposal for the US Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Regional Conservation Partnership Program. The primary driver behind the partnership was a desire for increased science-driven collaboration across landowners. This premise built on previous efforts by the Sustainable Southeast Partnership (SSP), a diverse network of organizations and individuals working together to reach cultural, ecological, and economic prosperity for the communities of Southeast Alaska. Declining revenue from timber harvest and a recognition of the need for economic diversification for rural communities, coupled with a desire to build a shared vision for collaborative resource stewardship, informed the original applicants' approach.

There had to be reciprocity between members: everyone needed skin in the game. You can't just be there for the grant funding, you have to have a bigger reason to be at the table. -Brian Kleinhenz, Steering Committee member

The HNFP proposed a collaboration between the major landowners and land managers around Hoonah – Huna Totem Corporation, Hoonah Indian Association (HIA), the US Forest Service (USFS), and Sealaska Corporation – as well as the City of Hoonah and TNC. The NRCS accepted the proposal in fiscal year 2014/2015, and the participating parties signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) in spring of 2015. The MOU outlined the purpose of the project, potential for mutual benefit, and the roles and responsibilities of the parties. The first field season of data collection followed in summer of 2015. While the USFS did not sign the initial MOU and instead signed a formal participating agreement the following spring, they contributed staff time and capacity during the first summer season. In spring of 2016, with financial support from the SSP, and HIA serving as a host organization, the HNFP hired a full-time coordinator to manage the field crew and provide on-the-ground support for the partnership.

The HNFP consisted of three primary participating bodies – the Steering Committee, Technical Committee, and local-level field crew. Executive leadership and decision makers from each landowner/land managing entity comprised the Steering Committee, while natural resource experts from TNC, USFS, University of Alaska, and private contractors made up the Technical Committee. At the local level, the full-time HNFP coordinator worked in Hoonah to recruit and manage a field crew, a group of local workers who conducted data collection and field work on Sealaska, USFS, and Huna Totem lands during the summer seasons. The Technical Committee used that data to develop inventories for a range of natural resources, including critical subsistence resources like deer, berries, and fish, as well as to conduct important field work such as thinning on second growth timber stands. Comprehensive community feedback from in-person meetings, surveys, interviews, and engagement at community events advised all Technical Committee findings. Using the field crew data collected by the field crews, the HNFP plans to develop a final report that will include a comprehensive, coordinated list of possible future watershed-level projects to restore, maintain, and improve key resources around Hoonah.



Hoonah, 2016 (Photo : Sustainable Southeast Partnership)

Approach

To develop this report, Meridian Institute consulted background resources and key documents associated with the HNFP, including the original proposal the HNFP team developed to establish the partnership and the participating agreement with the USFS. Meridian Institute followed this review with a comprehensive set of interviews with nineteen key stakeholders who worked on the development and/or implementation of the partnership. The stakeholders included representatives from all landowners who signed the participating agreement, as well as representatives from NGOs, contractors who worked on the partnership in a technical or professional capacity, and community and field crew members. See Appendix A for the interview guide and Appendix B for the list of interviewees.

Based upon these resources, Meridian Institute identified key themes and findings related to: the stated and perceived goals of the partnership; major successes and factors contributing to those successes; challenges associated with the partnership; and findings from the community engagement process. According to the <u>SSP's description of the HNFP</u>, the overall goal of the partnership was "to achieve a measurable and resilient blend of timber, salmon and deer production, local economic diversification, and improved watershed health." The original proposal to the NRCS described the HNFP as blending "highly inclusive collaboration, state of the art land management, and an innovative, watershed-scale planning approach for balancing economic, social and ecological outcomes, including improved resource conditions for both national NRCS priorities (water quality) and State of Alaska priorities (stream and wildlife habitat)."

