



# REFLECTIONS ON CONFLUENCE 2026

MAY 18-21, 2026  
COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY  
FORT COLLINS, COLORADO

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# A NOTE FROM THE DIRECTOR

It has been a few weeks since the last day of Confluence 2026, and I've had time to both process the event and look through the feedback we received from our evaluations and the planning committee. All in all, I'm looking back with so much fondness and appreciation for the community that came together to make this event a reality, and for all the travelers who joined us for four days of workshops, field trips, sessions, sharing, and connecting. So, that's what I'd like to reflect on here – our WCCN and Confluence community. To learn more about the substance of the event, please read the following reflections, check out the [program](#), and/or read through [the notes](#) our amazing volunteers put together.

First of all, everything started with our co-conveners: Trees, Water & People (TWP), Crowd Conservation, and Strategic By Nature. TWP's James Calabaza and Zoe Baskin went all in with me and the rest of the CCC team and were the visionaries behind the Indigenous Engagement

Subcommittee and large portions of our agenda. Crowd Conservation, with Nicole Reese and Paula Short, led our mentorship match for the third year in a row, and gave a workshop on the Monday before Confluence. Strategic by Nature's Stacy Beaugh provided a Monday workshop on fundraising. There was an amazing team at Colorado State University, John Sanderson who led our fundraising efforts, Lizzy Camp our behind-the-scenes guru, Julia Lankisch was an all-around support throughout the event, Ashley Roper who kept our event moving forward, and Aiden, our A/V tech that helped us keep our presentations seamless. Finally, in our moment of greatest need, Annia Quiroz jumped in to supported marketing and communications, and helped us run the event as well. I couldn't have had a more amazing team.

Our planning committee this year was just amazing, and had the addition of an Indigenous Engagement Subcommittee for the first time. I brought the initial goals of

Aireona Bonnie  
Raschke, Ph.D.



Director of the Western Collaborative  
Conservation Network

# A NOTE FROM THE DIRECTOR

Confluence to them all more than a year ago. I wanted us to create a welcoming space where people could connect and learn from one another, so we could support the collaborative conservation field through skill- and community-building. In this era of struggle and defunding/devaluing of conservation in the U.S, I felt like this was particularly important. The group took it from there, with exceptional ideas, invitations to speakers, and ongoing feedback. I was especially humbled by the people who continually checked in on me to see if I needed anything as the workload for the conference ramped up. The authentic space we create at Confluence, began with the kind, caring, and creative spaces that we built as the planning committee.

Then, of course, there are the sponsors of Confluence 2026. Each time I do fundraising for these events, I am reminded that it takes a special kind of donor to go in on a sponsorship for a gathering. They are the organizations and/or individuals who are willing to fully invest in a space that's dedicated to building human connections and helping professionals grow their skills. Without those people and institutions that value these gatherings, however, they just wouldn't be possible. And this year was pretty awe-inspiring in terms of what our sponsors helped us do. We supported 12 general scholarships, travel funds for 18 Indigenous participants, and 35 discounted registrations. Their support also helps us to bring vibrancy to Confluence through funds for field trips and supplies. And many of them have been long-term supporters of Confluence as well – with a few having even deeper connections to the event than me, when they started giving for Confluence 2020.

Lastly, there was the whole community that came together at Confluence. You all! Of course, our speakers and session leaders brought life to the agenda – contributing their ideas, expertise and time. Our volunteers helped us capture the event. And everyone who attended made it worth all the work, both actual and emotional. It was all of you who made Confluence 2026 the best one yet. There's a kind of magic, when you do your best to try to create a genuine and welcoming space, but you know at the end of the day, it is outside of your control to really make it that way. Then all the right people show up and the gathering is everything you had hoped it would be.

Together we are going to keep the collaborative conservation field in the Western US moving by caring for the people doing the work – you all.

Thank you for making Confluence 2026 so wonderful, and may all the connections and knowledge you gained from this community sustain you!



## A FEW WORDS FROM JAMES

Attending the 2026 Confluence workshop for the first time, I was immediately struck by a profound sense of community and warmth—a feeling that began the moment I walked into the ballroom on Day 1 and sustained itself throughout the event. Between the deep, honest conversations with colleagues and the integration of practical workshops with Ancient cultural knowledge, Confluence quickly became one of my favorite gatherings. This sentiment was echoed by everyone I spoke with, all of whom expressed a deep appreciation for the intentional design of the event.


