

Inside Philanthropy



The State of
American Philanthropy

Giving for
Oceans and
Freshwater

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ABOUT INSIDE PHILANTHROPY

Inside Philanthropy is a digital media site that covers the world of charitable giving. We report daily on foundations, major donors, and trends in philanthropy. Through our GrantFinder resource, we also profile and track thousands of funders working across key issue areas and geographic regions. Inside Philanthropy is supported by reader subscriptions and advertising. We do not receive funding from any other source. Learn more at insidephilanthropy.com

ABOUT THE STATE OF AMERICAN PHILANTHROPY

The State of American Philanthropy is a series of background papers on important topics and trends in U.S. philanthropy. The papers draw on past research and reporting by IP writers, as well as new interviews, grantmaking data, and other sources. Learn more at insidephilanthropy.com/state-of-american-philanthropy.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Water covers two-thirds of the planet and sustains all life. But in the face of climate change and crumbling infrastructure, the water challenges we face are increasing and disproportionately impacting poor communities and communities of color. This leaves the world at a crucial moment for ocean and freshwater resources, and philanthropy across the U.S. and the world remains in the early stages of response.

In the last five years, the amount of funding and the number of funders for ocean and freshwater resources has risen, but the funding levels are still significantly lower than other recipient areas. Additionally, the complexity and size of the water field have led to siloed approaches in thinking and giving, most notably the split between ocean and freshwater issues. Today, initiatives in ocean and freshwater giving focus on collaboration, integration and community engagement—with countless opportunities to grow.

Who's Giving:

- According to Candid data, from 2014 to 2018, the top 10 institutional funders gave between \$29.73 million and \$249.39 million.
- Giving for oceans and freshwater resources is dominated by a concentrated set of donors. On the marine side, for example, 20 top funders made up 64% of grantmaking over the past decade.
- Most top philanthropic organizations (with some notable exceptions) give primarily to either ocean or freshwater causes rather than both.
- Much of the giving to this area comes from large, private foundations, but corporate foundations and emerging billionaire-funded initiatives represent an increasingly visible part of the water philanthropy landscape.

Who's Getting:

- According to Candid, from 2014 to 2018, the top 10 recipients received between \$37.25 million and \$219.33 million.
- The biggest recipients reflect complex funding streams; they are not all primarily funded by private foundations (government, corporate, and individual giving also feature heavily).
- Wildlife nonprofits topped the recipient list. Meanwhile, by category, 2014–2018 funding was highest for Water Resources, followed by Marine Conservation, Freshwater Conservation, Fishing & Aquaculture, and Marine Science.

The Big Issues and Funding Trends:

- The field has several interconnected priorities: the growing impact of climate change, the need to center equity and community engagement among the most effective strategies, and the drive toward integrated water management, given water's massive global role.
- Resources are limited, but strategies to maximize impact include niche-based approaches (by geography or issue), community engagement, “one water” integration, regranting to dedicated nonprofits, and partnerships across the field.

- Philanthropy has its limits, so generating government action is crucial. This offers philanthropists the opportunity to galvanize citizens to lobby governments, fund grassroots advocacy, etc.

Equity in the Sector:

- People of color and poor people worldwide are most likely to be impacted by climate change and water issues. Addressing this requires tackling U.S. and global inequities.
- Leaders in ocean and freshwater philanthropy have increasingly centered equity as morally right and the most effective means to progress. However, funding to BIPOC-led efforts has lagged behind verbal commitments to equity.
- As a result, there are emerging efforts to hold funders accountable on equity, such as pledges to increase the share of climate change giving to BIPOC-led organizations and campaigns to assess the internal diversity of foundations giving climate-related grants.

Fundraising Now:

- Even in turbulent times, fundraisers report that support for oceans and freshwater work has held steady—although it still falls far short of what’s needed to secure the health of the planet.
- Oceans and freshwater fundraisers are seeking to highlight two central ways that their work can confront climate challenges: adaptation and mitigation.
- As the scope of oceans and freshwater work expands, the field has increasingly welcomed corporate funders.

Given increasing urgency to address our planet’s growing water-related issues, organizations and leaders in ocean and freshwater advocacy have identified four priorities where philanthropy can make a difference. First, the field must center and fund diverse leaders and communities, who often generate the most effective solutions. Second, the field needs to act on climate, since addressing climate change helps water, too. Third, the field must improve data, research and knowledge, especially through government, business and researcher partnerships. Fourth, the field must collaborate more, doing so as a core strategy, not an add-on.

Ocean and freshwater philanthropy has made significant progress over the last 10 years. Now, it’s time to ramp up the implementation of solutions and to expand their reach. For fundraisers this means helping philanthropic organizations to find a foothold in the expansive field of ocean and freshwater resources. The time is now to protect this critical resource that sustains us all. As marine biologist Ayana Elizabeth Johnson says, we must start seeing the oceans (and water) not as the victim but the hero of the climate story. To get there, we need more prospective funders of oceans and freshwater causes and innovative fundraisers to find their hero spots working together, too.

Introduction

Ocean and freshwater philanthropy is global, and it is local. It encompasses nature conservation and government infrastructure. It's about blue whales and microbes, glasses of water and river reservoirs. Water is as complex, expansive and varied as the two-thirds of the planet it covers. And of course, water is critical to sustaining life itself. In short, the importance of water in our lives – and of addressing the serious threats to our ocean and freshwater resources – cannot be overstated.

Today's water challenges, from ocean warming and river pollution to the effects of crumbling U.S. water infrastructure and [unsustainable fishing practices](#)—to say nothing of the profoundly [inequitable impact on communities of color](#)—are grave, urgent, and require mobilization across all sectors. This may be an [“all hands on deck” moment](#) for philanthropic organizations. And yet, only a small group of funders is devoting increasing resources to the water space. A pressing question hovers over the field: Will it be fast enough?

According to Candid data, U.S. ocean and freshwater annual private philanthropic funding between 2014 and 2018 rose by over 8% to \$417.41 million. The number of funders surged by 44.5% (from 4,794 to 6,927), which benefited 4,357 nonprofit recipients in 2018, an increase of 53.5% over 2014. Still, this annual \$400 million sum is dwarfed by the scope of giving to other program areas like education and health, small in comparison to the scale of the need in the field, and tiny in relation to water's role in our world. After all, it covers 70% of the Earth.

U.S. foundations [gave over \\$75 billion](#) in 2019 to all charities, showing the relatively low prioritization

of oceans and freshwater. Consider that in 2015, hedge fund billionaire John Paulson gave \$400 million to [one institution](#), Harvard University, and that total U.S. spending by states and the federal government on freshwater infrastructure was [\\$118 billion in 2010](#) and [\\$12.2 billion](#) for ocean and coastlines in 2011, [well below 1970 levels](#).

Moreover, the U.N.'s Global Panel on Water puts the scale of global economic losses related to water insecurity at \$470 billion per year with global investment needs at approximately \$6.7 trillion by 2030. There is an urgent need to engage more funders and attract more dollars as climate pressures mount and clean water threats intensify.

“The clock is ticking,” said the Packard Foundation's Meg Caldwell. The ocean and its ecosystems, which are at the center of the climate system, have absorbed the brunt of climate change's impact, and people and the ocean are paying the price for it. “Efforts to step up climate mitigation are putting the ocean on life support,” Caldwell said. “We are thinking about how we can keep the patient (the ocean) alive while we try to decarbonize the world and restore ocean health.”

One of the biggest challenges to orchestrated funding for water is the field's size and complexity, which, by necessity, has resulted in a siloed approach for now. On the marine side, oceans are a core issue for some of the largest foundations in the world, including the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation, and the Walton Family Foundation.

Philanthropists are focused on addressing sources of ocean degradation and protecting ecosystems and economic viability while mitigating climate impacts.

Other ocean challenges attracting funder attention include degradation from agricultural runoff, plastic pollution, habitat destruction, and illegal, unregulated, and unreported (IUU) fishing, as well as [profound inequities](#) in who benefits from the ocean economy.

On the freshwater side, the challenges are every bit as urgent. Key funders (Walton Family Foundation, Pisces Foundation) and some notable collaborative efforts (Water Funder Initiative, Water Foundation) have emerged to move water systems from a niche issue into a major philanthropic effort. Stalwarts in the field, like the Walton Family Foundation, have long supported river and watershed conservation. But the highly localized impact of climate change, the growing need to resolve contaminated drinking water issues—like those seen in Flint, Michigan—and the unequal access to clean water heightened by the pandemic are not being addressed well. A [major report](#) by U.S. Water Alliance documented a national gap in access to clean water resources: Race is the strongest predictor of water, sanitation and hygiene (WaSH) issues. Foundations concentrating their funding in specific communities like William Penn and the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation are responding at the local level, donating and activating their citizens to help advocate for change.

“Bringing community groups into the conversation, and ensuring utilities are good community partners in project design and contracting phases, can benefit cities across the country... The Flint water crisis [helped] people realize that public engagement is required to ensure safe, affordable and efficient water systems,” said [Radhika Fox](#), former CEO of the U.S. Water Alliance, a Mott grantee, and now head of the [U.S. EPA’s Office of Water](#).

While many advocates for ocean and freshwater causes anticipate the funding landscape will continue to grow, the long-term trajectory is uncertain. In IP’s August 2020 survey of fundraisers and foundation professionals, some expressed concern that investment is not coming fast enough or at large enough levels and that some funding was possibly derailed or delayed by the pandemic. “There is a lack of understanding of how urgently we need to address the climate crisis, the biodiversity crisis, and the pending water security challenges to adapt to climate impacts,” one fundraiser said.

Susan Bell, managing director of Water Funder Initiative, is more optimistic, reporting that the collaborative’s goal of bringing more funders to water is working, activating more than \$100 million in giving that would not otherwise have been in the field over the past six years. “Now, the idea is how to keep that momentum,” she says. She counts off three main arguments for attracting more funders to the field: Water unifies people, as it is generally free of U.S. partisanship; the field has room to grow, so funders can make a difference according to their vision; and water connects across communities and issues funders already care about.

It’s what philanthropy does next that is most critical. “We’re in this moment where all of these elements of science have shown us that we need to change the way that we interact... with nature,” Ayana Elizabeth Johnson, marine biologist, founder of Urban Ocean Lab and Ocean Collectiv, told the [Journal of International Affairs](#). “While we have, of course, locked ourselves into some amount of climate change, what we do really matters because we still have a wide range of possible futures.”

The Lay of the Land

Who's Giving

A concentrated set of U.S.-based donors dominates water giving. According to Candid, data from 2014 to 2018 showed that annual funding for both oceans and freshwater causes rose by over 8% to \$417.41 million. On the marine side, the 2021 Our Shared Seas report on a decade of ocean funding shows that about 20 top funders comprised 64% of all identified marine grantmaking, with five of the top funders representing 44% of the field. Other sources of water-related funding beyond private foundations include corporate foundations—a small but visible portion of the total—with funders like Tiffany & Co. Foundation protecting coral reefs and [American Water Charitable Foundation](#) giving to freshwater-oriented projects across the U.S.

