

ASPEN VALLEY LAND TRUST

2022 STRATEGIC CONSERVATION PLAN



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Photo courtesy of Robert J Ross

FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

WHICH FUTURE WILL WE CHOOSE?

Western Colorado. The words evoke snowcapped peaks, frosted fir trees, winding dirt roads, pastoral meadows – and more recently, skyrocketing housing costs, endless commutes, wildfires, drought, and contested water. Yes, all of this exists. The question is, which do we choose for our future?



For 55 years, thanks to the many ranchers, farmers, and conservation-minded landowners with whom we have had the good fortune to partner, Aspen Valley Land Trust has been protecting special places and connections to land.

So why a conservation plan now? **Studies show that land trusts with a conservation plan conserve twice as much land as those without – and right now, that is what is called for.** A thoughtful plan, one that considers data as well as community input, will guide our choices and create opportunities for the most effective and meaningful conservation.

Today, we face the compounding crises of climate change and loss of biodiversity. We also need to confront deep environmental and social injustices. Nature needs help. Local food systems need help. Our fragmented communities need help. And our children need hope for the future.

Fortunately, many of the best opportunities for addressing these intertwining issues exist on private land. Private land hosts many of the region’s richest soils, river bottomlands, wetlands, and key habitat connections. **Protecting this land is critical for allowing wildlife and plant communities to adapt to climate change and for providing our community clean air and water, nature, and local food.** Private land conservation also lends itself to being innovative, nimble, responsive, and proactive. Over the next few years AVLTL will develop new approaches, tools, and powerful partnerships to help get important work done and extend the benefits of conservation to everyone.

This plan describes an intentional and impactful approach to protecting land. Our priorities reflect two goals: **landscape-scale conservation** that protects the future of wildlife, plant communities, and agriculture, and **community-driven conservation** that addresses local needs for access to land and natural resources. Both are necessary to the future we all want to see.

If we take care of the land it will take care of us. Thank you for helping to create a future filled with trees, water, life, and hope for our children.

Suzanne Stephens, Executive Director

WHO WE ARE

Aspen Valley Land Trust is the only local, non-partisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to conserving land forever in the Roaring Fork and Colorado River valleys. Since 1967, we have been a trusted community-supported partner helping to protect the health of both our natural and human communities. **It is time to increase our impact.**

MISSION

Aspen Valley Land Trust protects the open space and special places of the Roaring Fork and middle Colorado River valleys for wildlife, agriculture, and community forever.

VISION

Aspen Valley Land Trust seeks a future where land, wildlife, and people flourish together, and where land is a treasure to be passed on forever.

VALUES

We believe that the following values are core to effective and inclusive conservation for the benefit of the lives and future health of our region:

Respect **Commitment** **Community** **Resilience** **Trust**



OUR REGION

THE PLACE

Aspen Valley Land Trust serves the Roaring Fork and middle Colorado River valleys from Independence Pass to the Roan Cliffs in De Beque. This area covers 2.1 million acres (approximately 3,350 square miles) from the Continental Divide of the Rocky Mountains to the eastern edge of the Colorado Plateau. Generally, public land occupies the higher elevations and peaks and private land covers the lower elevations and valleys. The valley bottoms and lower elevations are often the most rich and productive for both wildlife and humans; they are also the most highly threatened by growth and development pressure. Increasing temperatures, drought, flooding, and fires threaten communities and unique and vulnerable ecosystems throughout this region.

LEGEND

- AVLT Protected Land
- BLM Land
- USFS Land
- Local/State Land
- Other Conserved Land
- AVLT Service Area
- Rivers/Creeks

THE PEOPLE

AVLT is in the ancestral homeland of the Ute Indians, who call themselves Nuche, meaning the People. The Yamparka and Parianuc (White River) Utes were forcibly removed from this part of Colorado in 1881 and placed on the Uintah and Ouray Reservation in Utah.