Throughout the interviews, stakeholders identified a range of additional goals for the HNFP beyond the stated ecological and conservation outcomes, including:

- Workforce development and local capacity-building. The Steering Committee identified this as a priority goal, and many stakeholders cited its importance in the design and execution of the partnership.
- **Community priorities.** Stakeholders identified the goal of developing a land management plan for the land around Hoonah that more closely aligned with community priorities.
- **Coordinated management.** Some stakeholders discussed a goal to develop more coordinated management strategies across landowners to improve efficiency and management outcomes.
- **Collaboration and relationship-building.** Stakeholders discussed the goal to develop meaningful, substantive relationships across stakeholders and landowners.

This range of goals demonstrates the HNFP's focus on advancing a triple bottom line philosophy – creating social, environmental, and economic benefits. The stated goal of the partnership in the original proposal focused on achieving specific land management outcomes and environmental benefits. As a collaborative partnership, it also built relationships between people for improved management. By engaging and investing in the Hoonah community, it also worked to advance the economy of the local community through workforce development.

Successes

Stakeholders identified a range of successes resulting from the HNFP, including workforce development, collaboration and relationship building, data collection, increased research capacity, and improved public relations. Additional detail regarding each of these themes is provided below.



HNFP fish survey (Photo : Sustainable Southeast Partnership)

Workforce development. Many stakeholders discussed the positive outcomes from the workforce development goal of the HNFP. Membership on the field crew remained relatively consistent throughout the HNFP's first three field seasons, and field crew members gained more than steady summer employment; they also gained deep substantive knowledge about the metrics and data around important forest resources near Hoonah and were able to share these findings with their community. With skills in surveying, pre-commercial thinning, and a range of other natural resource management techniques, they likely will have future opportunities to work for land managers outside of the partnership and employ their skills with future job opportunities.

Collaboration and relationship building. More than any other success, stakeholders identified collaboration between and across landowners and the local community as one of the most critical outcomes from the HNFP. Some stakeholders cited the relationship between HIA and Huna Totem as the most positive tribal-corporation relationship in Southeast Alaska, thanks at least in part to the close collaboration fostered by the partnership. Similarly, by building a legitimate multiagency collaborative, the partnership built deep relationships that could last long into the future and reset the bar for how landowners and agencies interact. Identifying common goals and establishing relationships between landowners and environmental NGOs is also a major success, especially because some organizations and local landowners had historically tense relationships.

Data collection. As a fully-funded five-year landscape-scale planning effort, the HNFP was able to collect a large amount of critically useful data for natural resource management. In addition, this data collection included information on community values, needs, and priorities to advise the Technical Team and Steering Committee. Not only is this data useful for future management decisions and restoration and conservation planning purposes, the HNFP pioneered innovative data sharing techniques to ensure all stakeholders – from the USFS to TNC to the University of Alaska – could use what the field crew collected.

Research capacity. Much of the collection, consolidation, and modeling that the Technical Team conducted as part of the HNFP was innovative in Southeast Alaska. HNFP was an early adopter of Light Detection and Ranging (LiDAR) satellite imaging technology to analyze the landscape, representing one of the most ambitious, multi-disciplinary efforts to use the technology to date. Innovative landscape-scale technology, coupled with capacity for field-level verification, helped ensure the veracity and future applicability of these technologies. The partnership brought significant capacity to Huna Totem and Sealaska to undertake detailed landscape-level data collection efforts on their lands, providing the capacity to conduct science-driven conservation and management work that they otherwise may have been unable to undertake.

Public relations. With improved collaboration between the tribe, private landowners, agencies, and environmental organizations has come improved public relations across the community and Southeast Alaska. More stakeholders, both on the landowner side and from the public, have become more comfortable sitting down at the table together and publicly sharing information with reduced concerns of future litigation or exploitation.

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO SUCCESS

Some critical factors led to these successes, including:

Effective coordinator. Stakeholders identified having a stellar coordinator as essential to the partnership's success, particularly from the perspective of community engagement and field crew management.

Staff continuity. Stakeholders also discussed the importance of staff continuity as contributing to project success, particularly in the Technical Team, because all Technical Team members remained engaged and on staff at their respective organizations throughout the duration of the partnership.