Most top philanthropic organizations—but not all—tend to give primarily either to ocean or freshwater causes, rather than both. The Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation and the David and Lucile Packard Foundation lead U.S. philanthropies in ocean giving, while The William Penn Foundation, the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, and The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation primarily focus their activities on freshwater causes. The S.D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation also focused solely on freshwater giving, but this spend-down fund closed its doors at the end of 2020.

Of the top private funders, only the Walton Family Foundation concentrates on both marine and freshwater among its primary initiatives. Also supporting both are the Resources Legacy Fund, Chicago Community Trust, and the Foundation for the Carolinas through their donor-advised funds or donations to prominent water bodies in their geographical locations.

10 Oceans and Freshwater Funders to Know¹

S.D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation

Chicago Community Trust

Foundation for the Carolinas

William and Flora Hewlett Foundation

Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation

Charles Stewart Mott Foundation

David and Lucile Packard Foundation

William Penn Foundation

Resources Legacy Fund

Walton Family Foundation

Source: Candid

A set of [key funders](#) and collaborative efforts has emerged in recent years to move water systems from a niche topic into a [major philanthropic priority](#) that addresses systemic problems. Well before the Flint, Michigan, water crisis, the Mott Foundation [invested heavily](#) in its communities, surpassing the \$1 billion mark in giving to the region in 2017. In 2016, it committed \$100 million to address Flint's water crisis, with Carnegie, Ford, Kresge, Robert Wood Johnson, W.K. Kellogg and other funders committing another \$25 million. During the last 20 years, Mott has also been grantmaking to restore and protect freshwater resources in the Southeastern United States. But in 2018, it ended this line of funding in order to better focus its resources on the Great Lakes and Flint's ongoing drinking water struggles.

Initiatives funded by billionaires are emerging as a potentially significant source of incremental funding, such as the \$10 billion [Bezos Earth Fund](#)

and Bloomberg’s [Vibrant Oceans](#) initiative (at \$139 million pledged). In a 2021 commitment, the Earth Fund gave \$12.5 million to ClimateWorks Foundation to decarbonize shipping, according to the Our Shared Seas report. They are also investing in seaweed production and ecosystem protection through the World Wildlife Fund (see more in the Major Donors section of this brief).

Also, the rise and growth of organizations like Oceans 5 and Water Funder Initiative, which help bring greater funding to ocean and freshwater issues by providing funders with the organizational structure and staff expertise for collaboration, have helped position the field for a funding surge.

Some other U.S. foundations that are widely recognized for other areas of funding but may not be as well known for their water funding include Agua, Joyce, Kresge, Park, Roy A. Hunt, and the Wallace Genetic Foundation, Conrad N. Hilton in WaSH and freshwater funding and on the ocean side Paul G. Allen, Benioff Ocean Initiative, Bloomberg, Margaret A. Cargill, Pisces, Waitt, Oak and Marisa foundations.

There are also some highly recognized corporations that, perhaps surprisingly to the public, give to ocean and freshwater causes, such as Coca-Cola, Xerox, Georgia-Pacific, Tiffany & Co., Caterpillar, Anheuser-Busch, PepsiCo, and 3M.

Who’s Getting

The big “getters” in ocean and freshwater water initiatives reflect complex funding streams; private foundation money played a varying-sized role for each. Wildlife nonprofits topped Candid’s recipient list from 2014 to 2018.

10 Oceans and Freshwater Grantees to Watch²

Ducks Unlimited
Marine Spill Response Corporation
New Venture Fund
Ocean Conservancy
Nature Conservancy
Waterkeeper Alliance
Environmental Defense Fund
American Rivers
Trout Unlimited
Monterey Bay Aquarium

Source: Candid

According to Candid data, Ducks Unlimited, a grassroots, volunteer-based organization that protects North American habitats for waterfowl and wetlands, is a popular grantee among institutional funders. Since Ducks Unlimited’s inception in 1935, they have conserved more than 15 million acres across 50 states. Recent conservation priorities include the Mississippi Alluvial Valley and the Gulf Coastal Prairie. In FY 2019, major gifts and endowments comprised 18% of their support, and an additional 16% was raised through the donation of conservation easements. Their primary funding streams, however, were federal and state habitat support (37%), and events, memberships, sponsorships and royalties (29%).

Trout Unlimited is the fish flipside to Ducks Unlimited’s waterfowl conservation approach, which has a focus on “preserving fishing resources, conservation and healthy habitats, and community,” pulled in \$37.2 million. Its focus is

also collaborative, bringing together landowners, nonprofits and government agencies. While private donors were their biggest contributors in 2020, U.S. government funding and membership fees also played a large role.

Five of the big recipients of institutional funding for water are household names in the water and environmental space and received a combined total of \$233 million over the five-year period: Ocean Conservancy, Nature Conservancy, Waterkeeper Alliance, Environmental Defense Fund, and American Rivers. The Ocean Conservancy, long-time “champions for sea change,” work on a wide range of ocean-related issues, including addressing plastics pollution, reducing greenhouse gas emissions from the global shipping industry, and supporting sustainable fishing. They received 12% of their overall funding from foundations in FY 2020 (compared to 66% from individuals and 17% from corporations.)

With its origins dating back to 1915, The Nature Conservancy’s mission today tackles a global portfolio of water-related issues, focusing on river conservation, freshwater sustainability and marine projects. In FY 2019, 29% of their donations came from foundations, another 29% from bequests, 27% from individuals and 10% from corporations.

The Waterkeeper Alliance, which focuses on clean water globally, is the “largest and fastest-growing nonprofit solely focused on clean water.” It builds support in local communities for clean water issues, challenges polluters in court, protects water resources, and recruits and trains public advocates. Recent campaigns include a focus on strengthening environmental regulations around water globally and reducing farm pollution. In 2020, 84% of its funding came via foundations, with the rest split

evenly among individuals, corporations and direct-mail campaigns. Its work is both marine- and freshwater-oriented.

The 50-year-old Environmental Defense Fund, with a global mission to “preserve the natural systems on which all life depends,” supports U.S. water-related causes through its legal actions and through targeted projects like helping farmers to adopt new technologies to manage marine and freshwater supplies and helping to restore fish stocks to healthier levels. Most of its funding in 2020 came from individuals and memberships (68%) and foundations and institutions (23%).

Inside Philanthropy

August 2020 Survey

“There is lots of interest in clean energy, but the clean water funding for the middle of the US seems to be drying up. Lots of that funding is shifting to climate change work.”

—Fundraiser, Des Moines, Iowa

American Rivers, another mainstay in the water space, prioritizes the health of U.S. rivers and is well-known for its annual “America’s Most Endangered Rivers” report, which highlights troubled rivers whose fate may be decided through a major public decision or action in the coming year. Their primary source of funding in FY 2019 came through the government (45%), followed by private foundations (31%), and individuals (17%).

The Marine Spill Response Corporation is a unique organization that dominated the list of recipients, ranking second. It is funded by the Marine Preservation Association, an organization that “works to promote the welfare and interests of petroleum transportation and energy industries” by centering expertise in oil spills in a single go-to

organization and working to alleviate the problems caused by petroleum products in U.S. water resources. MSRC is included in the list of top recipients of charitable dollars for water work because it is organized as a nonprofit, it focuses on water issues and receives large amounts of private funding. But many water activists might dispute its inclusion because it works primarily to support the objectives of its corporate donors rather than seeking to make policy changes that would comprehensively address climate change.

The New Venture Fund (NVF), established in 2006, is a public charity that provides expertise to funders in philanthropy and nonprofit management, helping them to design and manage projects to completion. The fund supports grantmakers in a number of areas, including “ocean and river conservation, alternative energy sources and reduction of fossil fuels, protection of ocean life, wildlands conservation, ecological agriculture, and habitat restoration.”

Beyond Candid’s data, the 2021 Our Shared Seas report notes that key recipients for ocean funding include the Marine Spill Response Corporation, World Wildlife Fund, Oceana, the Monterey Bay Aquarium and Woods Hole Institute.

Meanwhile, the Wildlife Conservation Society, Blue Moon Fund, and Global Environmental Facility attracted \$48 million for global marine protection from the Waitt Foundation in 2016. Bloomberg Philanthropies’ Vibrant Oceans initiative also partners with the Wildlife Conservation Society to address illegal fishing as well as with Oceana, OceanX Media, Global Fishing Watch, and Rare.

On the freshwater side, a major additional recipient of funding is Water.org, which focuses on providing safe drinking water in 11 countries, and relies on private, individual and corporate funding, including partnerships with Ikea, Stella Artois (Anheuser-Busch), and Bank of America. Other freshwater funding tends to flow more locally. According to WashFund.org, regional U.S.-based recipients that received more than \$1 million in funding between 2014–2018 included Blue Water Baltimore, Cochise Water Project, and the Water Institute of the Gulf, which went toward watershed and drinking water protection. Many foundations also identify and work with international organizations that provide local WASH services and support, but these are harder to track. For example, the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation has supported Access Development Ghana, a private service provider, and partnered with Catholic Relief

Year	Dollar Value of Grants	Grantmakers	Grants Awarded	Recipients
2014	\$385.77M	4,794	12,121	2,837
2015	\$587.92M	5,831	17,715	3,478
2016	\$651.45M	5,771	19,417	3,719
2017	\$810.81M	9,784	14,229	3,517
2018	\$803.18M	6,927	17,298	4,357

Source: Candid

Services. Similarly, on the corporate foundation side, PepsiCo Foundation has worked with the Safe Water Network to establish the tools and processes to ensure access to clean water globally.

Giving & Getting Deeper Dive

Candid breaks out water funding data into five discrete categories that encompass the majority of U.S. philanthropic funding commitments to oceans and freshwater: water resources, marine conservation, freshwater conservation, fishing and aquaculture, and marine science.

Tracking the total funding toward ocean and freshwater causes can be difficult due to lack of comparable and accessible data and a common accounting or reporting framework. Additionally, the cross-cutting nature of issues and initiatives makes the parsing of where the money goes a challenge. According to Candid data, marine and freshwater initiatives split institutional funding about equally. In reality, water issues are profoundly local and rooted geographically, spanning watersheds, fishing areas, and the on-the-ground systems for delivering water for drinking, sanitation and hygiene. In short, these categories don't always reveal these realities, either.