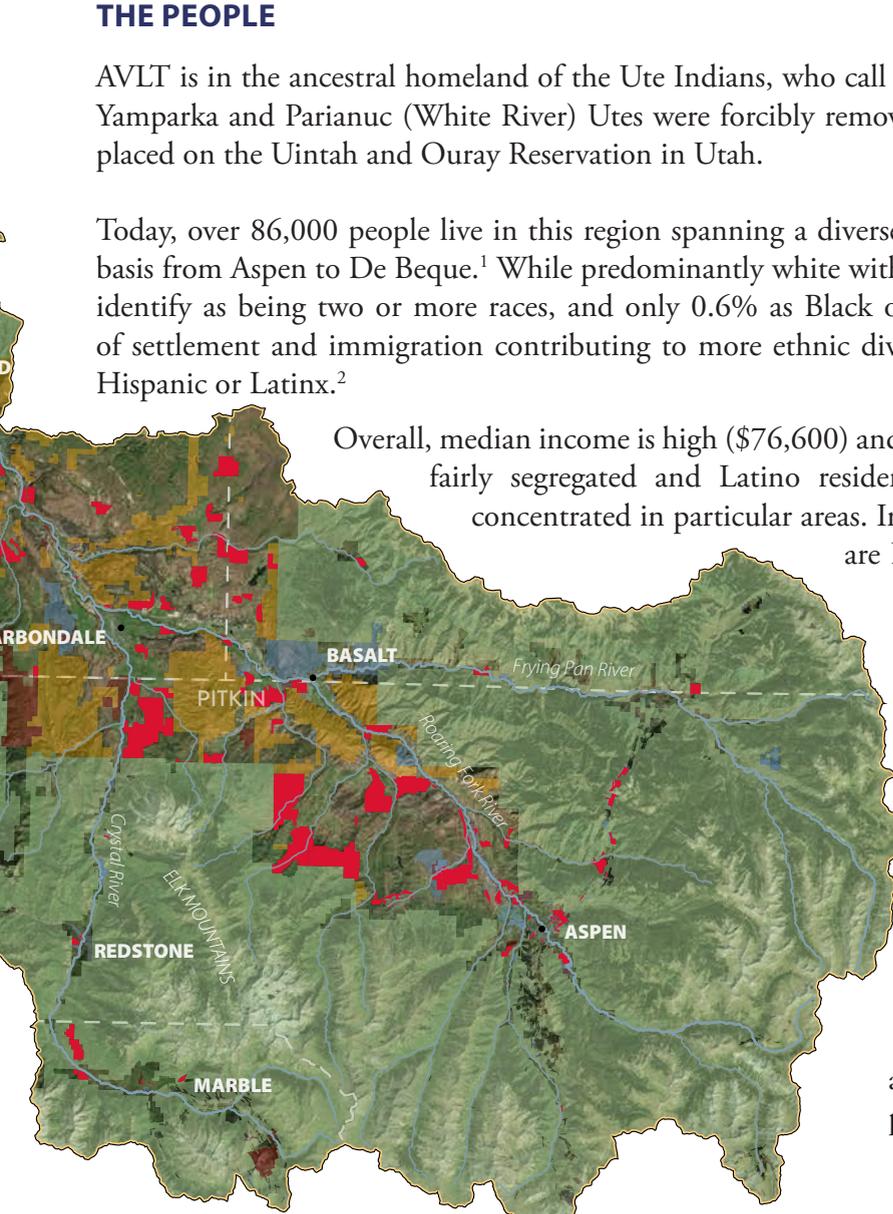
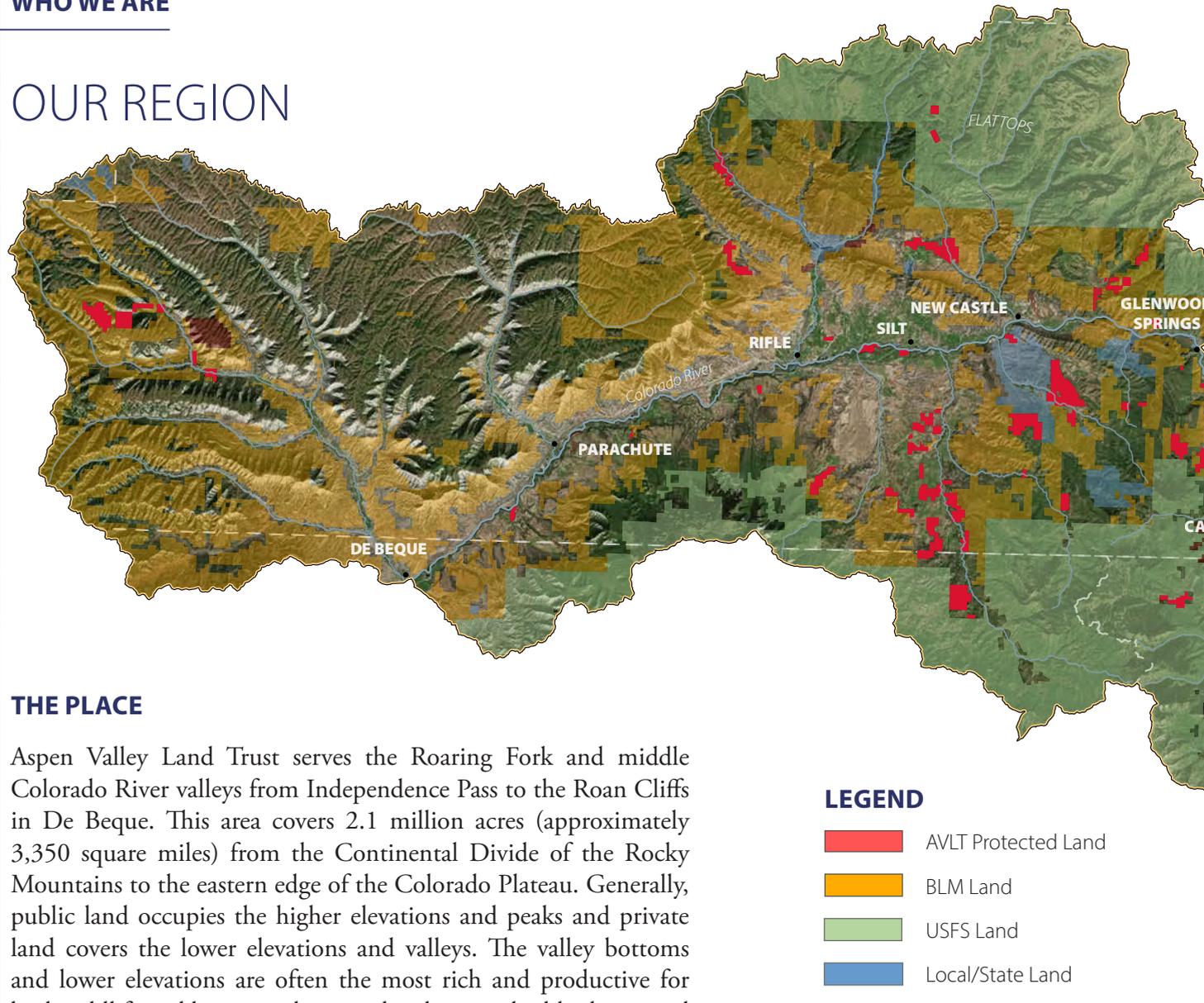
Today, over 86,000 people live in this region spanning a diverse cultural, socioeconomic, and demographic basis from Aspen to De Beque.¹ While predominantly white with little racial diversity (only 11% of residents identify as being two or more races, and only 0.6% as Black or Native American), there is a long history of settlement and immigration contributing to more ethnic diversity – nearly 25% of residents identify as Hispanic or Latinx.²

Overall, median income is high (\$76,600) and the poverty rate is low (8.5%). The region is fairly segregated and Latino residents and low-income residents tend to be concentrated in particular areas. In some localized areas, over 72% of residents are Hispanic and/or Latino, and others have no Hispanic and/or Latino residents. Median income is less than \$38,000 and the poverty rate is over 36% in some areas, while in other areas the median income is over \$129,000 with no residents living below the poverty line.

The local economy is dominated by outdoor recreation, agriculture, natural resource extraction, and real estate development, including residential, second home, commercial, and industrial development, which is accelerating in many areas. This is filling in the “spaces between places” that make each community unique.

¹ US Census Data based on 2019 American Community Survey.
² Localized area = Census block group. There are 54 Census block groups in this region with an average population of 1,600 each.

LAND OWNERSHIP IN AVLT REGION



WHO WE ARE

5-YEAR AVLT GOALS

AVLT's organizational goals were developed through our 2020-2024 Strategic Plan:

PROTECT

our special places and unique landscapes to ensure they remain forever vital for wildlife and community.

STEWARD

conserved lands to be resilient and beneficial for future generations.

ENGAGE

diverse communities on the land to inspire understanding of and support for nature and conservation.