Project management. Strong coordination and leadership from the original Sealaska project manager and the NRCS were critical for the project's success by keeping meetings, teleconferences, and timelines on track. Due to the difficulties of traveling in Southeast Alaska, videoconferences were integral to establishing relationships and keeping the project moving.

Early exploration of expectations. The MOU helped to define partner roles and contributions and fostered initial critical conversations to develop a statement of mutual benefit. Although it was an imperfect mechanism that did not adequately outline all details regarding roles and responsibilities, its existence and development made the partnership possible by outlining expectations for each partner organization in terms of monetary and material contributions.

Communications and network-building. In addition to the direct factors contributing to success, the SSP served as a key network to build collaboration across communities and disciplines with the HNFP. The entity served as a communications platform for others to learn from the partnership – broadcasting successes to communities and organizations across Southeast Alaska through the HNFP website, blogs, and newsletters.



HNFP June field tour to test vegetation survey protocols (Photo : Sustainable Southeast Partnership)



Left to bottom right : Field season fish, alpine vegetation survey, Sitka black-tailed deer (Photos : Doug Martin and Sustainable Southeast Partnership)

Challenges

Even within some of the partnerships' significant successes, it faced challenges along the way. Stakeholders identified some of the most prominent challenges associated with the partnership, including workforce recruitment, roles, partner capacity, priorities and management approaches, timelines, staff turnover, and funding.

Workforce recruitment and retention. Although stakeholders overall identified workforce development as a major success from the HNFP, the partnership encountered challenges identifying and maintaining a steady, reliable workforce from the local community due to a limited labor pool, lack of experience collecting detail-oriented field data, and challenges associated with long-term generational trauma and poverty in the Hoonah tribe and community. In addition, the Technical Team encountered quality control and data collection limitations with the field crew, which sometimes limited the usefulness of the information the field crews collected for agency purposes. In addition, some stakeholders felt they were unsuccessful in establishing genuine stewards of the land who had full ownership over the data collection and analysis process. This was a "missed opportunity" from the partnership - better coordination between technical experts and field crews could have created more educational opportunities for data analysis and expanded skill sets for field crew members beyond on-the-ground work. **Clearly defined roles.** Although the MOU outlined the high-level outcomes and expectations associated with the partnership and each partner, it did not include detailed roles and responsibilities associated with specific tasks, such as project management and coordination. As an outcome, the NRCS ended up serving in this capacity following staff turnover of the land manager that had informally taken on these roles. Even though the group was committed to collaboration, disparate organizations with varying mandates need someone to serve in a clear project manager capacity to ensure the pieces keep moving, and this role should be delineated and funded from the outset.

Staff and leadership capacity. Some stakeholders cited staff capacity as a major challenge for the HNFP. For example, although many stakeholders recognized the key role that USFS staff served in providing technical capacity to facilitate the success of the partnership, several identified the need for USFS leadership to provide a dedicated point person for future landscape-scale planning assessments to ensure the necessary organization, time, and attention to the partnership. Although high-level USFS leadership identified landscape-level community planning efforts as a priority, stakeholders noted challenges with translating this priority to mid-level leadership and technical staff with competing obligations.

Inconsistent priorities and management approaches. One of the fundamental goals of the partnership – to establish a landscape-scale management plan aligned with community priorities – was challenging to implement due to disparities between agency, landowner, and community priorities and management approaches. Although underlying values may be similar, the stated priorities of landowners and community members differed at times. For example, native corporations, by definition, are designed to generate revenue for their shareholders, and methods for generating revenue may not always reflect local priorities or model ecological stewardship. In contrast, the USFS has a multiple-use mandate to develop and administer timber, range, water, recreation and wildlife on national forest land. As such, the USFS must balance community and national interests within its institutional structure. Sometimes, these institutional structures conflict with community priorities. For example, USFS staff typically must track specific output targets, such as miles of restored stream or number of acres thinned, to monitor staff and station progress and success. Local communities may prioritize subsistence resource access and holistic health and vitality of culturally and socially significant sites over specific restoration measures. Staff exposed to community input on priorities likely do not have the latitude to shift agency outputs to align with the community's, even if that is a stated goal of the partnership.