These five categories emerged around ocean and freshwater issues, partly due to water's massive footprint and the enormous complexities of solving the issues facing these natural resources. The categories can be seen as symbolic initial steps that philanthropic organizations and other stakeholders used in organizing the field; today, it increasingly moves toward integrated or cross-cutting solutions. Besides these categories, some funders align their work loosely or formally with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals for Oceans (SDG

14) and Freshwater (SDG 6), both of which provide global targets for water sustainability and equity. The 2021 "Our Shared Seas" report shows the top areas receiving funding were science, protected areas/habitat protection, pollution and industrial sectors, fisheries, core support, and cross-cutting initiatives.

Subject	Amount Funded
Water Resources	\$230.74M
Marine Conservation	\$216.52M
Freshwater Conservation	\$188.15M
Fishing & Aquaculture	\$107.34M
Marine Science	\$67.50M

Source: Candid

With these caveats in mind, the categories within Candid's data give a snapshot of current priorities. Water Resources, the top funded area from 2014 to 2018, received \$231 million; this category refers primarily to freshwater causes supported via watershed protection and conservation, water pollution, wetlands protection, and conservation. Marine conservation funding, focused on oceans and coastal waters, followed as a close second at \$216 million, and included habitat protection and marine protected areas (MPAs).

The Freshwater Conservation category includes rivers, lakes and WaSH activities, areas favored by the Walton Family Foundation and William Penn Foundation. It ranked third at \$188.15 million over the five-year period. In addition to natural conservation, WaSH activities are rising in popularity for funders, with basic drinking water

supply and sanitation issues, education and training around WaSH, and WaSH research all attracting donor interest.

Given the critical role oceans play in feeding the world with high-quality protein and the dependence of many local communities on the oceans for their livelihoods, it's not surprising to see Fishing & Aquaculture rank fourth on the funding list, topping \$107 million in funding. Fisheries conservation and the use of markets to drive sustainable practices has been a primary area of this work. Driving a sustainable fishing industry that honors equity among large- and small-scale fisheries is among the primary areas where philanthropy dovetails with the "blue economy."

For example, the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation's initiative focuses on "safeguarding the health and abundance of wild-capture fish stocks and improving aquaculture practices" while also backing financial tools and efforts to align markets with "conservation-minded" goals. The David and Lucile Packard Foundation also prioritizes fishing, "leveraging the power of seafood buying-markets."

Marine Sciences, the category that includes scientific research and the study of marine wildlife, received just over \$67 million. The Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation is a big player in this area and ranks as one of the largest and most active grantmakers in non-biomedical science philanthropy overall. It focuses on marine microbiology that is "exploring and deciphering marine and freshwater symbioses," while the Packard Foundation's science jewel is the Monterey Bay Aquarium Research Institute, among other marine science initiatives.

The Big Issues & Beyond

"The philanthropic world, and many people in places of privilege, don't have to contemplate what climate change really means, but that's just not our reality in Southeast Louisiana," said [Colette Pichon Battle](#), who founded the Gulf Coast Center for Law and Policy in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. "It's here already. We're losing land (to sea rise) at one of the fastest rates in the country."

In Inside Philanthropy's interviews for this brief, the water philanthropy community voiced many priorities driving their field, but several, which are hinted at in Battle's statement, stand out: the growing impacts of climate change, the need to center equity and community engagement, the drive toward integrated water management, and the daunting size of water's role in our world. All of these issues, like water, are highly interconnected.

The need to slow planetary and [oceanic warming](#) due to the impacts of climate change is the clock against which the entire field is racing. [Sea levels are rising at 3.2 mm per year](#), and the ocean has absorbed 93% of the excess heat since the 1970s, severely threatening ecosystems and raising the urgency of greater funding. The warming climate has also triggered unstable weather patterns that lead to flooding and bringing drought to many parts of the United States. This adds stress to outdated and inadequate stormwater, wastewater and drinking water systems.

Moira McDonald, environment program director of the Walton Family Foundation, said they are [seeing the escalating crisis](#) and interconnectedness, and prioritizing it in their five-year plan. "When we look at water issues, we see connections to climate change everywhere," she said. "Whether it's flooding,

drought or drinking water, Americans feel real urgency around the deep connection between healthy, available water and the changing climate.”

Given the profound challenges facing the water sector, there are also significant possibilities for shaping solutions with sustainability and equity built-in. This is where prioritizing community participation fits in. Lois DeBacker, managing director of the environment for the Kresge Foundation, and Jacqueline Patterson, director of the NAACP Environment & Climate Justice Program [called for funders](#) to drive more dollars to BIPOC-led environmental justice groups because they are the fastest route to making progress in these areas. They argue that these community groups closest to the problems can identify solutions more easily, they have proven successful, they center benefits for the people of their communities, and are their most effective voices.

Integrated water management of marine and freshwater resources—a strategy also known as “one water”—is one of the core themes rising as a means for building solutions that serve all people and the



“We have an American water crisis, and it should be on the front pages of every newspaper across the country. Flint has taught me that we need to listen to and believe in science and to always question, even the things we take for granted the most.”

—Mari Copeny, activist and philanthropist

planet. While the “one water” framework has been adopted more prominently in WaSH circles, it is likely only a matter of time until oceans are integrated, too, as evidenced by the [U.S. Water Alliance recognition](#) that leaking infrastructure pollutes our seas as well as our drinking water. Across water, these are complex and expensive problems, and navigating their immense size is challenging. Getting governments to act on behalf of oceans and freshwater is a central challenge and requirement for making progress. But once again, communities have a major role to play. “The oceans are a public space. They are controlled by governments,” said J. Charles Fox of Oceans 5. “The basis of our grantmaking has been really trying to influence governments and influence these policies to result in better fisheries conservation and more marine protected areas.”

Ridgway White, president of C.S. Mott Foundation, which played a major role in addressing the Flint water crisis, indicated there is a similar point to be made about the giant role of government in other areas of the water space, and [cautioned](#) about the limits of philanthropy. “Government fault demands a government fix,” he wrote.

Bringing research, convenings and tools to this challenge of galvanizing leaders is a unique role that philanthropy can play, according to Susan Bell of the Water Funder Initiative. Philanthropy is able to actualize what really needs to happen in water, which is to get decision makers “to do the right thing or campaign to educate the public to do the right thing for water.”

Funder Trends and Strategies

Even though U.S. philanthropy has far fewer resources and levers than governments, the sector has a critical role to play in water issues. To

maximize those limited resources, funders are employing a variety of strategies, many uniquely tailored to their geographic areas or thematic interests. Some common ones include niche-based strategies (by geography or issue), community engagement, integrated or “one water” management, regranteeing, building political will, and working collectively.

Large funders like the David and Lucile Packard Foundation take a niche-based approach, identifying local experts and communities and aligning their work accordingly. “We begin by asking what is our role within the ecosystem?” said Packard’s Meg Caldwell. “We figure out where our opportunity is based on the landscape of players, and then we refine our ideas about our strategy in partnership with those closest to the work.”

The Walton Family Foundation also pursues a niche-based, geographical approach, although their “niches” are massive. WFF maintains its focus on the Colorado and Mississippi River basins, as well as on fostering a sustainable seafood chain by changing the “demand signal.” Their new five-year plan, released in 2021, targets the biggest water threats, which they see as climate change and agricultural pollution (and other practices). The Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation targets their primary conservation geographically, too, focusing on the North American Arctic, British Columbia and in the Amazon-Andes ecosystems.

The Flint water crisis unfolded in the Mott Foundation’s backyard. This quickly focused its water activism locally as it pursued strategies to ensure safe drinking water through efforts such as [tap water testing](#) and [addressing water rate hikes](#), and a [targeted effort at constituency building](#). Mott also funds integrated water management, a strategy

that aims to better connect communities with the authorities who oversee drinking water, stormwater and wastewater, an approach also favored by other prominent water funders such as [Pisces](#).

Issue Spotlight: Plastics Pollution



Oceans and seas are choking on more than 8 billion tons of plastic. If current trends continue, the U.N. contends that these bodies of water may host more plastics than fish within the next 30 years. In a reminder of the interconnectedness of our ocean and freshwater resources, rivers sweep up to 275 metric tons of new plastic into the world’s oceans and seas every hour, giving them a central space in water pollution research and solutions. Funders addressing plastics pollution include the Oak and MAVA foundations, and Ellen MacArthur Foundation’s New Plastics Economy initiative, among others.

The William Penn Foundation’s approach also works locally as declining water quality in the Delaware River watershed threatens Philadelphia’s drinking water. This has led the funder to back everything from [watershed cleanups](#) to sewer and [stormwater greening and job training](#). Executive Director Shawn McCaney [said in an op-ed](#) that connecting the riverfront and the community were essential to this work. “In addition to providing new recreation opportunities,” he said, “we also feel that public riverfront access is essential to building public support for policies and regulations that safeguard the region’s water quality.”

This theme of prioritizing community engagement echoes across most ocean and freshwater funders as a requirement for delivering progress on water challenges. As Charles Fox’s comments in the previous section highlight, ocean and water resources are vast. They fall primarily under government control – or in the case of international waters – into a complex system of jurisdiction. As a result, motivating public and stakeholder engagement is required to compell governments to act quickly and responsibly. This is a major reason why engaging community members has become so critical to success in ocean and freshwater issues.

“We know that local communities are the best long-term stewards of their environment,” said Tiffany & Co. Foundation Chairman and President Anisa Kamadoli Costa. “So many (of them) around the globe bear the brunt of the negative impacts the oceans are seeing and have the insights to advance solutions...That is a big theme for our grantmaking.”

Integrated water management, or a “one water” approach, is a strategy more foundations like Pisces are embracing to drive positive change in clean

water and equity. “(One water) means that all water is valued and managed holistically, inclusively and sustainably to produce the most long-term value for people and nature,” said José Aranda, water program associate at the Pisces Foundation. “So the bottom line is, we want to make one water the standard across the country.”

David Beckman, Pisces Foundation president, added that one water is also about exploring how philanthropic investments can drive multiple positive outcomes at once and do so with greater equity. “By focusing on front-line communities and the real inequities that we see in the U.S,” Beckman said, “we can move from a more siloed approach to an integrative one that carries with it the recognition that the pace and scale of the challenges we’re facing really demand an integrated response.”

While at the U.S. Water Alliance, then-CEO Radhika Fox (who has since left to join the U.S. EPA’s Office of Water), agreed that [integrated management was critical to the future of the U.S. water](#). “Integrated water management,” she said, “unites utilities with community groups, as well as environmental and agricultural interests.”

From Rivers to Oceans: The Benioff Ocean Initiative and Coca-Cola Join Forces to Tackle the Plastics Problem



The Benioff Ocean Initiative (BOI) and the Coca-Cola Foundation came together in 2020 to address both sides of the ocean-freshwater pollution equation, investing \$11 million in cleaning up nine rivers around the globe. The three-year initiative aims to create and empower a global network of interdisciplinary teams tasked with piloting technologies for capturing waste and adapting policy and communications interventions in diverse river environments. The projects build on an original commitment of \$3 million by the partners last May. The response to the competitive request for proposals was robust, leading the donors to scale total funding by \$8 million. The nine recipients were chosen from a field of 30 projects, representing five continents and 16 countries.