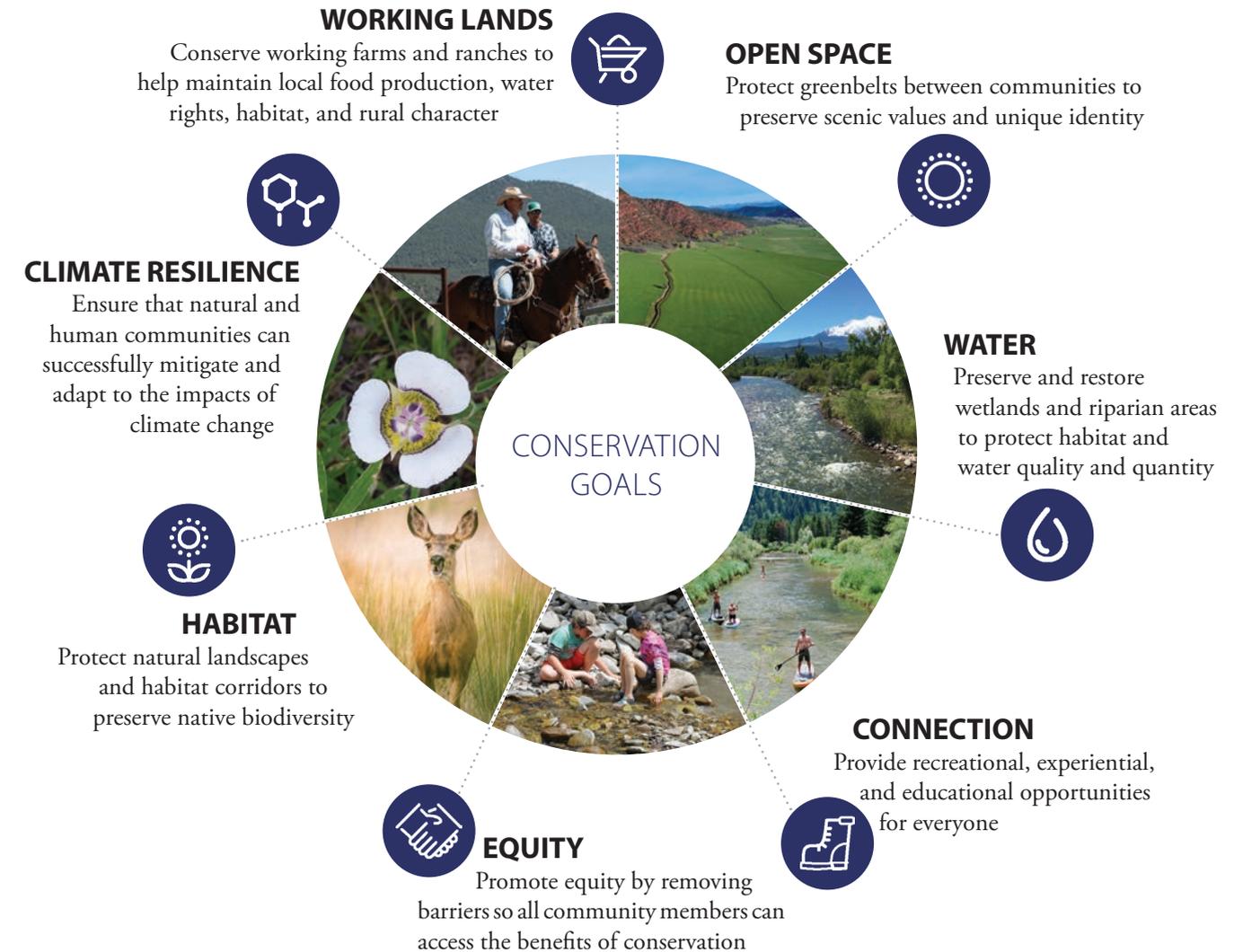
COMMIT

to building an organization capable of fulfilling its mission in perpetuity and strengthening conservation for the benefit of our diverse community, forever.



10-YEAR CONSERVATION GOALS

Below are the goals for AVLT's conservation work over the next 10 years. These are based on the best available science, AVLT's vision, community engagement, and partner expertise.



COMMUNITY-DRIVEN CONSERVATION SUCCESS

SILT RIVER PRESERVE
A protected, ongoing project with the Town of Silt for the benefit of wildlife, local agriculture, and community. The preserve is also used to train youth in sustainable agriculture.



SILT
132 acres
1 project

Community-driven conservation projects are generally close to where people live and help connect people to nature, agriculture, and each other. By understanding and prioritizing the needs of underrepresented and underserved residents, community-driven conservation can help remove barriers and expand equitable access to parks, trails, and local food.

33

miles of public trails

10

public parks

5

properties provide community agriculture

8

properties provide conservation programs

45

properties provide public access

LAND AND WATER PROTECTION SUCCESS

Private land protection is critical to landscape-scale conservation, which seeks to connect large, unfragmented landscapes for wildlife, migration corridors, and agriculture. AVLT has collaborated with landowners and partners since 1967 to conserve 69 square miles of land (roughly the distance from Aspen to Rifle one mile wide), which includes:

45,000+

acres conserved

103+

miles of river and stream frontage

1,500+

acres of wetlands

30,000+

acres of deer and elk winter range

7,000+

acres of irrigated ag land and connected water rights

COLORADO RIVER

RED HILL RECREATION AREA

The forever protected entrance to Carbondale with new trail connections to Red Hill, new parking areas, and improved public safety.



CARBONDALE

221 acres
2 projects

COFFMAN RANCH

Rock Bottom Ranch

BASALT

1,471 acres
7 projects

Wheatley Gulch

NORTH STAR PRESERVE



Cozy Point Ranch

REDSTONE

17 acres
2 projects

REDSTONE COKE OVENS



SNOWMASS VILLAGE AND ASPEN

42 projects
4,595 acres

CHAPIN WRIGHT MARBLE BASECAMP

A unique outdoor education wilderness retreat for local youth that aims to make inspiring outdoor experiences accessible, safe, and free for local schools and children of all backgrounds.



CRYSTAL RIVER

MARBLE

51 acres
3 projects

THE CASE FOR CONSERVATION

The lands and waters of the Roaring Fork and middle Colorado River valleys are vital – and under threat. In the face of development pressure, loss of biodiversity, and climate change, it is more urgent than ever that we protect the region’s most ecologically important and culturally significant places. **Private land conservation is critically important to achieving these goals.** And as our communities change and grow, we also need to ensure that everyone, especially community members who have traditionally been underserved, have access to parks, trails, and nature.

This plan will increase AVLT’s reach and effectiveness through:

1. Sharing and implementing our conservation goals and measuring how well potential projects meet those goals.
2. Creating an evolving, adaptable process for identifying strategic priorities based on scientific data and community needs.

This plan will ensure that AVLT’s work is as effective as possible by:

- **A Vision for the Future.** Creating a vision of conservation success for the next 10 years and beyond that highlights the importance of private land conservation and connecting communities to nature.
- **Landscape-Scale Conservation.** Using a science-based approach that combines data with partner expertise to select projects with an overall focus on increasing climate resilience, habitat and agricultural connectivity, and biodiversity.
- **Community-Driven Conservation.** Identifying ways conservation can help solve problems and address community needs with a focus on equity and increasing access to land for the community members that need them most.
- **Partnering for Good.** Fostering enduring partnerships and collaborations with private landowners, local nonprofits, governments, and land management agencies who all play important roles in conservation.