Having the privilege to serve as a coordinator and host allowed me to welcome others into this space, but it also granted me something invaluable: the room to use my voice as an Indigenous man to share our aspirations, values, and knowledge. The deliberate pace, flow, and energy of the workshop reminded us all to see each other as human beings rather than machines. In a world where burnout and fatigue are all too common, the uplifting energy at Confluence fostered true, authentic collaboration and ensured everyone had a space to be heard. I am incredibly grateful to the Western Collaborative Conservation Network for inviting Trees, Water & People to be a part of this transformative experience.


*James Calabaza*

Indigenous Lands Program  
Director  
Trees, Water & People



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 [@collaborative\\_conservation](#)

 [Western Collaborative Conservation Network](#)

[WCCN Website](#)

Keep up with the community by subscribing to the [WCCN newsletter](#).

Learn more about Confluence 2026 through our [Program](#).

# 2026 FIELD TRIPS

Each Confluence, field trips are a chance to engage in the local experience of collaborative conservation work, permitting us to take a deeper dive into the landscape and meet the people working on-the-ground. Being in a landscape with people that work in that landscape is an incredible opportunity to bear witness to and enrich what is being done locally and beyond.

## BISON CONSERVATION PROGRAM

**PRESENTED BY TREES, WATER, PEOPLE**  
**LOCATION: COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY**

An afternoon with one of the most consequential bison conservation programs in the world. CSU's Larimer Foothills Bison Conservation Program is a global leader in bison genetics research, with work that is actively shaping how keystone species like bison can coexist with commercial cattle operations and the communities that depend on them.

The conversation will move from the science to the relationships: how CSU and the City of Fort Collins have built collaborative stewardship opportunities around managing this herd and its prairie habitat, and how that work connects to a broader partnership with the Intertribal Buffalo Council to relocate bison into tribal communities across the region.



# URBAN CONSERVATION FIELD TRIP

**PRESENTED BY COLLABORATIVE CONSERVATION CENTER**  
**LOCATION: MULTIPLE**

The urban conservation field trip explored how three organizations along the Front Range collaborate to achieve conservation outcomes within and around our communities. They began at the Gardens on Spring Creek to tour their grounds and learned about their work. From there, they met with City of Fort Collins Natural Areas staff at Kestrel Fields to discuss the city's efforts to protect land and expand public access. They closed at the High Plains Environmental Center, and explored their gardens and learned about their collaborative approach to conservation.



# BIG THOMPSON WATERSHED: WILDFIRE RESILIENCE AND RIVER RESTORATION

**PRESENTED BY PEAKS TO PEOPLE WATER FUND  
LOCATION: MACGREGOR RANCH IN ESTES PARK**

This field trip explores collaborative efforts in the Big Thompson watershed to reduce wildfire risk and increase watershed resilience. Participants will visit MacGregor Ranch in Estes Park to tour a multi-phase forest restoration project and a Low Tech Process Based River Restoration (LTPBR) site, which has already shown active beaver engagement on the recently placed structures. The day features perspectives from partners working across the watershed, including MacGregor Ranch, Larimer Conservation District, Estes Valley Watershed Coalition, Estes Valley Fire Protection District, Colorado State Forest Service, Peaks to People Water Fund, and CSU's Colorado Water Center.



# CONFLUENCE 2026 TESTIMONIALS

## **Crystal Medina, Collaboration Program Manager, New Mexico Forest and Watershed Restoration Institute**

“Confluence 2026 was a powerful reminder of the strength and value of the collaborative conservation community. As both an attendee and a member of the planning committee, I was grateful for the opportunity to reconnect with colleagues and friends from across the West (and beyond) while building new relationships with practitioners, researchers, students, and emerging leaders who share a commitment to healthier communities and the landscapes they call home. Throughout the gathering, people with diverse experiences, disciplines, and perspectives came together with a genuine willingness to learn from one another, creating an environment grounded in mutual respect, connection, and curiosity.

