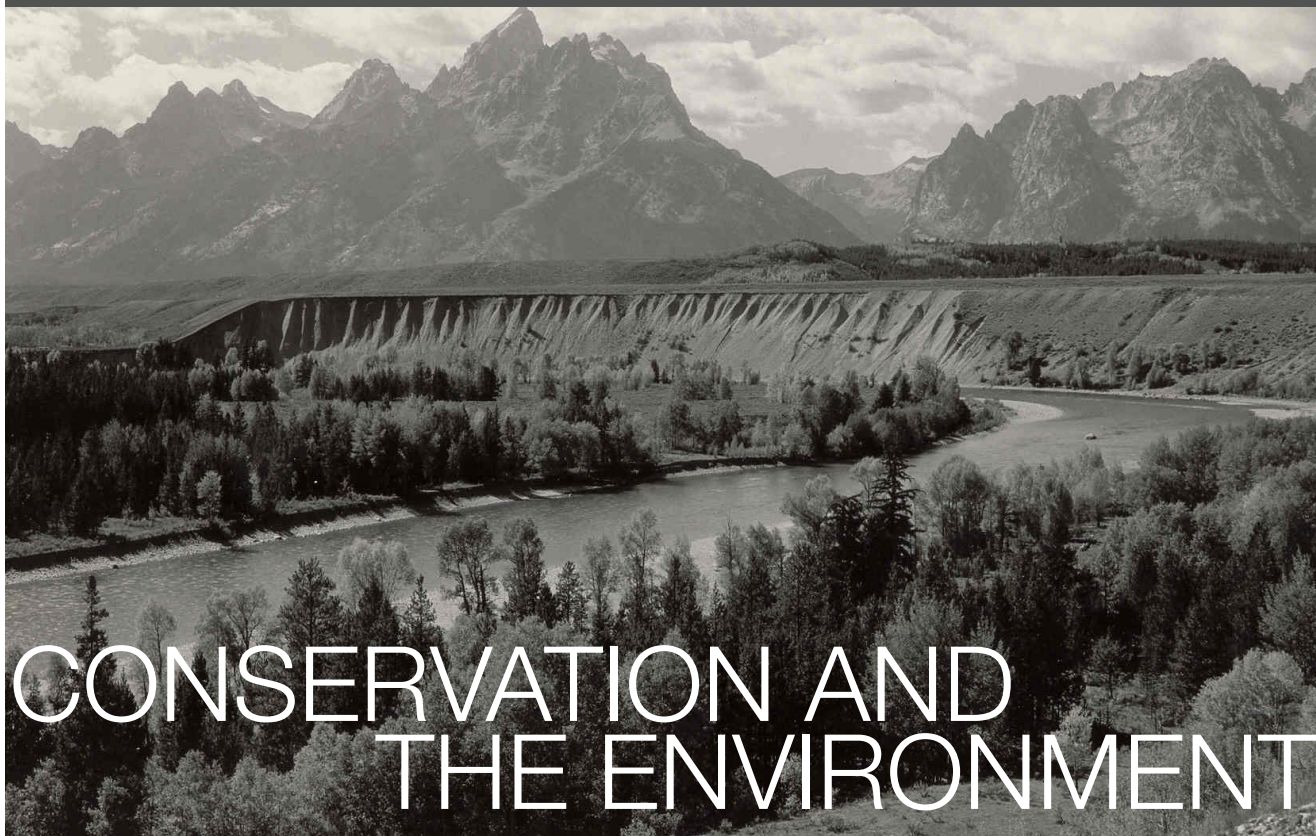




Rockefeller  
Brothers Fund

**75 YEARS**  
1940–2015

of Engaged Philanthropy



Grand Teton National Park, Wyoming. Rockefeller Archive Center

**C**ONCERN for the environment has shaped the Rockefeller Brothers Fund's grantmaking throughout its 75-year history, and it offers a good example of how a foundation must not only be clear about its own values and institutional strengths, but must also respond to major intellectual and social changes. The Fund's approaches have evolved as new aspects of environmental degradation have become evident, as scientific understanding has increased, and as the international environmental movement has gained momentum.