Shifting timelines. Timelines and outputs for the partnership hit many delays over the course of its funding period, including delays in publishing the final report, which is scheduled to come out in fall 2019. Without a final report detailing possible needed watershed projects, USFS and other landowners may not be able to move forward with pursuing these projects in a timely manner.

Staff turnover. When there was staff turnover on the project, such as in USFS staff at the District Ranger level or Sealaska at the management level, some stakeholders described setbacks or challenges as a result. Stakeholders cited losing the Sealaska staff member who had served as the overall project manager as a particularly acute challenge.

Longevity of funding. The NRCS grant funded work on the partnership from its inception through 2019. After the current funding cycle finishes, the HNFP lacks a clear idea of how it will sustain its activities and carry them forward to maintain community engagement, retain existing staff, and begin implementation of identified priorities.

STRUCTURAL CHALLENGES AND SUCCESSES

Stakeholders also discussed some of the major challenges and successes associated with the structure of the HNFP. Overall, most stakeholders found the general structure of the partnership successful. However, stakeholders encountered some challenges with Steering Committee engagement. Because Steering Committee participation was comprised of representatives at the leadership or executive level of land agencies, they had limited bandwidth to engage. Stakeholders discussed challenges associated with finding time for them to gather and make critical decisions necessary to move the partnership forward. Quarterly meetings proved insufficient to effectively set policy. While the Steering Committee was intended as the leadership body, the limited ability for meaningful engagement proved challenging, and, in some cases, resulted in an inability to prioritize community interests in land management decisions. For example, without regular engagement at the decision-making level, it was difficult to make significant and timely changes to prioritize based on community feedback.

LESSONS FROM COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Our knowledge is traditional. It's passed down from generation to generation by word of mouth. That memory's not lost and it's still with us. So we go out there and do it. –Phillip Sharclane, field crew and Hoonah community member¹

A major theme among most interviewees was the challenges and successes associated with the HNFP's community engagement efforts. In general, residents of Hoonah rely heavily on subsistence resources; over 90% of households use subsistence resources from the forest, so community prioritization of healthy ecosystems is high. However, actual community engagement with the partnership, its goals, and its outcomes was mixed. Long-standing skepticism between Alaska Native communities and government agencies contributed to some degree of wariness. Also, culturally and materially, residents of Hoonah are unlikely to attend full-day meetings about land management decisions or engage with USFS staff at their offices. The HNFP coordinator and other partners found a few tactics that were particularly effective for sparking meaningful community engagement, including:

Targeted Engagement. The HNFP coordinator and others ultimately identified other avenues to more effectively engage the community, including attending existing city and tribal events, reaching out for one-on-one engagement rather than through meetings and formal venues, and helping individuals fill out the partnership's surveys by administering them in person rather than mailing them to residences. Community members described the importance of high-energy, engaged, enthusiastic staff to pique their interest in the partnership, keep them informed and engaged, and share details of the partnership's activities with the community. The field crew also served as a key interface between the partnership's activities and the community, since they carried their daily activities back to Hoonah and shared what they were doing with friends, family, and neighbors. To enhance and improve this function,

¹ From "What is the Sustainable Southeast Partnership?" Video available here: <u>http://sustainablesoutheast.net/about/</u>

future partnerships could consider making this a paid part of the field crew and building out this function with more robust community engagement activities.

Hoonah Stewardship Council. The HNFP coordinator launched and organized the Hoonah Stewardship Council (HSC), a group comprised of interested community members to remain updated on the partnership's progress and share their own land management priorities. The idea behind the Council was to create a voice for the community to feed directly into the partnership's research agenda and land management decisions. Despite good intentions to prioritize community input in the HNFP's operations, the Council faced significant challenges in their ability to shape overall partnership priorities due to: the Council not being convened until over a year after the partnership began, when priorities had already been identified; limited community engagement; and lack of clear feedback mechanisms for their input to influence the partnership. However, the HSC remains active, and notes and conversations from the group can be found on the <u>HIA website</u>.