In many ways, the event embodied its theme, *The Future of Collaboration: The Power of Working Across Divides*, not only through the topics discussed but through the relationships and sense of camaraderie that emerged throughout the week. Beyond sharing research and project outcomes, Confluence created space for skill-building, reflection, and authentic conversations that strengthened both individual practice and our collective sense of community. The conference also provided valuable opportunities for researchers and practitioners to share insights, challenge assumptions, and explore how knowledge can be translated into meaningful action on the ground. I left feeling energized, grateful, and hopeful—not only because of the ideas exchanged, but because of the people who continue to invest their time, care, and creativity into strengthening this community and the practice of collaboration.”





**Travis Anklam, Collaborative Learning Program Director, Center for Natural Resources & Environmental Policy at the University of Montana**

“Confluence 2026 was the most meaningful opportunity I’ve had in years to connect with the community of practitioners leading stewardship work across the country. The centering of Indigenous voices, space for dialogue, and myriad ways to build and deepen relationships created a uniquely uplifting experience. Each session reminded me that we can’t do this work alone, and I left feeling connected, resourced, and inspired to continue learning and engaging across divides to support communities and landscapes across the West.”

**Zoe Bashkin, Indigenous Lands Program Resource Coordinator, Trees, Water & People**

“As we opened on day 1, I immediately felt a sense of relief when looking out at the crowd. The atmosphere was bright, exciting, and intimate; it felt like the space was built to be personal and bring people together. I was hugely impressed with how the agenda was built to include lots of time to move, transition topics, and talk to one another. This really kept interest and energy high all throughout the event. I got to meet so many people even when facilitating a breakout discussion or note taking; it really did feel like it was built to be a collaborative experience because each of us played a role in how the session or discussion went. The urban conservation field trip felt super relevant and exciting to learn about how urban conservation can be a collaborative nexus between neighbors, individuals, and municipal entities. I felt like the theme and agenda were very cohesive, which delivered the strong, overall message of building skills to be in better relationship with place and each other for successful conservation.”

**Jon Peterson, Director, Network for Landscape Conservation**

“Attending the 2026 Conference Conference provided a valuable opportunity to engage with conservation professionals, Tribal representatives, and researchers working toward shared environmental goals. As part of the Indigenous Engagement sub-committee for



the planning of the conference, and as a Diné (Navajo) woman, I was proud to contribute a unique perspective that is often overlooked in conservation spaces and conversations around land stewardship, climate resilience, and conservation planning. The conference reinforced the importance of ensuring Indigenous voices are included in decision-making processes that affect our lands, waters, and communities.

Events like this are essential because they create space for relationship-building, knowledge exchange, and collaborative problem-solving. They also strengthen the visibility and leadership of Indigenous people in conservation, helping bridge cultural knowledge and modern management approaches. The most valuable aspect of the event was the bridging of diverse experiences and world views that, I believe, will help us all move forward in our respective fields. The connections and insights gained through this conference will support future partnerships and contribute to more inclusive and effective conservation efforts. I was grateful for the opportunity to participate and to make new friends!"

### **Sydney Milan, Director, Upper Willamette Stewardship Network**

"Confluence 2026 was a wonderful experience that hit the right balance of learning, reflection, and community building. So much is required of us on a daily basis, it was invaluable to have the opportunity to step out of that grind and have a chance to learn and reflect on our collaborative work with amazing people from all over the county. I learned so much and met so many wonderful collaborators, I can't wait to go back in 2028."

### **Lindsay Riggs, Community Navigator Manager, Coalitions and Collaboratives (COCO)**

"More and more I've been thinking about what it means to steward our own individual human resource while advancing complex, challenging, and deeply important work in a highly uncertain context. Sometimes it feels as if we are caught in a vice of urgency: As the biodiversity and climate crises intensify, we are compelled to try to do as much as we can as quickly as possible, continually pouring more and more of ourselves into our work.



This is not quick and easy work, and it depends upon the talent and creativity of practitioners that are deeply committed to envisioning and building better futures for our lands, waters, and communities. How do we sustain such practitioners—our movement’s greatest asset—on a human level so that they can continue to do this work over the long term? I often think back to an especially poignant reflection a colleague shared over a year ago: How ironic, to be working to move past an extractive relationship and into a regenerative one with our landscapes, but to be doing so in a way that is so extractive of the people doing the work.

