

EVERYONE NEEDS FRIENDS

Charlotte Overby

The National Conservation Lands have an extensive network of local and regionally based non-profit organizations looking out for them—groups that do things like maintain trails, restore habitat, guide school trips, support policy, and advocate for various units within the system. Led by volunteers or professional staff, these community “friends groups” have unique missions, distinct roles in the communities they are based in, and one critical shared feature: they speak up, and stand up, for the National Conservation Lands as a system.

Today this Friends Grassroots Network—established and sustained by the Conservation Lands Foundation, whose mission is to protect, restore, and expand the National Conservation Lands—is made up of just over 80 non-profit organizations. Some, like Grand Staircase Escalante Partners, were established by former or retired public lands managers who wanted to continue sharing their expertise with the public and help make the Bureau of Land Management’s (BLM’s) first national monument a resounding success. Others, like FORT Friends, formed when community members came together to push for recognition of an important place in US military history. Others are new organizations, like Native Land Institute, that lift up Indigenous people’s perspectives to influence how public lands are protected, managed, and viewed by the broader public. And still others—like Wild Montana, which has been in existence for 65 years—were founded long before Congress passed the law establishing the National Conservation Lands. All represent the human “heart and soul” of these magnificent and uniquely American public lands.

FORT FRIENDS: STEWARDS OF HISTORY AND NATURE

**Elyane Stefanick, California Program director,
Conservation Lands Foundation**

Located on the traditional lands of the Ohlone, Costanoan, and Esselen people, California’s Fort Ord in modern times has a rich history as a US Army installation. From World War I to the end of the

Cold War, over 1.5 million soldiers trained at Fort Ord. It housed the last stand of US Army war horses. During the Vietnam War, it was the leading training center and staging ground for deployment to Southeast Asia. Training activities came to an end at Fort Ord in 1994, when the base officially closed its gates and became part of US military history.

Designated as a national monument in 2012, Fort Ord today comprises 14,658 acres, 7,200 of which are open to the public. Immensely popular for its 86 miles of hiking, biking, and equestrian trails, the national monument provides an array of outdoor recreation opportunities

Exploring nature at Fort Ord National Monument, California. BOB WICK, BLM



for residents of Monterey and Santa Cruz Counties and visitors alike. At the heart of Fort Ord's designation, and what helps keep it a natural coastal treasure, is the non-profit Fort Ord Recreation Trails (FORT) Friends.

Led by a small group of volunteer trail enthusiasts, FORT Friends works with BLM to maintain trails and engage people living near the monument—especially youth—with their public lands. The group encourages healthy lifestyles, respectful recreation, volunteering, and stewardship of natural resources. For example, FORT Friends supports BLM's Junior Ranger program, providing third-grade students from Salinas Valley schools with supplies, food, and water to comfortably explore the outdoors and helping kids build a relationship with the monument that will thrive well into adulthood.

Through its partnership with the Community Bike Collective, FORT Friends has also provided mountain bikes and gear for several high school racing teams. Sharing a border with the city of Salinas, where over 80% of the residents are Hispanic or Latino (US Census Bureau 2024), FORT Friends works with BLM staff, local municipalities, and partners to co-lead hikes, group rides, trail maintenance days, and host the national Take-a-Kid Mountain Biking Day.

Fort Ord attracts nearly 900,000 visitors annually, making it the most highly visited BLM-managed National Monument in California (BLM 2023), and FORT Friends is woven into the fabric of that success.

PUBLIC LANDS, SHARED FUTURES: PROTECTING GRAND STAIRCASE-ESCALANTE FOR ALL

Ben Katz, associate program director, Conservation Lands Foundation
Designated in 1996 by President Bill Clinton, Grand Staircase-Escalante was the first national monument managed by BLM—a bold gesture aimed at conserving not just scenery, but deep-time stories embedded in the Earth. The monument is a natural archive, revealing 100 million years of life, death, and transformation—a living landscape. You do not enter Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument so much as you are invited into it—quietly, reverently. It is a landscape that requires humility. Here, the Earth is exposed, raw with memory, an open book of stone.

The Hopi, Zuni, Ute, Paiute, Diné (Navajo), and other Tribal Nations know this land not as wilderness, but as kin. The canyons hold ceremonial sites, migration routes, and living histories. Indigenous voices have too often been excluded from the management of the monument—but that is changing.

Protection of a place so vast and intricate takes more than policy. It takes people who listen to the land. That's where Grand Staircase Escalante Partners comes in. Formed by citizens drawn to the monument's mystery and meaning, Partners is a non-profit with its roots in both science and story. Its work is fieldwork, outreach, advocacy, and a love letter to the land.

“The Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument is a source of sustenance for the American people—even those who don't know of its existence,” says Jackie Grant, executive director of Grand Staircase Escalante Partners. “Public lands provide us all with seen and unseen benefits that range from the spiritual satisfaction of knowing undeveloped places exist to more practical benefits such as clean water, recreation, and firewood gathering.”

Partners' staff and volunteers support paleontologists hauling plaster-wrapped fossils across badlands, and botanists tracking rare desert wildflowers through spring runoff. They coordinate volunteer crews who rebuild

“An open book of stone”: Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument. [ASA BJORKLUND, CLF](#)



trails washed out by flash floods, and remove invasive plants. They partner with Tribal Nations to develop opportunities for co-stewardship on the monument and protection of crucial desert water sources. Partners' native plant seed collection program conserves native plants and contributes seeds that are critical for restoration after natural disasters.