KEY DEFINITIONS

CONSERVATION

The active process of protecting and managing land for the future. Not only conservation easements and land acquisition, but proactive adaptive management including restoration and long-term stewardship.

COMMUNITY-DRIVEN CONSERVATION

Understanding and equitably meeting the needs of a community through land conservation. Projects are typically close to towns and help connect people to nature, agriculture, and one another.

EQUITY

Everyone has access to the resources they need to thrive. Working toward equity means acknowledging that not everyone has access to the same resources, addressing the discrimination and disinvestment that are the root causes of disparities, and working to eliminate barriers and provide increased support to those who have been most disadvantaged.

CLIMATE RESILIENCE

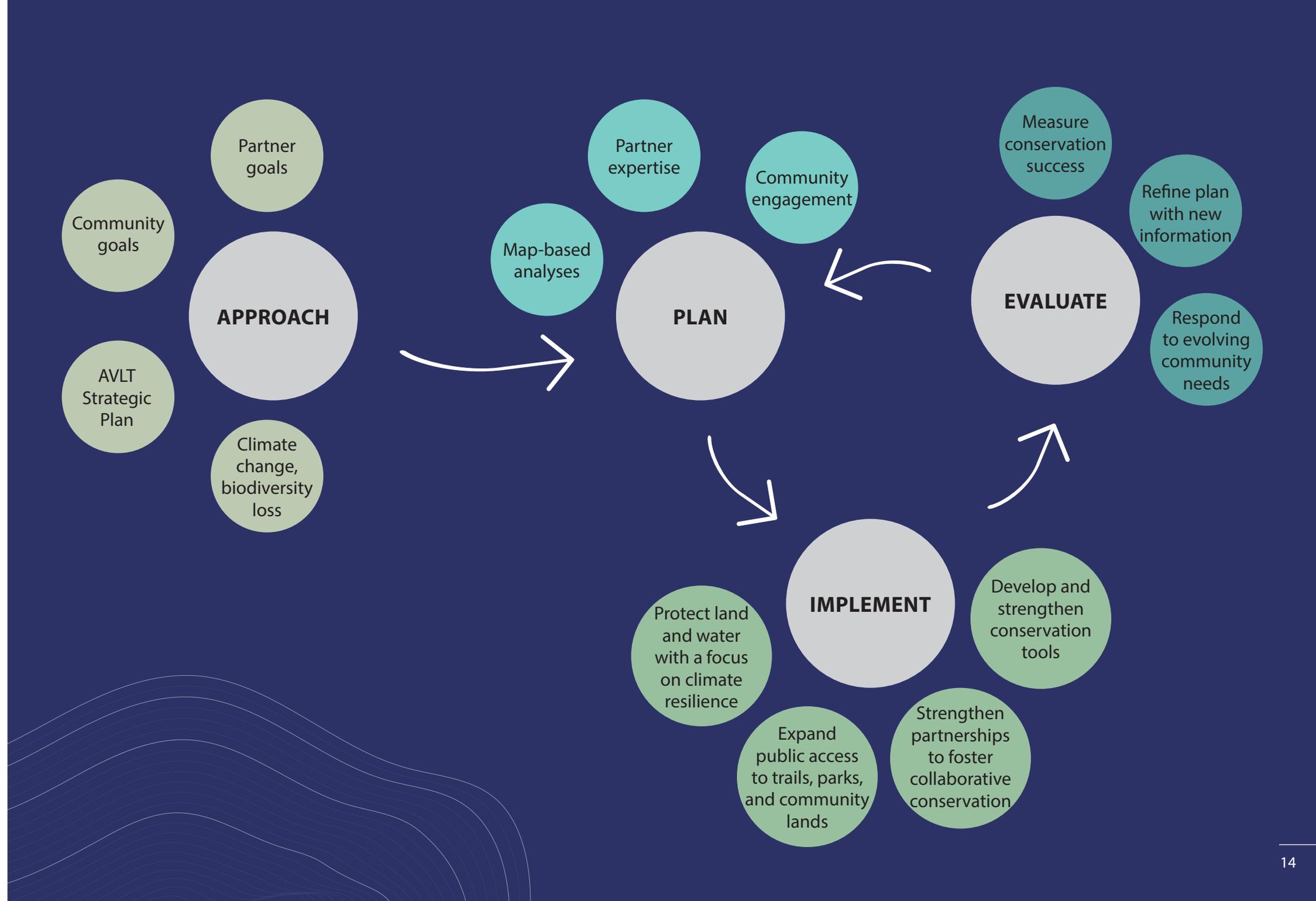
Resilient natural and human communities are able to bounce back from disturbances without losing their essential structure or functions. Resilient human communities have the ability to recover from adversity with social connections intact, vulnerable community members protected, and adaptable economies. Key parts of ecological resilience include high levels of biodiversity and intact processes such as natural fire regimes, carbon storage, habitat connectivity, and groundwater recharge. Ecological resilience is critical to human communities' resilience.

APPROACH

This Strategic Conservation Plan brings together community engagement and data-driven map-based (GIS) analysis to establish conservation priorities and goals. **This is not intended to be a static plan, but rather to provide measurable objectives and an adaptable approach that ensures AVLT's conservation work is as effective and meaningful as possible in the future.**

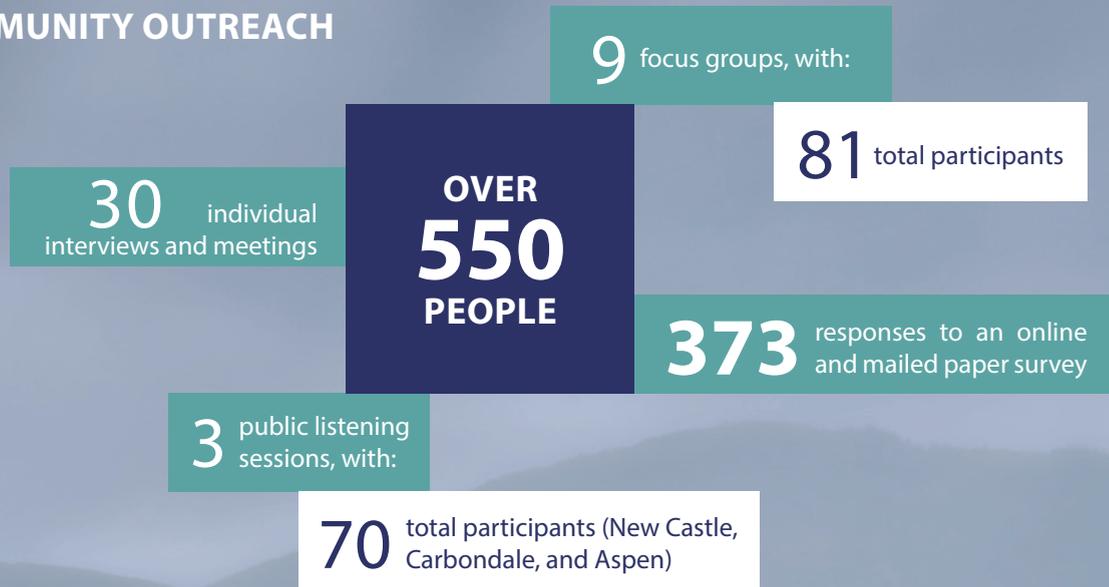
What it is not: This plan is NOT meant to identify or target specific parcels of land, but rather to provide a system for evaluating conservation opportunities. AVLT is a non-governmental organization that works with landowners and partners on a voluntary and collaborative basis to create conservation successes.