All of this was front of mind for me at Confluence, where I could faintly hear, as an undercurrent threading through many of the individual conversations I had, an appreciation for a sense of spaciousness that folks don’t often find in their professional spheres. Beyond the richness of content and discussion that Confluence offered up, it also carried an invitation to slow down, to connect more deeply with colleagues around a shared commitment to relational work. And this is what stood out to me most clearly, and what I cherished most deeply at Confluence: A sense of being nourished by the human connections that we found in stepping away from the immediacy of the day-to-day, and of being reminded that we collectively are a community that holds one another in love, care, and support.”

## FROM OUR TRAVEL FUND AWARDEES

### **Carly Payne**

“Confluence was wonderful, and I’m extremely grateful I was able to attend because of this scholarship. My job is unique and can sometimes feel lonesome despite its collaborative nature, but Confluence left me feeling like I had found my people. I’ve never been to a conference like this one, which gave me not only hope and inspiration, but also practical skills and ideas that are already helping me chart my future course and better engage in collaboration.”

# FROM OUR TRAVEL FUND AWARDEES

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## Qingyu Gan

“That was a really amazing experience to me, and I met lots of people who share the similar goals as mine. I was also really inspired by those meaningful and touching discussions, especially from indigenous people. All of those encouraged me to keep pursuing my goal in conservation and taught me how to better collaborate with different groups to maximize our efforts.”

## Amorina Lee-Martinez

“I have never attended an environmental conference that not only represented Indigenous leadership, but centered Indigenous teachings and perspectives to this extent. What I saw in Confluence 2026 is an example of what our future can look like, where relationality is the priority among the people and our relatives.

I still think about the Mother of the Forest and the story of how colonizers treated her. A stark example of how we have the choice to approach the natural world as a relative, not a trophy for the taking.”



# FROM OUR TRAVEL FUND AWARDEES

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## **Bethany Allen**

“I want to express my deepest gratitude for the opportunity to attend this amazing conference. It was exactly what I needed to recharge the capacity and energy I have been searching for. We are doing so much right now, and this experience completely inspired me. The phrase “relationships build at the speed of trust” really stuck with me as we think about how we build trust internally and externally. Moving forward, I am focused on building authentic, reciprocal relationships with Indigenous partners through language, food, ceremony, and full spectrum listening. This hit home deeply because I realized I haven’t had many opportunities to connect with Tribal and Indigenous communities in a way that felt truly authentic and reciprocal. Hearing how Indigenous languages speak of nature in the first person—as part of “us” rather than separate from us—has shifted my perspective on how we approach our work. It was also wonderful to be recognized by Martha Small for PCEC’s support of the Oral History Project, and to discuss different Co-management ideas with COCO’s team.

I was deeply inspired by the work of the Big Thompson Restoration, many conversations with Indigenous leaders, and projects and voices like Sacred Return. It actually made me wonder if we could raise funds to connect neighboring Indigenous students to a Bison Ceremony, and if local North Bridger Bison might host it. I also looked closely at Peaks to People’s modeling tool for prioritizing, and was able to offer the idea of water balance modeling work in MT that we use to prove impact. So many connections were made!

This is truly what I needed to remind me that taking care of the land and each other is a form of self-care. Thank you both so much.”

## **Sophie Pullen**

“Last week, I had the privilege of attending the 2026 Confluence Conference in Fort convened by the Center for Collaborative Conservation, Trees Water People, Strategic Crowd Conservation.

# FROM OUR TRAVEL FUND AWARDEES

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A huge, sincere thank you to each person who helped put this conference together Indigenous attendees and speakers for sharing your time, knowledge, perspective, and vulnerability.

Some Confluence highlights:

- Peer mentorship noodle & marshmallow activity (even though our group's structure was the first to fall... and fell dramatically). Anyone looking to learn more about mentorship best practices and how you can incorporate mentorship into your work or personal life, Crowd Conservation just finalized their Mentorship Toolkit.

- Buffalo Rematriation Panel, where we heard from Lewis TallBull with Denver Mountain Parks and The Sacred Return (Southern Cheyenne Tribe), Brandon Small with the Northern Cheyenne Tribe, and Torrey Davis with The Nature Conservancy on the cultural and ecological importance of buffalo, and the challenges and successes the panelists have seen with continuing to return buffalo to our western landscapes.

- Wednesday's Field Trip to MacGregor's Ranch in Estes Park, where we saw the amazing collaborative work of the Big Thompson Watershed Coalition, including a multi-part 400-acre Forest Health project. Additionally, we got to see successful process-based restoration in the form of 70 beaver dam analogs-where beavers returned to the site just days after the analogs were built!

