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NCLI Cohort 1

Photos Courtesy of Author

NATIONAL CONSERVATION LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE



In a classroom in the hills of eastern West Virginia, a group of 36 conservation professionals gather. The setting is intimate, not because of its size, location, or décor, but rather because the participants have given themselves over to the most intensive leadership-training program that the conservation community has to offer. Over the next two weeks, these future leaders will be fired in a crucible of self-assessment, evaluation, introspection, and peer-review designed by its creators to forge a perpetual influx of high-performing conservation leaders across our country. The National Conservation Leadership Institute (NCLI) undoubtedly has become the premier capstone experience for conservation professionals in our country.



The NCLI is a program modeled on the Harvard Kennedy School of Government, co-taught by some of the same faculty, and designed to provide intensive, real-world leadership training over a yearlong program.

CONSERVATION LEADERSHIP COMES AT A COST.

NCLI is able to offer training at a fraction of the price offered elsewhere through generous donations from state, federal, and NGO partners. But the organization still experiences annual struggles to make the next cohort of fellows financially feasible. Those who have experience with NCLI, directly or indirectly, agree that it is THE best leadership program for conservation available. NCLI is seeking sponsors and donors to continue to produce high-caliber leaders for conservation. If you wish to support this essential program that is so critical to the future of conservation, donations can be made online at www.conservationleadership.org.

A BRIEF HISTORY

NCLI began as the brainchild of a group of Boone and Crockett members including Lowell Baier, John Baughman, Bob Model, and Steve Williams, among others. These forward thinking conservationists realized that the retirement of the current workforce of “baby-boomers” would generate a deficit of seasoned leadership that would likely exceed 50 percent of all conservation leader positions. With natural promotional opportunities that come with the retirement of those leaders, the next level of policy makers and administrators would be tasked with guiding the future success of the conservation profession. Those up-and-coming conservation leaders would need quality leadership training in an extremely short timeframe.

Enter the NCLI, a program modeled on the Harvard Kennedy School of Government (and co-taught by some of the same faculty) designed to provide intensive, real-world leadership training over a yearlong program. The program consists of provocative, hard-hitting education provided by key leaders, not only from the conservation arena, but also from experts in adaptive leadership, emotional intelligence, and conflict resolution. During a two-week residency, followed by months of small group work, and culminating in a four-day capstone course, NCLI fellows are exposed to a world-class faculty that

understand the role of creating battle-ready leaders in a compressed timeframe.

Establishing the NCLI from scratch was no inexpensive endeavor. Putting together the ambitious curriculum and world-class staff created substantial funding needs. The Boone and Crockett Club, founded by none other than conservation leader Theodore Roosevelt, has been the major, sustaining contributor throughout the life of the program. The substantial annual contributions from the Boone and Crockett Club combined with those from national conservation organizations and individuals from across the country provided the seed money to launch the NCLI vision. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, and the U.S. Geological Survey also provided invaluable cash and in-kind donations to see that vision realized and sustained.

SUCCESSSES OF THE FIRST DECADE

Now 10 years later, the NCLI is a resounding success with 318 fellows (and 36 more about to start their residencies) working across the country in conservation leadership positions. Ten years is a magical number. We now have a decade of new leaders within the conservation community that not only have the NCLI experience, but also carry on the tradition of passing their newfound skills to others.

Here are some of the more pertinent numbers:

- 9 NCLI Fellows currently or previously were state fish & wildlife agency directors.
- 216 NCLI Fellows are in leadership positions with 40 state agencies.
- 48 NCLI Fellows are in leadership positions with 8 federal agencies.
- 44 NCLI Fellows are in leadership positions with 21 conservation Non-Governmental Agencies.
- 6 NCLI Fellows are from 5 industry organizations.
- 4 NCLI Fellows are from 4 Native American tribes.
- Most NCLI Fellows hold key conservation leadership positions.

Additionally, of the total 318 fellows to date, 102 are female, providing a gender balanced conservation leadership that is reflective of our profession and of society today. These numbers tell the story that the vision of a few conservationists a decade ago is coming to fruition. Our profession will not experience the brain-drain deficit seen by many others, primarily due to the opportunities afforded by the NCLI.

MOVING FORWARD

In 2004 when the NCLI was established, the program had a clear vision: to prepare the next generation to lead conservation and to make it one of America’s greatest

strengths. The impending leadership exodus that the founders anticipated did, in fact, happen. For example, over the last 48 months, more than 40 state fish and wildlife directors have retired, been replaced, or otherwise moved on. But the urgency of the NCLI founders to create a world-class leadership development program caused that program to flourish and fill the knowledge deficit of the retiring baby-boomers. NCLI was ultimately successful at crossing organizational boundaries and equipping these incoming leaders with the skills and training needed to address tomorrow’s challenges.

We are now witnessing a remarkable shift in thinking about leadership in conservation. This shift has had real impacts on all of the NCLI Fellows and their organizations, from the smallest tribe to the largest conservation agency.

The ranks of NCLI Fellows are strong and growing each year. But more importantly, the skills learned and relationships built during the process are having an impact on conservation that is growing with them. This increase in capacity in conservation leadership could not have come at a more critical time. Conservation organizations are facing an unprecedented social, economic, and political evolution that far exceeds what past leaders have had to face. While our conservation legacy was built on the backs of those past leaders, it will

take strong and novel new leaders to protect and defend it.

THE FUTURE

By all measures the NCLI program is a success story. We have seen the impacts of this program throughout all levels of state and federal leadership and other conservation entities. Not only are the Fellows that populate those organizations thinking strategically rather than tactically, but they are also cross-pollinating the concepts learned through NCLI with their peers and staff that have not had the opportunity to attend. Further successes are seen in the amount of interagency cooperation that naturally comes with having Fellows reach across agency boundaries.

So what lies ahead? First, we cannot rest on the accomplishments of the past decade, content that the crisis of leadership “brain drain”

has been avoided. With the generational shift in leadership comes a different mindset in regards to careers and work life. The generations that followed the baby-boomers are much more likely to change jobs than their predecessors. Economic factors also come into play, as organizations continue to have to make hard choices on staffing, potentially resulting in unintended mid-level management drain. Political factors are also more relevant and injurious, especially to governmental organizations. As the country continues to see an ever-expanding divide between political philosophies, conservation leaders (who are often apolitical) find themselves in increasingly difficult political positions.

The turnover of our leaders remains a real threat to our conservation legacy. NCLI shall and must continue to provide well-trained Fellows

to fill the on-going leadership gap. NCLI must focus not only on current leadership and real-world challenges those leaders face today, but also must continue to redefine leadership as the world changes around us. We must continue to challenge many of the deeply held assumptions that potentially hold us back. We must continue to nurture a high-trust network of conservation professionals that can bridge the gaps within and among conservation entities that ultimately results in the right decisions being made at the right time and for the right purpose.

Legacy is an often overused yet still genuinely powerful word. In the field of conservation, it brings to mind names like Roosevelt, Pinchot, Darling, Grinnell, Leopold, and others that gave their minds and bodies over to the concept that the conservation of our wild and

natural resources was essential to the very survival of our society. Those great men began in a time of great scarcity and founded a conservation ethic, which is still as relevant today, in our time of superabundance and increasing human population growth, as it was at the turn of the last century. Our conservation legacy will remain grounded in the principles founded by those great individuals, but it will only do so if we continue to develop and nurture our future conservation leaders; if we give them the tools necessary to approach problems adaptively; if we give them the skills to navigate an ever-changing and uncertain world. NCLI provides just such tools and skills. ■



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