AVLT respects private property rights, relies on landowners to meet these goals, and believes that managers and owners of working farms and ranches can be the best stewards of their lands. We support voluntary, incentive-based conservation in partnership with willing landowners.



COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

2019 COMMUNITY OUTREACH



2020-2021 TARGETED DISCUSSIONS



KEY FINDINGS FROM COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Protecting as much high-quality land as possible for agriculture and wildlife is paramount. There was a strong demand for more of the work AVLT has always done as the only local land conservation nonprofit.

Improving climate resilience and protecting biodiversity is critical. Strategic conservation can play a major role in promoting climate resilience. This includes protecting habitat that allows native species to adapt to climate change and protecting local communities from the risks of fires, floods, and drought.

Lack of affordable housing is a huge concern that needs to be addressed alongside conservation. Concerns about housing affordability came up in engagement with all interviewees. Many connected these challenges to larger issues with economic disparities. Many municipalities see conservation as playing an important role in encouraging in-fill development and appropriate siting for new housing. There could also be a role for AVLT in helping to support the creation of a local community land trust.

Preserving small-town character and open space around cities and towns helps maintain a strong sense of community. Many interviewees noted the key role that conservation can play in protecting open spaces between existing cities and towns to limit sprawl and maintain distinct community character.

AVLT is not strongly identified with community-driven conservation work now, and there are many opportunities to expand our work in ways that center justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion. Service providers interviewed all expressed interest in working with AVLT to connect community members to free outdoor education and recreation opportunities. In addition, understanding the Indigenous history of local land and working to engage with members of displaced Indigenous communities is an important aspect of AVLT's overall commitment to justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion.

Language barriers for Latino community members negatively impact access to and comfort with outdoor learning and recreational opportunities. While providing translation and materials in Spanish is an important first step in improving accessibility, interviewees emphasized the importance of deeper community engagement and having racially-diverse staff and board members as well.

There is a demand for expanding trails and in-town parks. Participants expressed strong interest in more close-to-home parks, trails, and river access. Recreation intensity is increasing throughout the region, and representatives from Colorado Parks & Wildlife expressed serious concern about the impacts of recreation on wildlife habitat and highlighted the need for a balanced approach with public access.

LANDSCAPE-SCALE MAP-BASED ANALYSIS

A significant amount of data have been combined for this plan. Landscape-scale mapping is organized into categories based on AVLT’s top identified conservation goals, including:

- Agricultural lands
- Biodiversity
- Proximity to protected land
- Riparian and wetland areas
- Wildlife habitat connectivity

Use of dynamic data, or constant intake of new or evolving information, is also included in assessing conservation priority levels.

CLIMATE-SMART CONSERVATION PLANNING

Each of the above landscape-scale data categories are important to increasing the region’s resilience to climate change. For example, large mammal species native to Colorado, such as mule deer and elk, use a wide variety of habitats and move from higher to lower elevations in the winter. As a result, conserving large mammal habitat benefits many other species. **Maintaining ecological connectivity between high and low elevations is also a key element in ensuring climate resilience.**

Approach for climate-smart conservation planning¹ includes protecting:

- Current representative patterns of biodiversity
- Large, intact natural landscapes
- Sustaining, and enhancing ecological connectivity
- Sustaining, and managing land for ecological processes and ecosystem functions
- Habitat patches at edges of species’ ranges and future habitat locations
- Climate resilient areas (areas least likely to undergo rapid climate-induced changes)
- Diverse topographical regions

¹Integrating Climate Adaptation into Land Conservation: A Climate-Smart Framework for Land Trusts (Point Blue Conservation Science, 2020).

INDIVIDUAL PRIORITY ANALYSES

The below samples of maps are used to identify conservation priorities within an individual category. This information helps AVLT evaluate and understand an areas conservation potential.



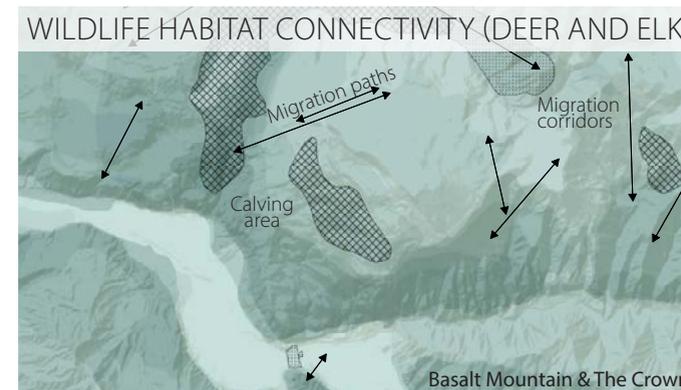
Priority Level

Data source: Natural Resources Conservation Service, Colorado Department of Water Resources



Priority Level

Data source: Colorado Natural Heritage Program, Colorado Parks & Wildlife, US Geological Survey



Priority Level

Data source: Colorado Parks & Wildlife



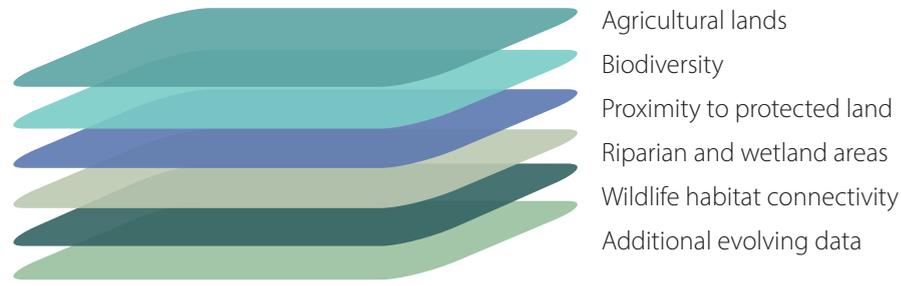
Priority Level

Data source: US Fish & Wildlife Service, Colorado Parks and Wildlife, Colorado Natural Heritage Program