It was really inspiring to learn about creative collaborative projects and solutions in Colorado, and throughout the US, in an environment that itself was so conducive to knowledge sharing, honest dialogue, reflection, and problem solving. I don't really know how to put it into words- but Confluence just had a warm and welcoming feel to it- so again, kudos to the planning committee.

It's a bummer that the next Confluence won't be for two years, but I highly recommend anyone doing collaborative conservation work to consider attending in 2028."



## INDIGENOUS TRAVEL FUND AWARDEES

### Luís Melendez, Program Coordinator, Centro Cultural Techantit

"Living in Los Angeles and participating in the Confluence Conference 2026 was essential for me to see how communities in other states practice stewardship and conservation. I was so happy to see the deliberate efforts made to incorporate Indigenous aspects into the conference. Bringing Indigenous wisdom into these talks is crucial and invaluable when working to preserve Mother Nature. I returned home inspired to improve my initiatives when collaborating with local parks and organizations to create vital green spaces in our urban settings."

## CONFLUENCE BY THE NUMBERS

125  
ATTENDEES

94%  
OF ATTENDEES  
RATED THE  
EVENT 4-5 OUT  
OF 5

>50%  
OF ATTENDEES'  
FIRST TIME

90%  
SAID THEY  
WOULD RETURN

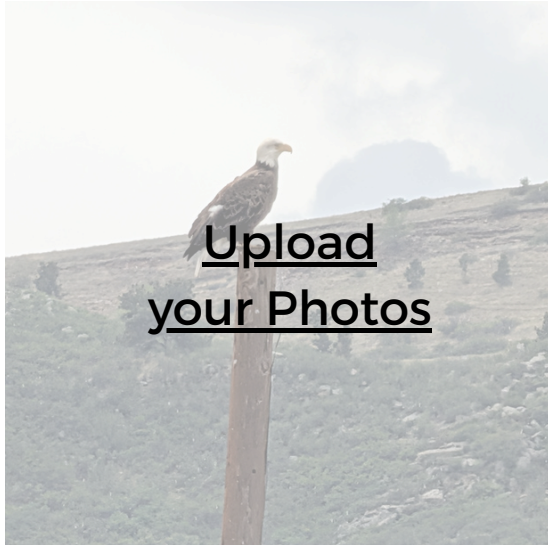
\$27,000  
RAISED IN TRAVEL  
SUPPORT

88%  
SAID CONFLUENCE  
GAVE THEM WHAT  
THEY CAME FOR

# TOOLS AND RESOURCES



[Session and Panel Notes](#)



[Upload your Photos](#)



[Mentorship Toolkit](#)

## DIRECTORY OF PARTICIPANTS

We had an incredible group participate in Confluence 2026!

**To learn more about who came, who you met, and who you want to reconnect with, check out the [Directory of Participants](#).**

If you think there are edits to be made in this directory, leave a comment on the document and email [conserve@colostate.edu](mailto:conserve@colostate.edu) so we can fix that for you.

# THANK YOU TO OUR CO-CONVENERS



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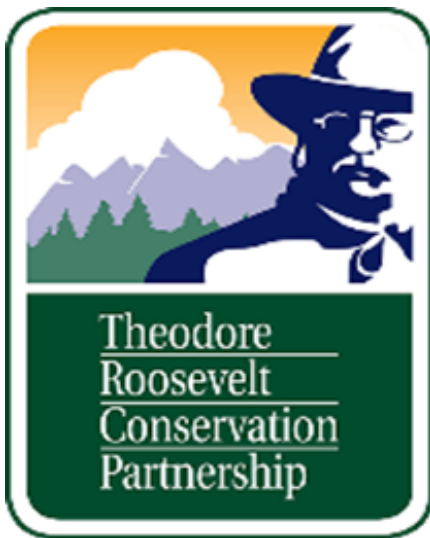


LEADERS: \$5,000 - \$9,999



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GUARANTORS: \$2,500 - \$4,999



GUARANTORS: \$2,500 - \$4,999



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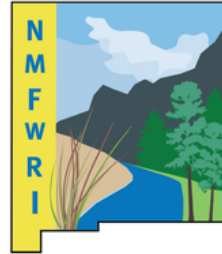
**4 KING'S ANVIL RANCH**

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