#### **LAURANCE S. ROCKEFELLER AND CONSERVATION**

From 1941 until the early 1970s, the RBF worked to preserve and protect the environment through grantmaking in population and conservation. Conservation was a special interest of founding trustee Laurance S. Rockefeller, and it constituted much of his personal philanthropy and public service. In its early decades, the Fund expressed its commitment to the environment primarily through grants to Laurance's projects, including the Grand Teton, U.S. Virgin Islands, and California Redwoods National Parks, the Palisades Interstate Park, the American Conservation Association, the Conservation Foundation, the Nature Conservancy, and the National Audubon Society.

Laurance acted as an advisor on environmental matters to five U.S. presidents. He served on the Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Commission, a fact-finding group established by Congress, beginning in 1958. He chaired the 1965 White House Conference on Natural Beauty, a pivotal event in raising Americans' environmental awareness. He chaired President Johnson's Citizens' Advisory Committee on Recreation and Natural Beauty and President Nixon's Committee on Environmental Quality.

For most of his career, Laurance sought to combine environmental conservation and recreational use. In the early 1960s, along with his brother, New York Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller, he was instrumental in gaining public support for the state's acquisition of more than 300,000 acres of land for urban parks, wilderness, and forest recreation areas.

As chairman of the New York State Council of Parks, Laurance declared, "land alone cannot fulfill the recreation needs of people. Development of marinas, bathing beaches, picnic and camping areas, golf courses, multiple use areas and many other facilities are needed... Development costs money, indeed, often more than the land itself." Yet this kind of development-oriented thinking soon came under fire from the environmental movement emerging after the 1962 publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*.

## FROM CONSERVATION TO ECOLOGY

The new science of ecology guided the movement, and led environmentalists to question the values implicit in the kind of recreational use that Laurance promoted. It challenged the optimism of the 1950s, the view that economic growth was an essential goal, and the confidence that the impact of growth could be managed effectively. The new ecologists argued that humanity needed to reevaluate its attitude toward the planet, recognize that civilization is dependent for survival upon the health of Earth's ecosystems, and set limits on economic growth.

Ecology influenced the era's youth culture and back-to-the-land movements, and began to grab headlines in the mainstream media after the nation's first Earth Day celebration in April 1970. Following the United Nations 1972 Stockholm Conference, the first international meeting on the global environmental crisis, concerns about the environment steadily mounted around the world.

## LAUNCHING AN ENVIRONMENTAL PROGRAM

By 1967, the RBF was making approximately \$1.75 million in environmental grants annually. It had begun to shift its focus from land acquisition to public education in response to the challenges presented by the environmental movement. In 1974, the RBF launched a new Environmental



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### Laurence Rockefeller (left) and planners at Caneel Bay, U.S. Virgin Islands.

In 1956, the Fund gave \$1 million to Jackson Hole Preserve, Inc., which was developing of a large tract on the Island of St. John for national park purposes. Laurance Rockefeller already owned the Caneel Bay Estate, where he had built an ecologically friendly commercial resort, and he sought to expand environmental preservation on St. John. The Virgin Islands National Park opened later that year, becoming the 29th national park in the system. In 1960, Laurance donated the resort, doubling the Park's size, and it was designated a World Biosphere Reserve in 1976.



Program, focusing on “the way in which population, resources, food, capital, pollution, and values interact.” It proposed addressing the complex interdependencies that characterized environmental problems through supporting citizen groups, encouraging the environmental law movement, conducting scientific anticipatory analysis, and promoting regional planning.