To achieve integrated water management, foundations and governments will need to give up short-term thinking in return for future gains. Peter Laugharn of the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation called the [global gaps in water access](#) highlighted by the pandemic “perilous” and cautions that funders have to begin thinking long-term. “We’ve got to break the long-established habit of funders giving with the urgency of now without sustainability plans in place. We’re apt to leave communities and facilities worse off in the long run,” Laugharn said. “Clean water isn’t just a pump and tap.”

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“[There is a] Lack of understanding of how urgently we need to address the climate crisis, the biodiversity crisis and the pending water security challenges to adapt to climate impacts. By not addressing this most important issue the notion of helping people for a short term emergency will become moot since the window to address irreversible impacts to a habitable planet will become too short.”

—Fundraiser, Calgary, Alberta, Canada

On the marine side, another popular target for funders is advancing sustainable fishing and aquaculture, as evidenced by the relatively high funding levels this issue receives. Funders have recognized that [fewer than 10 nations dominate](#) the fishing industry with massive operations, crowding out smaller nations and local fishing villages, and threatening one of the world’s primary protein sources. Funders choose a variety of strategies to address this issue, from market initiatives to on-site collaborations. The Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation, WFF, Packard and Oceans 5, among others, target conservation through market efforts, engaging the private sector and consumers to build market incentives for sustainable supply chains.

[Marine protected areas \(MPAs\)](#) and marine spatial planning (MSP) are favored strategies for many ocean funders. Even though oceans cover 70% of the planet, [only 7% of marine waters are protected, versus 15% of land](#), and the global goal is to get to 30% by 2030. Protected areas help ecosystems recover and fisheries replenish. Once this occurs, fish populations often overflow into unprotected areas, sustaining the wider fish-based industry and diets. Oceans 5 supports MPAs while the [Waitt Foundation](#) champions MSPs. The Tiffany Foundation uses a similar protected area approach for [coral preservation](#).

Some funders like the Hewlett Foundation pursue a traditional conservation approach by primarily regranting to dedicated nonprofits such as the [Water Foundation](#), Resources Legacy Fund, and the Pew Charitable Trusts’ river conservation efforts. (Hewlett recently underwent [third-party evaluation](#) of this approach, highlighting the value of niche-based work and a drive toward equity.) This regranting approach is common among community foundations, as well.

Given the size and complexity of water issues, none of these areas or strategies are saturated, and new tactics continually emerge. Many funders choose to work together, often to focus on a particular problem, geographic area, or to benefit from staff expertise provided by organizations that specialize in leveraging funder resources or in particular issues. (See Intermediaries & Associations). Still others are [calling for philanthropists](#) to become the lead innovators in the field, providing proof of concept for solutions and drawing critical capital and commercial resources into the fight for ocean and freshwater resources.

Perspectives on Equity

Black, **Indigenous** and other people of color (**BIPOC**) and poor people in every nation are most likely to experience obstacles in accessing and affording clean water, and are more likely to be impacted by the droughts and flooding that accompany climate change. In coastal communities, rising seas and overfishing **disproportionately threaten** the homes and livelihoods of BIPOC communities in the U.S. and of **less-developed nations**. However, these issues are dominated by voices from the Global North, where most of the funding also goes. There is a terrible truth behind all of these trends: The water emergency “**has not been felt equally.**”

“The planet we all depend upon is dying, and it’s impacting vulnerable communities faster and more drastically than wealthier ones,” said one fundraiser in an informal IP survey conducted in August 2020. Inequities in how our water resources are protected, managed, funded and shared are entrenched.

As DeBacker and Patterson **highlighted in IP**, “BIPOC-led organizations have a demonstrated track record of success. With sophisticated

strategies and tireless organizing, BIPOC-led groups have produced transformational action on climate and environmental racism.” (For more, see the Funder Strategies section of this brief). On the bright side, funders are increasingly saying they are centering equity within their ocean and freshwater philanthropy, not only because it’s the right thing to do, but also because it represents the fastest, most effective means to progress on behalf of the planet.

Yet, the money still needs to flow to these organizations. For example, according to the National Congress of American Indians, many native communities have **tribal treaties** guaranteeing them water rights, which they safeguard, **winning lawsuits for water protection** and championing water sources as stewards. Yet, Native American organizations receive **only 0.3% of all philanthropic funding** and are least likely to have access to clean water.

The **Donors of Color Network** issued a Climate Justice Pledge that is influencing water funding conversations, too. The network advocates for foundations to pledge 30% of their climate change giving toward BIPOC-led environmental

Leadership Spotlight: Anya Elizabeth Johnson



Marine biologist and lead of OceanCollectiv Ayana Elizabeth Johnson wrote a 2020 op-ed in the *Washington Post* about how the intersection of her life’s work and racism derails her professionally and personally.

“Here is an incomplete list of things I left unfinished last week because America’s boiling racism and militarization are deadly for black people: a policy memo to members of Congress on accelerating offshore wind energy development in U.S. waters; the introduction to my book on climate solutions; a presentation

for a powerful corporation on how technology can advance ocean-climate solutions; a grant proposal to fund a network of women climate leaders; a fact check of a big-budget film script about ocean-climate themes; planting vegetables with my mother in our climate victory garden.”

organizations, an effort to boost levels from 5%. So far, the Pisces Foundation and the Schmidt Family Foundation are the only major funders mentioned in this State of American Philanthropy report that have signed the full pledge. The William and Flora Hewlett Packard Foundation has signed a partial pledge. Again, the impetus for the network's report is that directing funds toward BIPOC-led organizations is the fastest route to progress on ocean and freshwater issues.



“This is the moment to recognize we go with the community. The power dynamics that currently exist need to be rebalanced so that Indigenous and local communities have a seat at the table for decision making and implementation and the power that their traditional practices and rights deserve.”

—Meg Caldwell, deputy director, Ocean program, David and Lucile Packard Foundation

“We were created out of complete disaster, necessity and need—and we’re still here, and we’re still fighting, and we’re leading the way around the Green New Deal and climate equity,” said Colette Pichon Battle, founder of the Gulf Center on Law & Policy, and an advocate for the pledge. “We’re leading that with no investment. What could we do with deep investment?”

Conversations and commitments around centering equity are rising among water funders. “More and more environmental funders are recognizing that you have to put people and communities back into this equation around environmental funding,” said the Walton Family Foundation’s Moira McDonald.

The foundation is committing to bringing more community voices to the table in the Colorado River basin over the next five years as one approach to its equity work. “We are moving toward a set of guidelines for the management of the river reservoirs,” she added. “We’re looking to see how we can bring some of these voices, like tribes, into the conversation and ensure they have the capacity to build their sense of what they need for river health.”

In ocean inequities, funders are beginning to prioritize addressing the historic dominance of a handful of countries that have extracted the majority of resources and tend to be the primary recipients of funding. Only about 10 countries do the majority of global fishing. Additionally, ocean funding flows primarily to North America and the Caribbean. The Packard Foundation’s Meg Caldwell, who characterized 2021 as “[the year of ocean equity](#),” said her foundation recognizes the need. “This is the moment,” Caldwell declared, “to recognize we go with the community. The power dynamics that currently exist need to be rebalanced so that Indigenous and local communities have a seat at the table for decision making and implementation and the power that their traditional practices and rights deserve.” The WFF is also supporting local fishing communities on the Louisiana coast to engage in the oil spill restoration planning process.

Funders like Pisces, [Osprey Foundation](#), [the Conrad Hilton Foundation](#), and organizations like [DigDeep and Water](#), are framing WaSH issues as human rights issues for the U.S. and globally, and making advances for BIPOC people throughout the country.

Meanwhile, the environmental field overall remains predominantly white, particularly at the leadership and board levels; this is another

challenge to ensuring diverse perspectives and community-led strategies. Several organizations have emerged to hold environmental philanthropy accountable for diversifying the field, getting more funders to put their money where their mouths are with their hiring practices and raising expectations.

Green 2.0, a small non-profit, [asks environmental funders](#) each year to submit their demographic data to Candid's Guidestar system. Their 2020 response was tepid: Just 11 of 40 foundations participated. "Foundations are lucky that they carry the checkbooks," said Andrés Jimenez, the first full-time executive director of Green 2.0, during a press conference. "There aren't that many... organizations looking at foundations and saying, 'We can hold you accountable. Year after year, we see a lot of the same foundations continuing not to report.'" Funders highlighted in this State of American Philanthropy report who also participated in the 2020 Green 2.0 report include Mott, Packard, Heinz, Hewlett, Pisces, Marisla, and William Penn. Those who were invited but did not submit data were Bloomberg, Moore, Coca-Cola, Oak and Walton.

Recognizing the importance of equity in water-related funding is increasingly indispensable. The [2020 Walton Family Foundation survey](#) showed that water-related issues are urgent among all adult Americans, but BIPOC Americans see even greater urgency for clean drinking water (88% to 66%), ocean conservation (91% to 72%), and freshwater conservation (91% to 76%). Given the many voices and effectiveness of BIPOC national and community leaders and the consensus that Americans value water, funders may find themselves challenged to move ahead without adopting strategies that center equity and directly supporting BIPOC-led organizations.



DONORS OF COLOR NETWORK

Established in 2019, the Donors of Color Network is "the first ever cross-racial community of donors of color and movement leaders committed to building the collective power of people of color to achieve racial equity." Its Climate Justice Pledge spotlights funders that are committed to transparency and inclusive grantmaking. DOCN expects that within one month, funders upload their grants to the Candid eReporter portal and provide an annual report on climate grants and within 12-24 months funders direct at least 30% of all climate giving to "organizations run by, serving, and building power for communities of color, who have a majority of people of color boards and senior staff and a justice lens."

A Closer Look at Funder Types

Private Foundations

According to Candid, 10 private U.S. funders gave more than \$400 million to freshwater and ocean efforts from 2014–2018. As highlighted in the introduction, this sum is dwarfed by the scope of giving to other program areas like education and health, small in comparison to the scale of the need in the field, and tiny compared to water’s footprint on our planet. Funders strive to develop cohesive strategies to carve out a niche in the massive field and make an impact. While each funder is unique, the top players tended to pursue specific ocean strategies, geographical regions, local watersheds, or drinking water issues, simultaneously or as sole focal areas.

On the mainly marine side, the [Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation](#) topped the list, delivering more than \$249 million over the five-year period. Through its environmental program, it pursues the Marine Conservation Initiative, which focuses on the North American Arctic and British Columbia. Its Conservation and Markets Initiative prioritizes sustainable seafood, and its Andes-Amazon Initiative includes Amazon River conservation. Its science funding expands this commitment, boosting research in marine microbiology and symbioses in ocean and freshwater aquatic systems.