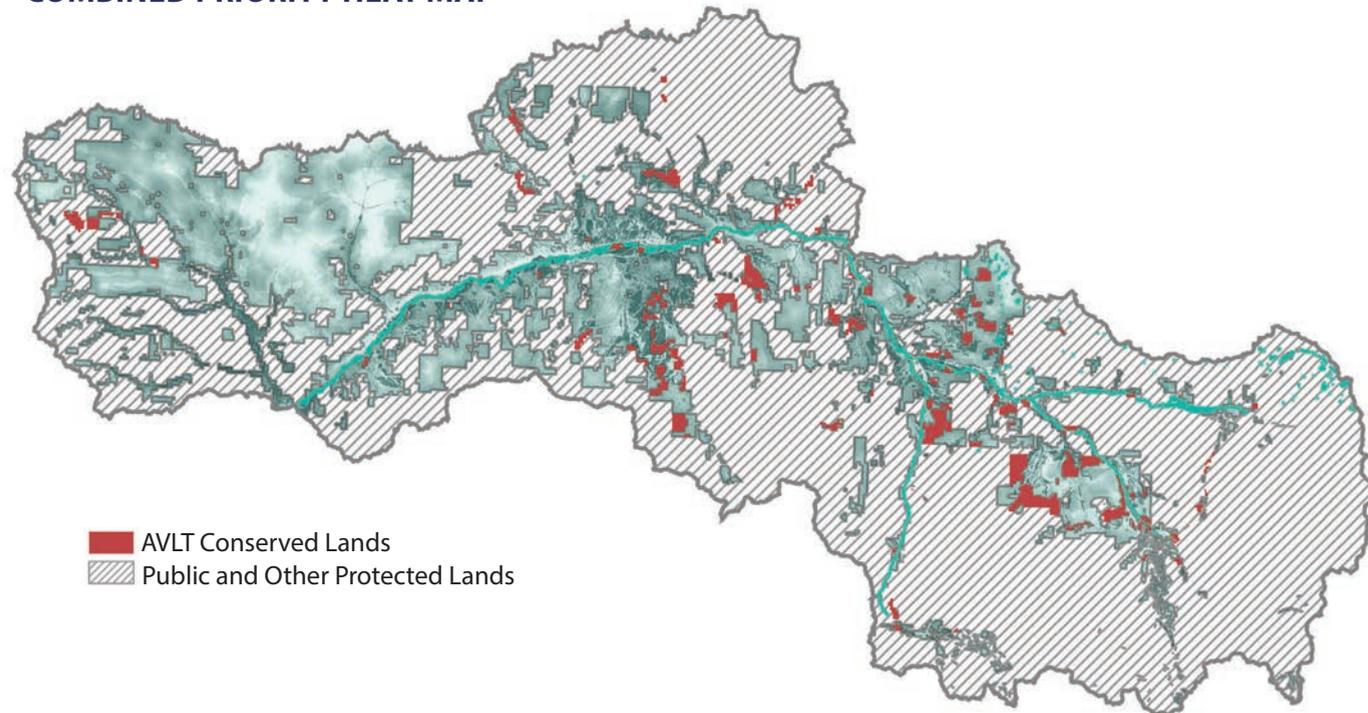


CONSERVATION PRIORITIES

This sample map combines conservation goals to help AVLT assess conservation potential in our region. Map-based analysis is designed to be dynamic and incorporate new information as it becomes available.



COMBINED PRIORITY HEAT MAP



MAP-BASED PARK DATA ASSESSMENT

The Trust for Public Land's ParkServe program generates a 10-minute walk service area or "walkshed" for all the existing parks in local cities and towns. A person who lives in one of these 10-minute walksheds is considered to have good close-to-home park access. All populated areas that fall outside of a 10-minute walkshed are assigned a level of park need based on a weighted calculation of three demographic variables: population density, density of children age 19 and younger, and density of households with income less than 75% of the regional median household income.

This data and approach will help AVLT assess high priority areas for community conservation projects.

2030 CONSERVATION OBJECTIVES

Strategically protect more land with a focus on climate resilience

- Double our conservation impact by protecting an additional 40,000 to 50,000 acres of priority private lands using the approach developed.
- Protect an additional 10 miles of critical river and stream frontage.
- Create new and strengthen existing tools for conservation and land stewardship.



Expand well-designed public access to trails, parks, and other protected land with a focus on equity

- Help protect and enhance access to trails in 3 to 5 high-need areas.
- Help provide and protect park access in 3 to 5 high-need areas.
- Create 5 additional miles of public trails.

Strengthen partnerships with municipalities and public agencies to foster collaborative conservation

- Share mapping (GIS) conservation data with partners.
- Hold annual meetings with regional representatives from Colorado Parks and Wildlife and other conservation partners.
- Hold annual conversations with representatives from towns and counties.
- Identify future opportunities for state and local public financing.



Strengthen partnerships and collaboration with community groups to expand opportunities for underserved residents, especially youth, to connect with nature

- Establish and activate an “ambassador land” to serve as an asset for the public, especially underserved community members, to engage hands-on with conservation, stewardship, habitat restoration, and education.
- Establish formal partnerships with at least two community groups to collaborate on programming and provide space for youth to connect to nature.
- Facilitate use of AVLT lands like Chapin Wright Marble Basecamp and Coffman Ranch to help develop other sites to provide outdoor education opportunities to an average of 5 schools and 1-3 youth programs annually – with a focus on schools with the highest number of low-income students.
- Partner with community groups that work with underserved community members to provide 3-5 additional engagement opportunities per year on conserved properties.
 - Collaborate on programs that annually serve at least 300 youth, with a focus on low-income and Latino communities.
- Provide bilingual signage, wayfinding, and all basic materials related to outdoor recreation and programming.
- Work with community farms and nonprofits to provide community-centered programming at the Silt River Preserve and other conserved land.

Evaluate success and adapt

- Commit to ongoing community engagement that reduces barriers to participation and creates safe, meaningful, and fun ways Latino and underserved community members can provide input.
- Conduct bilingual outreach and work with schools and community-based nonprofits to identify partnerships and uses for new “ambassador land” and community-accessible lands.



PROJECT SELECTION APPROACH

This selection approach is focused on private land conservation projects but can also be applied to restoration, public access, park activation, or education projects as well. **This approach can be used to prioritize landscape-scale or community-driven conservation projects.** Community-driven projects are likely to be smaller and involve additional public engagement to determine how to best partner with community members.

The benefits of a project are determined by the value of the resources that are protected, the risks to those resources, and the needs of community members who would be served by the project. This approach builds on scientific data and community engagement to incorporate a stronger focus on conservation that promotes climate resilience and furthers equity in the community.