Laurance’s approach to conservation also evolved, becoming very much in step with the ecological viewpoint. He helped lead the Fund into experimental initiatives supporting alternative agriculture and renewable energy, including the New Alchemy Institute on Cape Cod, Massachusetts. He became deeply involved with the Lindisfarne Association, a network of visionary activists and intellectuals that served as a counterculture think tank and promoted a “new planetary ethos.” Steven Rockefeller, a member of the fourth, or “cousins,” generation and a professor of religion and ethics at Middlebury College, became an RBF trustee in 1977 and joined Laurance and several like-minded cousins in embracing spiritually grounded approaches to a new ecological ethos.

### A NEW GENERATION

As the Fund’s leadership transitioned from the founders to their descendants, the personal environmental commitments of Rockefeller family

members have continued to guide the Fund’s work. In the 1970s, the Fund began supporting the environmental law movement through grants to the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC). Laurance’s son, attorney Laurance Rockefeller, Jr., worked at NRDC for over 25 years and continues to serve as an NRDC trustee in 2016.

In the mid-1980s, Steven Rockefeller became involved with the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), which had published the World Conservation Strategy, an influential document in twentieth century conservation and the first to introduce the concept of sustainable development. The IUCN’s subsequent World Charter for Nature, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1982, called for a new ethic of respect for nature and sustainable resource use.

Non-family trustees have also brought expertise to the Fund, for example Russell Train, founder of the World Wildlife Fund and second Administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency.

### ONE WORLD

In the early 1980s, the Fund undertook a comprehensive program review that reflected the cousins’ leadership and reshaped its grantmaking. The recommendations from the review were organized around the theme of global



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**The New Alchemy Institute was founded in 1969 to explore adaptive strategies for sustainable living in an overburdened natural environment.**

Scientific research focused on food-producing and renewable energy systems, including intensive gardens, backyard fish farms, solar collectors, aquaculture, hydro-wind power, and two self-sufficient bio-shelters on Cape Cod and Prince Edward Island. The Institute also aimed to change public awareness and acceptance of new technologies, gearing its inventions toward usability for families, communities, and small businesses.

interdependence and were adopted in 1983 under the rubric One World.

The One World vision reflected major shifts in the thinking of the international community regarding the interrelated challenges of global poverty, environmental degradation, and the need for economic development. The deepening scientific understanding of the economic and social causes of global environmental degradation prompted a reconceptualization of responsible development. The term “sustainable development” was not well defined until publication of *Our Common Future*, the 1987 report of the World Commission on Environment and Development. In 1983 the Fund did not yet employ the term, but the One World program was infused with similar understandings. Its adoption set the Fund on a new course in which ecologically sustainable development would, from that point forward, comprise a major portion of its grantmaking.

#### EARLY STEPS ON CLIMATE CHANGE

Beginning in 1986, the RBF made grants to Sweden’s Beijer Institute to promote research on global warming. These grants evidence the Fund’s early recognition of the significance of climate change, which was not yet understood by the public or recognized by national and

international governmental bodies. With RBF support, the Institute formed an Advisory Group on Greenhouse Gases. It played an important role in the 1987 adoption of the Montreal Protocol, a model international agreement that limits use of chlorofluorocarbons, which were destroying the atmospheric ozone layer, exposing people to cancer-causing solar radiation.

#### ENGAGEMENT WITH ASIA

In 1987, the RBF launched a Program in Asian Resources, supporting Asian nations’ efforts to address environmental concerns on a region-wide basis. A grant to the Wildlife Fund Thailand helped it convene representatives from more than 40 environmental NGOs to discuss regional problems including the promotion of better resource management and the role of public and private donors.

By 1994, the Fund’s sustainable development grantmaking in East Asia aimed to help leaders address both economic development and resource conservation. Grants supported local leaders in monitoring the environmental and social effects of international development programs, funded citizen-led land restoration and coastal management initiatives, and worked to promote the adoption of sustainable resource use policies in the agriculture, forestry, and marine sectors.

Fisherman, volunteers, and staff construct holding ponds for conch grow-out experiments at the Caribbean Conservation Association.