The [David and Lucile Packard Foundation](#) is also well-known for its ocean generosity and is one of the largest foundations in the country. Between 2014 and 2018, it gave almost \$100 million to marine causes, including to its flagship commitment, the Monterey Bay Aquarium and the Monterey Bay Aquarium Research Institute

(MBARI), which were founded by David Packard. Their commitment continues: in 2019 alone the foundation gave MBARI \$48 million. Beyond MBARI, Packard focuses on [two main initiatives](#): protecting and restoring ocean life and supporting marine biodiversity through sustainable fisheries and seafood production strategies.

The [Walton Family Foundation](#) pursues both ocean and freshwater strategies, a direction motivated by the family’s identification with water issues from different perspectives and geographies. Perhaps among its highest-profile projects is its “[unprecedented](#)” giving in the Colorado River Basin, as well as large and influential projects in the Mississippi River Basin and along the Gulf Coast. On the ocean side, it also focuses on seafood markets as a vehicle for driving sustainable fishing. Between 2014 and 2018, it gave \$157 million to these causes.

Similarly, the [Hewlett Foundation](#), which gave over \$41 million between 2014–2018, kept a geographic focus primarily on conservation of Western landscapes and rivers with the goal of “conserv(ing) biodiversity and protect(ing) the ecological integrity of half of the North American West for wildlife and people.” It supported conservation initiatives, including regranting organizations, like the Resources Legacy Fund, the Open Rivers Fund, U.S. Public Lands and Rivers Conservation (through the Pew Charitable Trusts), and the Water Foundation.

While funders like the Walton Family Foundation pursue several geographic areas based on the family’s interests, other foundations choose to root their work in a single geographical area. For these funds, local watersheds and water issues often emerge as central themes for their giving.

The second-largest donor on the list was the [William Penn Foundation](#), a major regional player that gives millions to protect the Delaware River watershed and [targeted sub-watersheds](#) through research, organizing and [support for infrastructure improvements](#), as well as constituency-building. Between 2014 and 2018, it gave over \$165 million. In a [2020 op-ed](#) in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, the foundation’s executive director, Shawn McCaney, advocated for the fulfillment of the region’s “people-centered civic vision” for the waterfront’s development.

The [Charles Stewart Mott Foundation](#) witnessed the water crisis up close as it unfolded in its hometown of Flint, Michigan. Between 2014 and 2018, it gave more than \$43 million to freshwater causes. Part of this generosity reflects the [\\$100 million it pledged](#) between 2016 and 2020 to help Flint recover “and rise from its water crisis,” including \$4 million to help the community reconnect to the Detroit water system, \$100,000 to distribute water filters, and more than \$7 million to support diverse organizations working on water issues. A separate

initiative supports community-building to inform water quality and environmental policymaking by building political will for infrastructure improvements and clean water. Additionally, Mott focuses on water conservation in the [Great Lakes region](#), “work(ing) to ensure long-term conservation of freshwater ecosystems by strengthening the environmental community and informing the development of water policy.”

The [S.D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation](#) was among the most prominent water funders in California and one of the largest working on the issue in the U.S. overall, before the spend-down fund closed in 2020. It gave \$54 million between 2014 and 2018 and served as a major catalyst for advancing water issues, knowledge and leadership in the state. In its [final report](#) of staff insights derived from its funding of water issues, Bechtel highlighted the need for more funders in the space, the value of partnerships, and emphasized the benefits of an integrated systems approach.

While those are the big private funders in the ocean and freshwater space, others are joining. The [Pisces Foundation](#) is relatively new to the scene, moving from self-directed giving by Gap clothing founders Bob and Randi Fisher to an emerging national environmental leader. The [Waite Foundation](#) teams with organizations across sectors to motivate governments to create marine protected areas and plans. It has given away \$70 million to 78 ocean-related projects in as many countries since its founding with a promise to double that over the next decade. The [Paul G. Allen Foundation](#) focuses on protecting sharks, rays and coral reefs, and supports bioscience research. The Skoll Foundation [pledged \\$10 million](#) in equity in 2020 toward WaterEquity, an initiative to leverage the power of private markets to solve global WaSH issues. The

Funder Spotlight



Pisces
Foundation

Established in 2007, the Pisces Foundation focuses its efforts on climate and energy, environmental education, and water. Its water strategy supports the implementation of One Water management in communities across the country; modern water policies to ensure clean and reliable water for everyone; and increasing peer-to-peer sharing between urban watershed managers who are scaling or implementing new water management practices.

New York-based [Surdna Foundation](#) has planted a stake in city water infrastructure as the focus of its sustainability program. Like many urban water funders, Surdna is interested in promoting stormwater management and green infrastructure.

[Heinz Endowments](#) tightly focuses on river conservation and restoration in Pennsylvania, including an emphasis on issues related to [coal and fracking pollution](#). With formidable combined assets of around \$1.5 billion, Heinz is a powerhouse in Pennsylvania and its home base of Pittsburgh. Grants range widely from about \$30,000 to \$500,000, but can go higher or lower. Past grantees include the Clean Water Fund.

On the [freshwater side](#), the call for a better, more systemic approach to improving access to WaSH resources has gained momentum among funders. They're aiming to bring people, institutions and resources out of their silos to build integrated and resilient WASH systems that include training, monitoring and ongoing maintenance, financing and incentives to keep things running.

Among those funders are Peter Laugharn in his role as president and CEO of the [Conrad N. Hilton Foundation](#) (a leading investor in WaSH) and Louis Boorstin, managing director of the [Osprey Foundation](#), which was founded by Baltimore resident and financial executive Bill Clarke and gives to faith-based freshwater initiatives. Together, Longhorn and Boorstin co-founded the [WaSH Agenda for Change](#) to encourage collaboration and share knowledge to support systems approaches to global WASH (See Intermediaries & Associations).

Corporate Funders

In general, corporate philanthropy lags behind private philanthropy, [representing just 5%](#) of total

giving across all causes in 2019. This trend was similar in oceans and freshwater giving. But corporations may be under increasing pressure to ramp up their commitments—according to the Walton Family Foundation's [Urgency of Water](#) survey, 9 in 10 Americans expect action from companies on environmental issues. Corporate funders that give in this area focus primarily on discrete problem-solving, giving back locally where they operate, and matching employee giving. Beyond these shared themes, giving strategies and recipients varied widely.

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"I see a need for values based advocacy in the sciences, especially the environment and natural resources. While underlying values and ethics are often implicated as fundamental problems, progress in understanding and applying values and ethics are not easily measured and hence are less attractive to funders."

—Fundraiser, Santa Fe, New Mexico

The [Coca-Cola Foundation](#) is the soft drink giant's primary philanthropic vehicle for global giving. The foundation commits 1% of its annual operating income to charitable giving, which in 2007, pivoted to include ["global water stewardship programs."](#) It also prioritizes grantmaking to clean water, water conservation and recycling causes. Coca-Cola awards funds to organizations throughout the world that protect watersheds in water-stressed regions and promote water conservation awareness within local communities and industries. Total giving across all areas was [\\$125 million in 2019](#), with big water-related grants to Circular Seas (\$825,000) for recycling programs related to marine clean-ups in Spain and Portugal, Ahl Masr Foundation for Development (\$400,000) for water access, Fundacion Semana for the Bogota

River Group (\$500,000), Georgia Aquarium (\$500,000), and American Forests (\$200,000) for watershed restoration, among others. One of Coca-Cola's most high-profile water conservation efforts is its partnership with the [Benioff Ocean Initiative](#).

The [Tiffany & Co. Foundation](#) has been involved in ocean protection work for over 20 years, giving over \$25 million in ocean grantmaking. According to Tiffany & Co. Foundation Chairman and President Anisa Kamadoli Costa, the foundation values putting local people and perspectives at the core of their solutions and grantmaking collaborations. "Given our size, we're always looking to leverage our grantmaking dollars so that we can help the field punch above its weight," Costa said.

The local focus that many corporate charities prize dovetails naturally with the way freshwater conservation and urban water issues manifest, making freshwater causes a common theme among many corporate foundations.

[Ben & Jerry's Foundation](#), launched by the Vermont ice cream company in 1985, invests in [Vermont](#) and across the United States. Within its environmental giving, the foundation recognizes that environmental protections (or erosions) greatly affect the health of local residents. It is especially keen to support organizations and program work that bridges marine protections with health and welfare protections for local citizens.

The [Caterpillar Foundation's](#) environmental program targets "strong, resilient community infrastructure," prioritizing sustainable, natural infrastructure and water access. It works globally and supports projects as diverse as global aquaculture and sustainable fishing in Peru, as well

Corporate Funder Spotlight



Awarding grants to organizations in 21 countries, Patagonia supports "innovative work that addresses the root causes of the environmental crisis and seeks to protect both the environment and affected communities." Patagonia encourages organizations bringing underrepresented communities to the forefront in fight against environmental exploitation and injustice, as well as, systemic bias, and discrimination in environmental policy.

as the Upper Tana Nairobi Water Fund, which is a joint project with the Nature Conservancy that reduces agricultural runoff into the river. Its grants can range from a few hundred dollars to a few million; however, most water conservation grants range from \$1,000 to \$10,000. Past grantees include the Colorado Water Trust and the Heartland Water Resources Council of Central Illinois.

[Dominion Energy Charitable Foundation](#), the philanthropic arm of the Virginia-based power and energy company Dominion, focuses its giving on the more than 15 states where it operates, donating \$48 million in 2019 to causes in four areas, including environmental stewardship focused on natural resource protection. The foundation requires that environmental grantees address specific environmental community needs and produce quantifiable results to be shared with Dominion. Past grantees include Connecticut's Niantic Watershed Committee.

The [Georgia-Pacific Foundation](#), which is run by the U.S.-based papermaking company, prioritizes protection of marine resources and rivers (and the wildlife within). It also prioritizes geographic areas within 30 miles of Georgia-Pacific facilities, which are spread across 32 states. Most Georgia-Pacific conservation grants range from \$1,000 to \$10,000.

[Patagonia](#), the foundation for the outdoor supply company, donates 1% of annual sales revenue to nonprofits that seek to conserve the environment. Patagonia prioritizes small, grassroots, activist organizations that mobilize average citizens and press for public-policy change to conserve wildlife and habitats and protect rivers, oceans, wetlands, aquifers and vernal pools. It offers a wide variety of environmental grantmaking opportunities and oversees the World Trout grants program. Grants range from a few thousand to about \$12,000;

Community Foundation Spotlight



THE CHICAGO
COMMUNITY TRUST
EQUITY • OPPORTUNITY • PROSPERITY

The Chicago Community Trust is currently focusing its discretionary funds on combating racial and ethnic wealth inequity; however, it has given widely to support freshwater and marine-related projects.