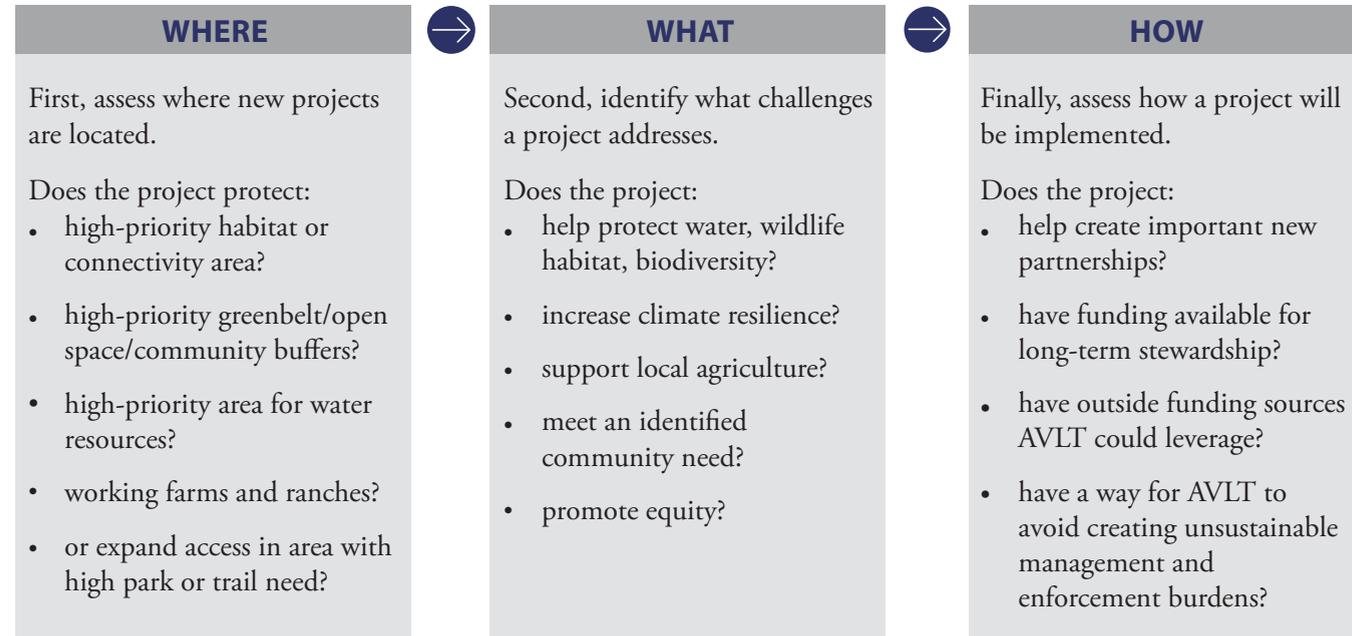
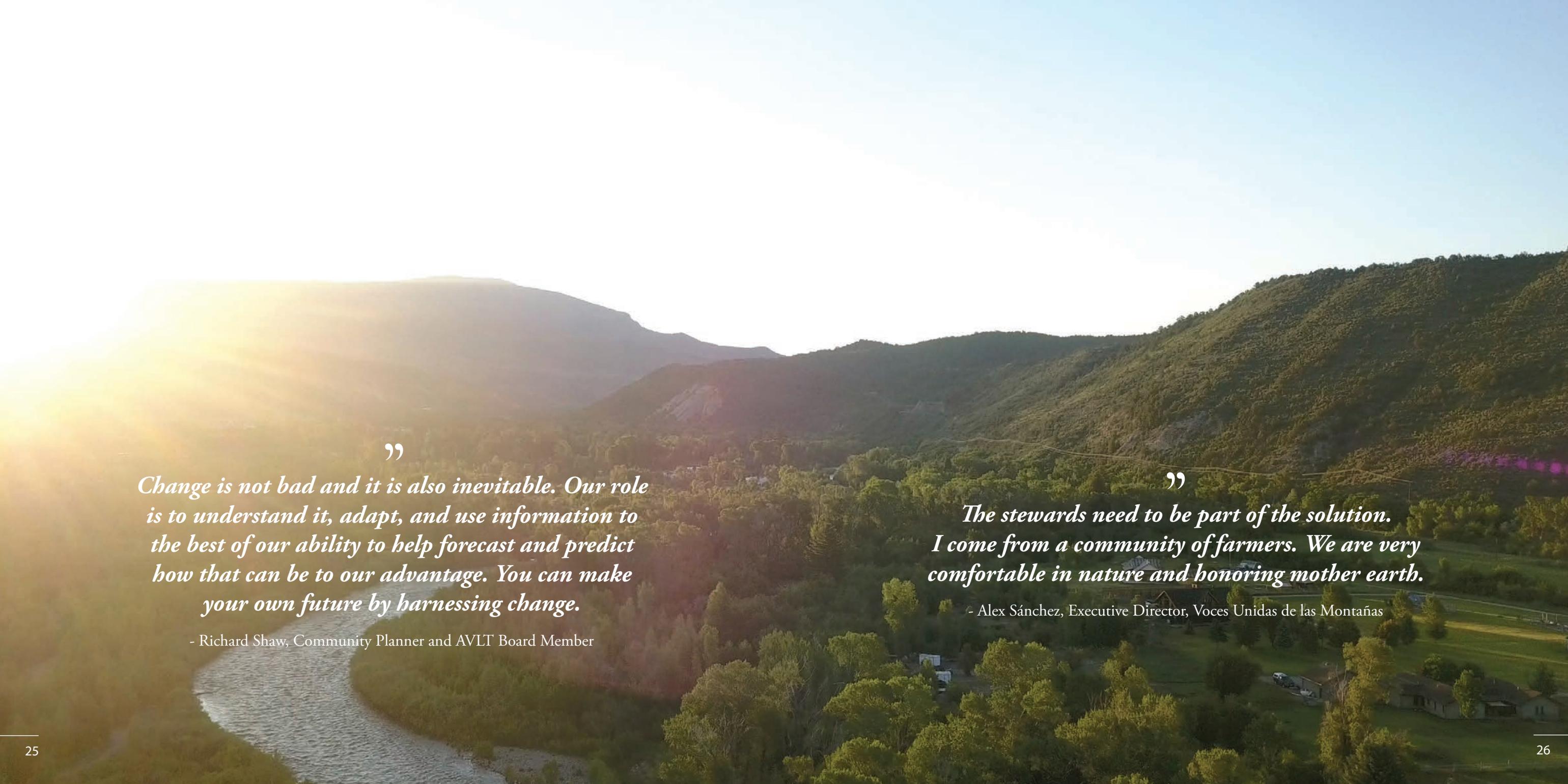


Photo courtesy of Robert J Ross



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Change is not bad and it is also inevitable. Our role is to understand it, adapt, and use information to the best of our ability to help forecast and predict how that can be to our advantage. You can make your own future by harnessing change.