Hoonah Stewardship Council March 2018 meeting (Photo : Hoonah Indian Association)

As discussed above, establishing community ownership over the partnership proved difficult, due in large part to the structure of the partnership and limited latitude from landowners and the Technical Committee to make decisions about the land. Although community engagement was ultimately successful at informing the community about the partnership and keeping community members up to date, its success was limited in developing genuine community-driven science and management.

Recommendations

Based on the successes, challenges, and lessons described above, the following recommendations emerged:

- 1. Begin with community engagement. Since one of the primary goals of a landscape-scale planning effort is to align community priorities with land stewardship activities, bringing community members into the fold from the outset is critical to foster legitimate shared ownership and ensure feasible opportunities exist for incorporating community input.
- 2. Hire a full-time coordinator. A full-time coordinator should begin work on a landscape-scale planning partnership at the outset of the project. This position is necessary to conduct community outreach and engagement, handle partnership logistics, manage the field crews, and keep the day-to-day operations running without creating unrealistic demands on land managers' time. The coordinator should be fully embedded in and engaged with the local community to foster needed engagement with local residents. This position is challenging in that is requires a 'jack of all trades' skillset, from communication with the CEO of a major land management organization to the local field crew members, and fixing field work equipment, as well as managing and sharing huge amounts of data across platforms.
- 3. Hire or designate a project manager. This person would serve as the coordinator at the partnership level, managing relationships and tasks across and between the signatories to the partnership agreements, while the partnership coordinator served at the community and field crew level. They would schedule calls and meetings, keep partners on track toward timelines for specific outputs, and facilitate the meetings and calls. This individual also provides a consistent point of contact and institutional knowledge to address concerns of turnover in partnership representatives and membership.
- 4. Delineate expectations and outcomes. The Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) needs to clearly delineate what all partners will be responsible for, particularly in terms of staff time and resources, and landscape-scale partnerships should adhere to these expectations. This includes a clear set of outcomes and associated timelines across resources and land managers, so the partnership is not faced with conflicting or outsized expectations from one or a few partners that were not agreed to in the MOU. Land managers, in turn, need to clearly reflect their commitments internally by allocating the necessary staff time and capacity to support local partnerships at every level of management.

- 5. Engage community members meaningfully. One of the substantive, foundational challenges of a landscape-scale community planning process is that ultimately, for community buy-in and ownership to be meaningful, landowners need to be willing and able to give up some portion of control over their resources to the community. This relinquishing of control has the potential to provide legitimate ownership and power to the local community to make decisions about the land they use. However, it requires early, candid conversations between landowners and the community about what they can and cannot cede to local interests.
- 6. Focus on youth involvement. Youth involvement has the potential to catalyze the community to long-term sustainable management, and young people who join the field crews and learn natural resource management skills could represent both a successful workforce development effort and long-term career prospects for the workers.
- 7. Plan for longevity. NRCS funding typically only lasts three to five years. Future forest partnerships should consider long-term funding and plan past the NRCS funding horizon at the outset of the partnership to clarify future expectations and ensure the sustainability of important collaborative work.

Conclusion

The HNFP has reached the conclusion of its initial five years of funding, and it is working to chart out a course for ways to fund and implement the priority projects identified over the past five years, as well as continue to grow and cultivate the relationships fostered by the partnership. A final report based on the partnership's work is scheduled for release in October 2019.

The purpose of this lessons learned report is to inform and advise future landscape-scale community planning processes in Alaska and elsewhere. Future initiatives can learn from the HNFP's successes and challenges to implement collaborative, community-driven models in other places across Southeast Alaska. The Keex' Kwaan Community Forest Partnership in Kake, Alaska, which launched fully in the summer of 2019, is one such example. As other communities follow suit, these lessons learned are designed to provide guidance for land managers and other individuals considering participating in a partnership – whether in the USFS, private agencies, or as full-time staff – to help develop robust and successful partnerships.