Grand Staircase is not easily reached. Roads disappear into slickrock. Maps grow vague. But for those who enter, the reward is immeasurable: a direct encounter with wildness, with the unfinished business of the Earth, and with a protected landscape that reminds us just how small—and how deeply connected—we are.

BECOMING PART OF WILD MONTANA

John Todd, executive director, Wild Montana

In 2001, I ditched a week of undergraduate classes at the University of Montana to paddle through the 149-mile Upper Missouri River Breaks during a cold week in

November. Early that year, the Breaks made headlines after it was designated as a national monument. That fall, my brother mailed the folded and torn pages of an outdoor magazine that had a hundred words or so about this forlorn landscape full of stories and sky. He wrote two words across the top: "Let's go."

We left Missoula and drove through the night, dodging deer in our two old trucks grinding over a snowy pass. We slept on the side of the road, just shy of Fort Benton. That week, we had the river to ourselves. At night we fell asleep to the sound of coyotes. In the morning, we broke through the skim ice that formed along the shore to get out into the main current. We wandered between the sandstone cliffs to stretch our legs, spied muley bucks in sage flats at dusk, and drifted below bighorn sheep high above the river in the broken badlands.

That's the week I fell in love with Montana.

Wild Montana: Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument. BOB WICK, BLM



When I got back to Fort Benton to pick up my truck, I immediately asked for a job at the shop where I bought the beat-up canoe that I took down the river. I guided multi-day trips through the Breaks off and on for a dozen years. Now deep into middle age, I've clocked over 300 nights sleeping under the dark skies of the monument—and I still go back every year.

The Breaks is one of the few places along the 2,300-mile Missouri River that hasn't significantly changed since the last ice age. Instead of working as a guide, these days I find myself working as executive director of Wild Montana, defending this landscape from attempts to alter or rescind its protections, opening it up to privatization and industrial development.

Wild Montana is the state's oldest and largest conservation organization and has worked for over 60 years to stop dams, designate the Upper Missouri as a wild and scenic river, and eventually protect it as a 377,000-acre national monument.

Since 1958, Wild Montana has been uniting and mobilizing people across Montana, growing a conservation movement around a shared love of public land. We work from the ground up bringing people together around policies, proposals, and protections that defends public lands and

waters from degradation and irresponsible development. Our work safeguards wild places, secures habitat, and keeps headwaters running cold, clear, and connected.

A few thousand people float the Breaks every year and sleep perched above the river amid tipi rings, homesteads, and Lewis and Clark campsites, just like I did 25 years ago. Wild places need wild people—and building a movement to keep places like the monument just the way they are is the work of Wild Montana.

NATIVE LAND INSTITUTE

Romir Lahiri, associate program director, Conservation Lands Foundation, and Board of Directors vice-chair, Native Land Institute

Originally from Acoma Pueblo, Keegan King—founder and chief executive officer of Native Land Institute (NLI)—spent his childhood immersed in the landscapes surrounding his community, including the Malpais and Mount Taylor in New Mexico. These natural places were more than just a backdrop to his early years; they were a formative part of his identity. When his family later moved to Albuquerque, Keegan witnessed his mother's active role in efforts to protect Petroglyph National Monument from overdevelopment. Watching her and the incredible community leaders who rose up during that campaign left a lasting impression and helped shape his path as a lifelong advocate for the protection of sacred and traditional Indigenous lands.

El Malpais National Conservation Area, New Mexico. BOB WICK, BLM



Those early experiences inspired King to step into the conservation space. As he began his work, he noticed a troubling pattern: traditional conservation organizations often engaged with Tribes in a purely transactional way. Groups would reach out to Tribal communities for requests to sign-on to group letters, for photo opportunities to diversify their public image, or when campaigns had stalled and needed Indigenous voices to regain momentum. It became clear to Keegan that a new kind of organization was needed—one that would center Tribal voices and leadership, honor deep connections to the land, and uplift Indigenous-led conservation grounded in spiritual, traditional, and sacred values.

That vision became NLI, an organization dedicated to advancing economic, environmental, and social justice for Indigenous communities across the Southwest and beyond. As a connector and convener, NLI supports Tribes and Indigenous communities on a range of issues, empowering them to drive positive change from within. It has played a critical role in pursuing protection of public lands around the state of New Mexico by helping connect traditional friends groups to Indigenous communities, working to improve communication between those groups, with an ultimate goal to help Tribes take leadership roles in conservation efforts.

From taking Tribal leaders to Washington, DC, to meet members of Congress and Administration staff, to supporting comment-writing, communications, and participation in Resource Management Plan processes, and more, NLI fills an important role that helps center Indigenous voices in land protection efforts.

When it comes to who has a voice in protecting public lands, King thoughtfully states, “Integrating traditional

and Indigenous knowledge into conservation efforts and bringing Tribal leaders to the forefront of the campaigns to fight for their lands is critical. Including Tribes in these efforts isn’t just beneficial—it’s a moral responsibility.”

King emphasizes that Indigenous connections to land are not only historical, but living and on-going. These lands tie present and future generations to their ancestors. Whether through cultural practices, spiritual traditions, or recreation, these places tell the story that Tribes—the original stewards of the land—are still here. They have not been forgotten. They continue to care for, protect, and maintain deep relationships with public lands across the country.

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Charlotte Overby is CLF’s vice president of Conservation Field Programs, leading and supporting the field team to develop diverse and effective coalitions, strengthen grassroots voices, and empower partners to work at the local level toward globally significant conservation. Before joining CLF, she was with the Nevada Wilderness Project, Patagonia, and Missouri River Relief.



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