Past grantees in this space include the Monterey Bay Aquarium, which received a \$10 million grant for its marine science and coastal waters programs; and the Nature Conservancy, Illinois, which received a \$1.8 million grant supporting its work on water quality in Illinois rivers and Lake Michigan, the Eastern Lake Michigan Dune Restoration project, and the Great Lakes Invasive Species Project in Northern Michigan.

however, the foundation occasionally makes larger grants. American Water manages more than 500 water and wastewater systems for 1600 communities across 16 states. Since 2010, its American Water Charitable Foundation has given millions of dollars to community-based, freshwater-related causes through grants of up to \$20,000 and employee matching gifts.

The [Xerox Foundation](#) is the philanthropic arm of the digital and print products and services multinational company headquartered in Connecticut. It has a longstanding history of corporate philanthropy. The foundation's environmental and water giving centers in two grantmaking programs, with an emphasis on sustainability: Community Involvement and Science Consultant. Recent grantees include [The Maritime Aquarium](#) (Norwalk, Connecticut), the [National Aquarium](#) (Baltimore, Maryland), and the [Mill River Collaborative](#) (Stamford, Connecticut). The foundation also recently supported [SoundWaters](#), which seeks to protect the Long Island Sound through education.

Community Foundations

Drinking water management is a massive, systemic issue, but it is also hyperlocal, connected to all types of community decision-making, from housing to city parks. In light of the worsening and inequitably distributed impacts of climate change, these issues are a natural fit for the work of community foundations, which are dedicated to serving geographic regions; for this reason, they are becoming a growing presence in freshwater issues. Also, urban water quality funding across the country often occurs at the local level, with community foundations recognizing clean water as a solution for public health, sustainability and meeting federal requirements.

Community foundations offer a few important advantages as water-cause partners. They have financial resources at the ready and can make grants and investments as active partners, sometimes also engaging the holders of the donor-advised funds they manage. Community foundation staff can bring specialized and local knowledge, expertise and community connections, and they can act as effective conveners, providing spaces to bring stakeholders together.

Two big community trusts showed up on Candid's list of funders in ocean and freshwater funding: the [Chicago Community Trust](#) and the [Foundation for the Carolinas](#). The Chicago Community Trust was one of the first community foundations in the country and is one of the largest, with more than \$3.3 billion in assets. Few funders appreciate Chicago's rivers as much as the Chicago Community Trust, which helped launch the [Great Rivers Chicago](#) initiative in 2015. This ambitious public-private initiative aims to draw more attention and dollars to the waterways in the city, helping transform old industrial areas into vibrant community assets. In 2018, CCT announced new grants totaling \$810,000 to organizations working to unlock the potential of Chicago's rivers. The overarching goal of this commitment is to help local residents feel more connected to the riverfront. The Chicago Community Trust also manages donor-advised funds that support environmental and water causes outside the region, funding projects such as The Freshwater Trust, Tippecanoe River's Watershed Foundation, and wetlands-specific projects through the Nature Conservancy.

The [Foundation for The Carolinas](#) is also one of the largest community foundations in the U.S., with \$2.7 billion in total assets. It seeks to inspire

“philanthropy and [empower] individuals to create a better community,” especially in the management of its donor-advised funds. Prior to the pandemic, it focused on “trails and trees,” with large (\$2 million+) donations to Waterkeepers Alliance, and sizable donations to Ocean Conservancy, Oceana, and Clean Water for North Carolina. In 2019–2020, [30% of its grants](#) supported environmental and wildlife causes, but last year, it pivoted toward sustaining the community throughout the pandemic.

Initiative Spotlight

 **Community Foundation Water Initiative**

Launched by the S.D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation in 2015, this initiative included the Silicon Valley Community Foundation, the San Francisco Foundation and the California Community Foundation among its participants. At the conclusion of the initiative in 2020, some lessons learned were that flexibility allowed participating foundations to integrate water into their existing programs; dedicated funding for collaboration and infrastructure were critical elements to the initiative's success, and multi-year investments provided time for the initiative to reach its main goals.

The [Community Foundation Water Initiative](#), led by the S.D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation, was created to promote the value and benefit of integrating water issues into the work of community foundations. It enlisted five local community foundations to make their own water-related grants, build and exchange knowledge, and collaborate on distributing a pooled fund related to water and land use of more than \$2 million. Even though the initiative also ended in 2020 along with Bechtel Foundation, its

impact likely did not. Those involved say it seeded the idea of water as integral to every community foundation. “The insight that we had was that, whether or not you are explicitly making grants about water issues, if you are in regional planning, if you are in housing, if you are in transportation, you are making grants about water,” says [Remy Goldsmith](#) at Silicon Valley Community Foundation.

[Community foundations](#) have a role to play, too, as sea levels rise. The coast of Louisiana is on one of the (receding) front lines of this slow-motion crisis. Climate change and the fossil fuel industry are among the primary causes for the loss of stable waterfront land in this state. For example, the central community foundations in Louisiana—the Greater New Orleans Foundation and the Bayou Community Foundation—played crucial roles in supporting coastal conservation.

Major Donors

In recent years, ocean conservation has become a [rising star](#) in U.S. philanthropy, at least among tech and finance billionaires, such as Marc and Lynne Benioff and Michael Bloomberg.

Marc Benioff, a founder of Salesforce, and his wife Lynne have [given \\$1.5 million](#) to the Sustainable Ocean Alliance and committed \$10 million in 2016 to establish the Benioff Ocean Initiative dedicated to ocean conservation. Unlike some of their peers, the Benioffs chose a decentralized method of choosing its priorities: crowdsourcing. This inspired the center’s first project: saving whales from fatal collisions with shipping vessels, called WhaleSafe. They have also pursued unique strategies to reduce plastic waste in oceans and rivers by partnering with the Coca-Cola Foundation.

Entrepreneur, philanthropist and former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg’s [Bloomberg Philanthropies](#) supports Vibrant Oceans, a two-phase initiative that partners with academic researchers, nonprofit organizations, local governments around the globe, to boost the health of overfished, polluted and warming ocean ecosystems and to feed the more than 3 billion people who rely on the oceans as a primary food source. Vibrant Oceans Initiative kicked off with a [\\$53 million commitment in 2014](#) and an additional \$86 million in 2018, when Bloomberg also teamed up with Dalio’s OceanX Media to boost ocean exploration, media coverage and public awareness.



“More than three billion people depend on the oceans for food and their livelihoods. That means threats to marine ecosystems – like climate change and overfishing – also threaten lives around the world. We’re teaming up with OceanX to ensure that ocean conservation receives the attention it deserves.”

—Michael Bloomberg, founder, Bloomberg Philanthropies

Other notable super-wealthy funders who have jumped into the ocean and freshwater space over the years include Microsoft co-founder [Paul Allen](#) and [James and Kathryn Murdoch](#), through their Quadrivium Foundation.

One significant development is the Amazon-scale money that has begun to roll into the field, via Amazon CEO [Jeff Bezos](#) and his former wife MacKenzie Scott. It remains unclear whether these two mega-donors giving separately will prioritize water. In early 2020, Bezos [pledged \\$10 billion](#)

toward the creation of the Bezos Earth Fund to combat climate change, pledging to give at a clip of \$1 billion a year. According to the 2021 “Our Shared Seas” report, Bezos is such a recent arrival to ocean giving that he would have merited a spot in their top 20 ocean funder list, in part thanks to the \$100 million he doled out in March 2021 to support Oceans 2050 through the World Wildlife Fund. He has also made eight-figure grants to the Nature Conservancy and Natural Resources Defense Council, which will likely make positive impacts for freshwater resources, too. Still, Bezos’ giving lacks transparency and his motivations have been met with skepticism.

In 2020, MacKenzie Scott began working with a team of nonprofit advisors to give away her \$57 billion Amazon fortune, pledging \$125 million to climate change. Scott says she is just getting started, suggesting that she, like Bezos, has ample room in her portfolio for water giving.

Intermediaries & Associations

Collaboration is a must in this field, and the role of associations as builders and connectors is critical, too. The immensity of the planet’s water resources presents a sizable obstacle for everyone who wants to engage in the field. Identifying solutions that fit within funder portfolios and geographical interests

can take enormous time, energy, unique expertise, and may delay progress. Over the past decade, foundations have increasingly begun working together and pooling funds through intermediary organizations.

A decade ago, four foundations, including Oak and Marisla, banded together to launch Oceans 5, which focuses on grantmaking to advance marine protected areas and sustainable fishing. Given the international scope of both of these issues, making progress requires engaging governments and compelling them to act through policy initiatives. Collaborative work like Oceans 5 presents many advantages, allowing funders to explore outside their geographical expertise, narrowing strategies, and bringing many different players to the table.

“I think the biggest impact of collaboration,” said J. Charles Fox, Oceans 5 executive director, “is that you create an alignment of a narrower set of priorities that are easier for policymakers or civil society to really focus on.” He added, “We are, in effect, creating political will for action on a relatively discrete set of problems that have a discrete set of solutions. And you really can’t do it any other way than by collaboration.” His small, global team brings expertise and focus to its funders and does no fundraising. They now feature

Thinking Locally & Globally: Water & the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals



The United Nations’ 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development published 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for all developed and developing countries as a “shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for all people and the planet, now and in the future.” Two of the 17 goals are focused on water and provide a concise summary of the primary goals — and funding needs — in ocean and freshwater conservation. Many funders and nonprofits seek to align their work with the water SDGs, either explicitly or generally.

19 funders who have contributed \$100 million total since launching, and they are poised for continued growth. Other emerging marine collaboratives include [Blue Nature Alliance](#), which aims to protect 5% of the world's oceans within the next five years, and [OceanKind](#), which promotes ocean conservation and innovation.

On the freshwater side, the [Water Funder Initiative](#) (WFI), an effort to bring funders to what they now call "The Water Table," launched six years ago. At the outset, the Walton Family and S.D. Bechtel, Jr. foundations wanted to secure long-lasting freshwater solutions for people and the environment. But both organizations soon recognized that even with their sizable wallets, the types of government actions and long-term sustainability vision that are required for protecting water resources needed much greater philanthropic participation. This meant driving more funders to join freshwater causes and raising funding levels.

"They recognized that philanthropy was in the perfect position to motivate big dollars in the private and public sectors," said Susan Bell, Water

Funder Initiative's managing director. Today, 10 funders are at the core of the initiative, including, in addition to Walton and Bechtel, Pisces and William and Flora Hewlett foundations, and Lyda Hill Philanthropies, with more than a dozen working closely with them. The collaborative sets strategies and motivates investments in the field. WFI has helped to align more than \$350 million to the field in the past six years. "So that's what they were after," Bell said. "It's happening."