Appendix A. Interview Questions

I. Introductions and Project Overview (5 min)

II. Background (15 min)

- 1. How and when did you get involved with the HNFP? What role(s) have you served within the partnership?
- 2. How would you describe the purpose and goals of the HNFP? When you started with the partnership, what did you see as the major opportunities for the region?
- 3. What were you hoping to gain or achieve for yourself or your organization through your involvement?

III. Successes and Challenges (10 min)

- 1. What do you see as the major successes of the partnership so far? What factors contributed to this success?
- 2. Were there challenges or barriers that had to be overcome? How was this managed?

IV. Partners and Community Engagement (10 min)

- Do you feel like the project represented broad community buy-in and ownership of all parties involved? If so, how was this achieved? If not, what was missing or could have been improved?
- 2. Did you feel like participation was balanced and representative of individuals and organizations in the region? Was anyone missing?

V. Organization, Structure, and Approach (10 min)

- 1. Did you find the structure of the partnership to be effective? Did you encounter any management or organizational challenges with the partnership?
- 2. How did the partnership approach field work and data collection?
- **3.** How did the partnership approach workforce training and recruitment? What was the approach to orientation and training?

VI. Lessons Learned and Advice (5 min)

1. What recommendations would you make to another community launching a similar forest partnership effort?

VII. Additional Information (5 min)

- 1. Are there any resources that would be helpful for us to review?
- 2. Who else should we talk to in order to gain a more balanced understanding of the partnership?

Appendix B. Interview List

* denotes Steering Committee member
** denotes Technical Team member
+ denotes Partnership staff

Jon Bonkoski** Knowledge Systems Program Director, Ecotrust

Sarah Campen Artist and Facilitator, The Orpheus Project (formerly Tongass Collaborative Stewardship Group)

Bob Christensen** Regional Catalyst, Sustainable Southeast Partnership Executive Director, SEAWEAD

Brie Darr Fish, Wildlife, Watershed, Ecology, Soils, and Subsistence Staff Officer, USFS, Tongass National Forest

Jackie Dick Community Member

Clare Doig** Consulting Forester, Huna Totem Corporation

Dennis Gray, Jr.* City Administrator, City of Hoonah

Ian Johnson+ Partnership Coordinator, Hoonah Native Forest Partnership

Brian Kleinhenz* Vice President, Terra Verde, Inc. (formerly Sealaska Corporation) Doug Martin**

Founder, Fisheries Scientist and Aquatic Ecologist, Martin Environmental

Miakah Nix+ Partnership Coordinator, Keex' Kwaan Community Forest Partnership (formerly Indigenous Fellow, Ecotrust)

Katherine (KK) Prussian** Hydrologist, USFS, Tongass National Forest

Conor Reynolds** Conservation Forester, The Nature Conservancy

Samia Savell Resource Conservationist, Natural Resources Conservation Service

Phillip Sharclane+ Field Crew Member, Hoonah Native Forest Partnership

Robert Starbard* Tribal Administrator, Hoonah Indian Association

Earl Stewart* Forest Supervisor USFS, Tongass National Forest

Julianne Thompson** Hydrologist/Watershed Program Manager USFS, Tongass National Forest

Chad VanOrmer** Ranger, Admiralty Island National Monument USFS, Tongass National Forest (formerly Hoonah District)

ABOUT MERIDIAN INSTITUTE

Meridian Institute is a mission-driven, non-profit organization that has helped our clients and partners develop and implement solutions to complicated, often controversial problems—big and small, global and local—for over two decades.

We do this with an innovative approach that brings together three elements: our deep understanding of the issues at hand, as well as the people, politics, and power dynamics that surround them; our dedicated, expert team; and our ability to foster constructive discussions, manage decisions, and support actions that shape the world for the better. We work not only to shape meaningful consensus and action in the near term, but also to build our partners' capacity for cooperation that often continues for years, even decades.

We focus on five key services: collaboration, implementation, strategy, research, and philanthropic support. We bring our skills to bear on a diverse range of issues, including environment & natural resources, climate change, agriculture & food systems, forests, health, oceans & coasts, resilience, science & technology, and water. Across issues, boundaries, and systems, our work is a catalyst for powerful impact.

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