- Richard Shaw, Community Planner and AVL T Board Member

”

The stewards need to be part of the solution. I come from a community of farmers. We are very comfortable in nature and honoring mother earth.

- Alex Sánchez, Executive Director, Voces Unidas de las Montañas

YOUR INVITATION

YOUR ROLE IN THIS PLAN

As a community-supported conservation organization, people like you have helped Aspen Valley Land Trust conserve over 69 square miles of land in Western Colorado since 1967. With this Strategic Conservation Plan and with your support, we can improve climate resilience and protect important wildlife habitat, biodiversity, open space, water, and working lands, protecting quality of life for all in the community. We can also help create more community connections to the land for the benefit of all.

Together, we can create the future you want to see for these valleys.

YOU ARE INVITED TO:

- Share your ideas and suggestions
- Become an AVLT supporter or Sustaining Member
- Volunteer with us
- Consider conserving your land
- Learn more! Visit avlt.org/strategic-conservation to check out links, resources, and updated data

CONTACT US

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avlt@avlt.org



Photo courtesy of Henry Fraczek

THANK YOU, INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

JUSTICE, EQUITY, DIVERSITY, AND INCLUSION INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

Aspen Youth Center (Roaring Fork Valley, Aspen to Parachute): Michaela Idhammer-Ketpura

English in Action (Roaring Fork Valley): Lara Beaulieu

Glenwood Springs Historical Society, Indigenous Awareness: Bill Kight

Madres en Acción (Rifle/Parachute): Bertha Lopez

MANAUS: Sydney Schalit and Jon Fox-Rubin

Montezuma Land Conservancy: Travis Custer

Mountain Voices Project (Garfield, Eagle, and Pitkin Counties): Alice Steindler

Stepping Stones (Roaring Fork Valley): Kyle Crawley

Valley Settlement (Garfield, Eagle, and Pitkin Counties): Sally Boughton

Voces Unidas de las Montañas (Garfield, Eagle, and Pitkin Counties): Alex Sánchez

Wilderness Workshop/Defiende Nuestra Tierra: Beatriz Soto

MUNICIPAL AND AGENCY INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

Aspen: Ben Anderson, Principal Long Range Planner

Basalt: Susan Philp, Planning Director; James Lindt, Assistant Planning Director; Ryan Mahoney, Town Manager

Carbondale: Janet Buck, Director of Planning

Colorado Natural Heritage Program: Numerous conversations with staff throughout planning process

Colorado Parks and Wildlife (Region 7): Kirk Oldham, Area Wildlife Manager

Colorado Parks and Wildlife (Region 8): Matt Yamashita, Area Wildlife Manager

Eagle County Open Space: Katherine King, Director

Garfield County: Sheryl Bower, Community Development

Glenwood Springs: Gretchen Rice-Hill, Assistant Economic/Community Development Director; Jennifer Ooton, Assistant City Manager, Economic & Community Development

New Castle: Dave Reynolds, Town Administrator; Paul Smith, Town Planner

Pitkin County: Liza Mitchell, Ecologist/Environmental Planner; Carly Klein, OST Senior Planner; Ellen Sassano, Long Range Planner; Cindy Houben, Community Development Director; Dale Will, OST Acquisition Director; Jessie Young, OST Community Outreach

Rifle: Scott Hahn, City Manager; Nathan Lindquist, Planning Director & Assistant City Manager

Silt: Jeff Layman, Town Manager

Snowmass Village: Dave Shinneman, Community Development Director; Clint Kinney, Town Manager; Andy Worline, Director of Parks, Recreation, and Trails; Starr Jamison, Parks and Trails Manager

University of Colorado Boulder (Cooperative Institute for Research in Environmental Sciences): Imtiaz Rangwala, Research Scientist

USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service: Stephen Jaouen, Resource Team Lead District Conservationist; Glenwood Springs Field Office; Emily Van Buskirk



Photo courtesy of Robert J. Ross



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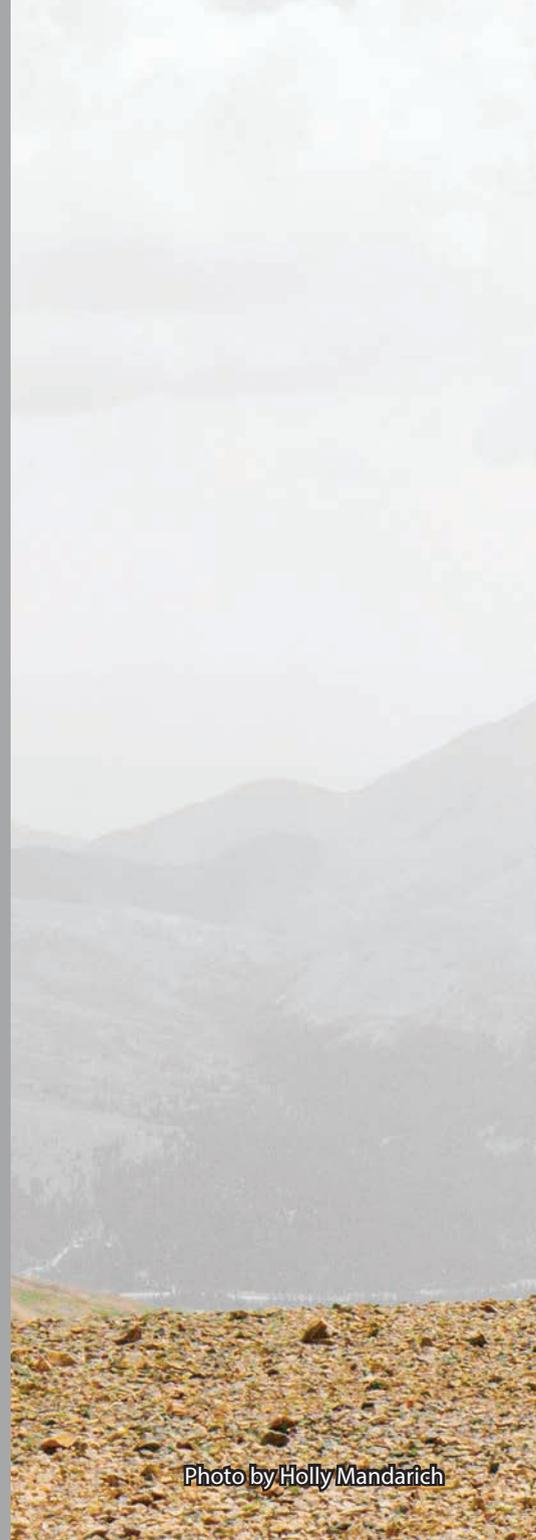


Photo by Holly Mandarich