"When we began, there were a few funders that would put \$25 million a year in one year together," Bell said. "Now, there are funders that are putting together nearly \$70 million dollars a year towards some really big, impactful projects."

The [Urban Water Funders](#), part of the Water Funders Network, also seeks to motivate more philanthropic participation by providing networking and learning opportunities that center equity, a "one water" approach, and sustainable infrastructure. Meanwhile, in 2015, the Agenda for Change launched to create a global hub for WaSH issues. Its members work collaboratively toward change on Sustainable Development Goal 6, which prioritizes WaSH issues.

Management groups like the [Resources Legacy Fund](#) (RLF) also play a role, helping large donors to set goals, develop strategies, make grants, and execute complex initiatives. Some of the largest foundations in the conservation field have relied on RLF for help, including the Packard Foundation, the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation and the Hewlett Foundation.

Similarly, the [Water Foundation](#) works in the space between American West communities and infrastructure solutions, using its expertise to bring



"We've got to break the long-established habit of funders giving with the urgency of now without sustainability plans in place. We're apt to leave communities and facilities worse off in the long run. Clean water isn't just a pump and tap."

—Peter Laugharn, president and CEO, Conrad N. Hilton Foundation

funding partners (including Hewlett, Moore, Mott, Pisces, RLF, and Walton Family foundations) and grantees together to “advance water solutions for communities, economies, and the environment.”

In addition to the networks highlighted in the Perspectives on Equity section, funder associations and other nonprofits play a critical role in driving change, galvanizing funders, and supporting one another. [US Water Alliance](#) plays a critical role in educating the American public about the importance of drinking water and infrastructure issues and helping to lead the [Water Equity Network](#), which emerged in 2020 to act as “a force for equity and opportunity” for vulnerable communities. [Biodiversity Funders Group](#) is a professional association of grantmakers that features special member sections in land and freshwater conservation, as well as marine conservation. [Blue Prosperity Coalition](#) brings together foundations, NGOs, academic institutions and others “to assist committed governments in developing and implementing sustainable marine spatial plans to protect the environment and improve the economy.”

Many of the foundations discussed in this brief belong to funder affinity groups such as [Environmental Grantmakers Association](#) and [Health & Environmental Funders Network](#); however, neither of these PSOs have subgroups or learning resources dedicated to water issues, and neither have grantmaking or collaborative funds specifically focused on water issues.

Activist Spotlight: Mari Copeny



When she was eight, Mari Copeny watched her little sister break out in rashes due to the contaminated water in her hometown of Flint, Michigan. In response, she wrote a letter to then President Obama asking him to meet with her and other activists in the shadow of their erupting water crisis. Obama met with Copeny—when he came to deliver \$100 million of assistance to Flint.

Now, at just 13, Copeny has leveraged her social media and grassroots platform to raise more than \$250K to help her community access bottled water and another \$425K to produce water filters that can be used nationwide. She’s also the face of a rising generation of youth who are angered by inaction and the status quo, the racial disparities in clean water access, and the degradation of our water resources.

Fundraising Now

As the pandemic underscores global interdependence, many fundraisers are focusing on another set of crucial connections: those drawn by oceans and waterways. With one foot on land and one in water, organizations in this field have worked with funders to frame oceans and waterways as solutions to a growing climate crisis, to center social and economic dimensions of water preservation, and to collaborate in the fight for healthier waters and communities. Even in turbulent times, fundraisers report that support for oceans and freshwater work has held steady—although it still falls short of what’s needed to secure the health of our planet.

As in other fields, ocean and freshwater fundraisers have confronted pandemic uncertainty by drawing on longstanding funding relationships. “There has been an effort [from funders] to be even more of a partner to us through a time of instability,” said Laure Katz, vice president for Blue Nature at Conservation International’s Center for Oceans. “I’ve seen an increase in engagement, in flexibility, and understanding of significant shifts in priorities to deal with a crisis.”

Even with slight dips in individual and event giving, long-term relationships with trusted foundation partners have helped oceans and freshwater nonprofits continue their work. “They’re going to stick with us no matter what,” said Farrah Smith, director of major gifts at Sea Shepherd Conservation Society. “They have stuck with us no matter what.”

COVID-19 has created fundraising opportunities, too, with several organizations taking greater advantage of virtual tools. American Rivers, for

example, has hosted more frequent webinars during the pandemic—with great success. In fact, according to Amy Souers Kober, the organization’s vice president of communications, a virtual launch event in April 2021 was so successful that American Rivers plans to continue virtual hosting even past pandemic restrictions.

Sea Shepherd, meanwhile, has benefited from pandemic TV-watching habits. In March 2021, it featured in “Seaspiracy,” a Netflix documentary highlighting its work against illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing worldwide. Programs like these, coupled with people’s desire for positive impact in difficult times, have made contributions to oceans “a family affair,” Smith said.

Freshwater causes have also been resurgent during the pandemic, albeit for different reasons. According to Souers Kober, lockdowns and the economic downturn have catapulted water access into the national conversation. “We were told to stay at home,” she said. “Well, a lot of people don’t have clean, safe, affordable running water in their homes. With the economic crash, a lot of people were in danger of having their water shut off.”

But even for those with access to clean drinking water, “the only safe place to see friends was outside, and so having a natural space—a clean stream or river, access to that—was this incredible benefit,” Souers Kober said. For American Rivers, recent giving has reflected this growth in freshwater prominence nationwide.

Another source of urgency around these issues has been building for much longer than the pandemic: climate change and its vital relationship with ocean and freshwater health. “There is an increased focus on climate, and a starting understanding of the role

that oceans play in regulating it,” Katz said. Freshwater fundraisers agree, but getting funders to recognize this connection, especially as climate funding increases, can be an uphill battle. “We took for granted that everyone was making that connection,” Smith said. “Now, we’re realizing, wow, we actually have to get out there and explain this better.”



“There has been an effort [from funders] to be even more of a partner to us through a time of instability. I’ve seen an increase in engagement, in flexibility, and understanding of significant shifts in priorities to deal with a crisis.”

— Laure Katz, vice president, Blue Nature at Conservation International’s Center for Oceans

Oceans and freshwater fundraisers have sought to highlight two central ways that their work can confront climate challenges: adaptation and mitigation. For freshwater, “on the adaptation side, we’re often talking about floods and droughts, which are related to water and freshwater systems,” said Robin Abell, Conservation International’s freshwater lead. But according to Souers Kober, changing rivers aren’t just a source of climate stress—they can offer climate solutions. In the face of existential climate threats, she said, “I would love for funders to see... that rivers on every level—healthy, free-flowing rivers—really are sources of strength and hope and opportunity.”

When it comes to oceans’ role in climate change, fundraisers note a similarly two-pronged focus on adaptation and mitigation—and a similar funding gap. For Paul Houseman, international fundraising director at the Marine Stewardship Council, adaptation involves contending with changing ocean ecosystems. “As resources become scarce, as

nations need to feed themselves, as fish start to move because of climate change,” said Houseman, “how do we deal with this challenge?”

While funding for adaptation challenges has grown in recent years, Houseman said he would like to see more funder interest in ocean contributions to reducing carbon emissions. “The fishing industry has a carbon footprint,” said Houseman, but with sustainable fishing, “catching abundant fish requires less energy. So [the question is],” he added, “how could sustainable fishing... actually help the world get to a more carbon-neutral state?”

This emerging focus on climate has come alongside greater emphasis on social issues that intersect with the preservation of oceans and waterways.

Increasingly, said Kathy Whelpley, chief of staff at Oceana, “nonprofits have to be able to tell the story of how foundation grants are having an impact on other issues that are interwoven” with more traditional ocean and freshwater priorities. Advocates are asking the question: What are we trying to protect? More and more, the field’s answer is including the human communities that contribute to ocean and freshwater ecosystems.

For the Marine Stewardship Council, this has meant a greater focus on “local communities, indigenous communities, female fishers and small-scale fishers,” especially in the Global South, Houseman said. “It’s no good to say that the fish we’re catching is sustainable if it’s caught by forced or child or slave labor, so the social component around fishing is becoming much more important,” he said. “Are we able to ensure that local communities have food security [and] economic development, or are the benefits of this resource extraction not staying with local communities, but going to multinational corporations?”

Oceana has seen similar emphasis placed on social issues. Its supporters, says Whelpley, have provided “smart and strategic” funding that maximizes impact on gender equity, poverty and other issues affecting ocean-reliant communities. Even beyond program implementation, Whelpley said, there has been a push to ensure nonprofit staff and planning are more inclusive and representative.

The same trend holds for freshwater nonprofits—with a more domestic focus. There is “more and more support for multi-benefit solutions that address these intersecting issues of justice, climate, economy and health,” Souers Kober said. Getting to these solutions, she added, requires “making sure that front-line communities are leading. They’re the ones feeling the burden of poor river management, of climate change, floods, droughts, pollution.” For some sectors of freshwater work, social emphasis is not new. “Access to clean water is a human right,” said Abell, “so there’s a very strong equity piece built into this discussion.”

Philanthropy “can be a catalyst, can be a first mover, can set the tone of support,” said Katz of Conservation International. And funders have long pushed oceans and freshwater nonprofits to embrace interwoven social impact as a priority. Today, she said, funders and fundraisers are reflecting “on social equity and the role of

philanthropy in helping to promote that, on our responsibility in the way that we support and champion socially equitable approaches, [and] on how we approach strategy development in an inclusive way.” Houseman agreed, saying funders have adopted “a much more holistic appraisal of what it means to grant around ocean health. It’s not just species, it’s not just the environment; it’s also, how is this affecting human beings that rely on the ocean?”

As funders and nonprofits connect oceans, freshwater and human societies, organizational strategies have raced to catch up. In recent years, leaders in the field have fought to bridge divisions: between different organizations, between Global North and Global South, between types of funders, and between oceans and freshwater. “We cannot just be working in our own little silos, expecting to solve these big problems,” Souers Kober said. “You’ve got to reach out and collaborate.”

“Among the top things I’ve been hearing [from funders] is, we want to fund something where you’re working with other NGOs, because the more people that are working on an issue the better,” Smith said. Funders have led on this, building funding collaboratives like Oceans 5 and the Blue Nature Alliance (of which Conservation International is a founding member) to maximize

Opportunity Spotlight: We Can’t Protect What We Can’t Measure

One recurring theme in the field of oceans and freshwater philanthropy is the need for improved data. The complex, transboundary nature of ocean and freshwater systems and the lack of comparable, unified accounting systems limits strategic analysis and a robust understanding of the problems and potential solutions. For example, the U.S. Water Alliance reports that even U.S. federal data, which is sometimes seen as a gold standard, is not reliably tracking the water access gap. Two global tracking resources have emerged on ocean and freshwater issues: Our Shared Seas and the now-defunct WaSHFund.org. Our Shared Seas is backed by the Packard Foundation while the WaSH funders site had the support of the Hilton Foundation for almost a decade.

impact. According to Whelpley, these collaboratives help donors and practitioners learn together—shared learning that is especially important as nonprofits in this space increasingly focus on intertwined social issues like gender equity.

Fundraiser Spotlight



Established in 1973, American Rivers has grown to over 355,000 supporters, members, and volunteers across the U.S. The organization focuses its work on protecting and restoring rivers and their fish and wildlife habitats; supporting community leaders on their conservation and water management solutions; and ensuring safe and clean water for everyone.

The need for collaboration isn't just national—it's global. Freshwater advocates are shifting away from local approaches to rivers in favor of national or international strategies. Still, says Abell, "there are very few foundations that fund international freshwater ecosystem conservation."

Oceans have a similar gap, though the disparity there is between Global North and Global South. "The vast majority of ocean philanthropy is going to either North America or global initiatives focused in the northern hemisphere," Katz said. "The Pacific Ocean is larger than all land masses on the planet on its own, and it's receiving less than 1% of ocean philanthropy." This discrepancy appears in funding sources, too. According to Whelpley, it's time to engage more funders outside the U.S. and Europe, funders who could not only extend support, but also offer much-needed perspective.

As the scope of oceans and freshwater work expands, the field has increasingly welcomed

corporate funders. "There is definitely a growing interest in the blue economy and the economic opportunities that oceans present," Katz said, citing renewed attention from corporations and investment capital. Katz's colleague Abell pointed out that on the freshwater side, some corporate giving by consumer-facing companies is spurred in part by potential "reputational water risk." Both large and small companies want to invest in sustainability, Souers Kober said.

Governments have felt the pressure, too, generating "a significant increase in multilateral and bilateral aid for oceans," Katz said. But even where government funding is scarce, political will is an asset. Smith highlighted that Sea Shepherd often partners with governments with stretched economic resources. Meanwhile, collaboratives like Blue Nature Alliance match political will with philanthropic backing. Fundraisers emphasize that this is especially important to facilitate work in politically repressive contexts. For oceans and freshwater organizations, government support, both financial and political, is crucially important—and still short of levels needed to ensure global ocean and freshwater health.

Nothing encapsulates the field's desire to break down silos more than emerging approaches that look beyond ocean/freshwater dichotomies. "What we would love to see," Abell said, "is more of the 'source-to-sea' or 'ridge-to-reef' approach that goes from the mountains down to the ocean and recognizes those natural connections." These connections, which are of increasing interest to multilateral funders, could transform the field. "Maybe it will increase the competitive tension between ocean and freshwater conservationists," Katz said, "but maybe it will encourage us to work more together around those integrated systems."

An Analysis of Opportunities & Challenges

Philanthropic organizations considering jumping into ocean and freshwater funding are often daunted when identifying where to begin. The field is massive and complex. Despite this challenge, water advocates make clear that the [urgency is rising](#) and there is plenty of room for foundations to engage and make their mark, and for nonprofits to help lead the way.

“No foundation has got a big enough bank account to get this done,” the Pisces Foundation’s David Beckman said about the outsized scope of the water challenges facing the nation and the globe. The key for the philanthropic field, Beckman believes, is to maintain a collaborative perspective because there are at least \$300 billion of unmet water infrastructure needs in the U.S., not including oceans and coastal areas.

Fortunately, organizations and leaders in both oceans and freshwater advocacy have drafted area-specific blueprints that point the way for funders contemplating entering the space. Oceans and freshwater resources frequently require different approaches to their restoration, protection and management. However, they share four common priorities where philanthropy can make a difference.

Priority 1: Center and fund diverse leaders and communities. As highlighted in *Big Issues and Perspectives on Equity*, lifting, funding and centering community voices is not only the right thing to do, but also the best tactic for making progress on tough water issues. It is also critical that philanthropic organizations diversify, too, especially at decision-making points where solutions are formed. Communities most affected

by ocean and freshwater degradation are those in the strongest position to identify and advocate for solutions, yet they [lag behind](#) predominantly white organizations in receiving funding. The Donors of Color Network advocates for 30% of all philanthropic giving to go directly to BIPOC-led organizations, a recurring theme for philanthropic action. The Native Americans Philanthropy Network called not only for increased funding of their organizations, but also for funders to “be more responsive than directive.”

The [2019 Our Shared Seas](#) report on funding recognized that equity and human well-being are “intricately connected,” but these themes remain “poorly conceptualized in both research and practice”—opening the door for nonprofit and philanthropic engagement. The Ocean Panel’s [report on ocean equity](#) provides a background of the expansive equity issues among ocean resources and management and identifies priority actions for funders to advance “equity safeguards.”

The Water Foundation’s [guide for funders](#) names diversifying water leadership as one of the highest priorities, calling on philanthropy to boost civic engagement and power among diverse communities and leadership training to help public institutions better respond to local needs. The [U.S. Water Alliance report](#) on an equitable water future also highlights the importance of centering equity, defining equity pillars for funders and the field to pursue.

While ensuring the full inclusion of diverse voices is a top priority for water resources, diverse and disadvantaged communities must also receive the benefits of those solutions equally. “When we

think about ocean conservation, it can't just be for the spots in front of fancy resorts or the homes of wealthy individuals," marine biologist Ayana Elizabeth Johnson told *YaleEnvironment360*.

"We should also be thinking about not just who bears the brunt of the impacts on the ocean, but who gets the benefit when we do take care of it."

Priority 2: Act on climate. The 2019 *Our Shared Seas* report emphasized the ocean-climate nexus as an area "ripe" for philanthropic engagement. "The biggest change right now that I see in my field is on the climate-oceans nexus," noted Charles Fox of *Oceans 5*. "This would include issues like, how do you decarbonize shipping? How do you promote offshore wind as a renewable energy source? How do you look at creating resilience in ocean ecosystems? You can imagine mangroves, for example, are very important for a carbon sink. What policies can I think of that would ultimately result in protecting or restoring more mangroves?"

This priority resonated on the freshwater side, as well. The Water Foundation's guide for funders, for example, named "championing climate change" as a priority: "Place-based and health-focused philanthropy can help local communities prevent damage to their drinking water supplies from a changing climate." WFI suggests that philanthropy pursue projects such as diversifying

water supplies, advocating for water protection and pollution prevention, and strengthening small water systems.

Priority 3: Improve data, research and knowledge. There is much we don't know about our water resources and needs, a gaping hole necessitating philanthropic support. As Packard Foundation's Meg Caldwell pointed out, unlike climate change, for which carbon emissions released and global temperature rise are good metrics, the oceans (and freshwater) lack "a single metric that everyone can rally around." This places greater reliance and emphasis on good data for analysis and planning — but data are lacking overall.

"For most of the world, we do not know how much of a country's economic health and workforce is supported by coastal and marine resources, even though policy, investment and conservation decisions are highly dependent on this kind of information," reported marine biologist Benjamin Halpern in the first *Our Shared Seas* report. This sentiment is echoed on the freshwater side.

Water Funder Initiative argues that better data can drive better, faster science and flexible responses to freshwater challenges, "Philanthropy has unique potential to advance innovations in water data by elevating open, accessible water data as a priority

Data Spotlight

The logo for 'OUR SHARED SEAS' features the words 'OUR SHARED SEAS' in white, bold, sans-serif capital letters. The text is set against a dark blue background with a white wave graphic at the bottom. The background of the entire box is a lighter blue with a subtle pattern of white waves.

According to *Our Shared Seas* there is more data available than ever before "about the rapidly accelerating threats to ocean health and the solutions for addressing those threats. The group gathers that data and presents it in reports offering primers on threats and trends, solutions to those threats, ocean conservation funding, perspectives from thought leaders in the field, and deeper investigations of topical ocean issues. Its library also offers collections of ocean data, reports and presentations.

and brokering and catalyzing relationships between governments, businesses and researchers.” In an [IP op-ed](#) on the role funders can play in freshwater, three nonprofit and foundation leaders also emphasized the need for filling the data gaps. (See “We Can’t Protect What We Can’t Measure”)

Priority 4: Collaborate more. As highlighted in *Intermediaries & Associations*, funders who band together can go farther faster on behalf of water and the planet. The S.D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation, in its final, [post-spend-down report](#) recommendations, said that working together with other funders was integral to “enduring progress on water issues.” The foundation treated collaborative grantmaking as a core strategy, not an add-on, which they say made a difference in their efforts: “Collaboration can help introduce new opportunities,” they wrote, “as well as shine a light on the strengths and limitations of any individual approach.” The foundation’s report also commended its decision to work with intermediaries, such as the Water Foundation, as a decision that “benefited all partners.” The Water Foundation’s CEO Allison Harvey Turner [echoed these sentiments](#) in an IP article: “We must reject ‘go-our-own-way’ approaches and instead coordinate and align our efforts... We also need to lend our voices and resources to one another’s priorities.”

Charles Fox of Oceans 5 named another advantage of funders working together: mitigating risk.

Collaborative grantmaking gives funders access to expertise that they might not have on staff. But also, Fox said, “You get into a pool of risk. You’re making grants collectively, and the individual exposure (for an institution) is smaller because you’re in this with others.”

Given the cornerstone work by advocates and intermediary organizations to smooth entry for funders by sharing their lessons learned in the oceans and freshwater fields, charting a course today is easier than just a decade ago. Still, as the 2019 *Our Shared Seas* report warned, “There is no silver bullet to solving the multitude of ocean threats.” But they do remind funders and advocates that we have the necessary tools for action. The next steps for the oceans are “to remove barriers to solutions, accelerate their implementation, and expand their reach to ensure that solutions become the norm rather than the exception.”

Marine biologist Ayana Elizabeth Johnson recommends a full “flip of the script”: “We are overdue for a reframe, from seeing the ocean as a victim or threat, to appreciating it as hero,” she told *Scientific American*. We should not turn our backs on the ocean, Johnson said, as it is teeming not only with life and supports our climate, but it is also full of solutions from marine ecosystems to regenerative ocean farming to algae biofuels.

Johnson’s colleagues on the freshwater side would likely agree with her assessment. Their holistic vision of “[One Water, One Future](#)” makes water the “hero” of freshwater systems, delivering reliable water utilities, thriving cities, competitive businesses, sustainable agriculture, social and economic inclusion, and healthy waterways.

Now, funders new to ocean and freshwater philanthropy need to find their “hero” spot, while fundraisers need to help them connect the dots to begin.

Resources for Oceans and Freshwater

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¹Based on available U.S. based institutional grantmaker data from Candid from 2014 to 2018. Excludes federal funding and funding by higher education institutions.

²Based on available U.S. based grant recipient data from Candid from 2014 to 2018. Excludes government organizations and higher education institutions.

³Based on available data U.S. based institutions from Candid. Excludes government organizations .

Feedback?

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