RBF gave the region a special focus through the Eastern Caribbean Natural Area Program from 1977 to the late 1980s, when grantmaking focused on promoting the areas of sustainable development in tandem with natural resource conservation and job creation. The program continued on as an independent organization, the Caribbean Natural Resources Institute, headquartered in Trinidad, which is now a regional leader in fostering community-based resource management and livelihood development.



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## THE LEGACY OF RIO

The 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro, known as the Rio Earth Summit, was a pivotal moment in the acceptance of the seriousness of global warming and the loss of biodiversity. The Summit produced two important international agreements, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Convention on Biological Diversity. These two issues have shaped the RBF's environmental agenda ever since.

Endeavoring to build on what was achieved at Rio, the Fund's sustainable development program began focusing on mitigating climate change and protecting biodiversity. The biodiversity work concentrated on protecting temperate rain forests, promoting sustainable forestry, and reforming the management of ocean fisheries.

On the climate change front, things have not gone smoothly at the international level. Preoccupied with economic growth, governments have been slow to respond to the call for a transition to a clean energy economy. Resistance to action on climate change has been especially strong in the United States. Congress, for example, did not ratify the 1997 Kyoto Protocol designed to implement the UNFCCC.

## INTO THE 21ST CENTURY

Convinced that global warming could possibly have catastrophic consequences, in 2005 the Fund began concentrating its entire sustainable development budget on addressing climate change. The biodiversity component was phased out. This difficult decision acknowledged that, if global warming is not halted, all efforts to protect the planet's biodiversity will be undermined.

In 2013, reflecting a concern to align the Fund's investments with its mission, the trustees made the decision to join with the international fossil fuel divestment movement and began divesting RBF holdings from fossil fuels.

Governments continue to associate development with economic growth, but an increasing number of scientists and activists argue that we live in a world with real limits to economic growth and material consumption. Widespread poverty and growing economic inequality mean that finding a just and equitable path to ecological sustainability presents complex problems. Today the Fund integrates its environmental work with its efforts to promote democratic processes in global governance, particularly in helping the Global South achieve an equal voice.

The Fund's underlying commitment to the

The Fund's divestment announcement coincided with Climate Change Week, which saw more than 300,000 march through New York City for climate accountability.

On September 21, 2014, The People's Climate March was brought together by longtime grantee 350.org in partnership with over 1,500 organizations representing indigenous peoples, environmental activists, scientists, civil society, student organizations, businesses, labor, faith groups, and others to form the largest climate movement in history. There were simultaneous companion marches in 160 other countries to demand action the day before a UN summit on climate change.



Photo courtesy 350.org/Robert van Waarden.

The Robo-Bird, a solar-powered recycling project and civic sculpture, was the product of a collaboration between academics in Serbia and Kosovo.

The 2012 project, under the direction of Serbian grantee Association Oktopus, encourages youth to recycle cans to unlock online games about the environment. Grantmaking in the Balkans also includes Philanthropy for Green Ideas, an annual competition to support the development of sustainable small businesses across the region, and research into renewable alternatives to affordably power cities without building more coal-fired plants.



Photo courtesy of Association Oktopus.

environment has often infused its other programs. In the 1970s, the Fund's Caribbean program honed an eco-development approach, combining resource management with job creation. In post-Communist Central and Eastern Europe in the 1990s, the Fund incorporated environmental advocacy into its efforts to help rebuild civil society. The Fund's current democratic practice and peacebuilding work arguably comprise essential components of sustainable development, broadly construed.

Over the last four decades, RBF environmental programs have been revised to reflect the evolving science, the changing social and political situation,

and the best thinking by the growing international movement in support of sustainable development. The goals and strategies of the Fund's environmental grantmaking will continue to evolve. There is an ongoing debate on what constitutes genuine sustainable development and whether it can be achieved without a major shift in ethical values and attitudes toward nature. In 2016, the Fund retains a deep commitment to environmental conservation, but the global situation has prompted it to change its focus from population, parks and recreation, forests, and fisheries to reducing greenhouse gas emissions and creating a clean energy economy.



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New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller testing a Clean Air Car Race vehicle with the student team from Ithaca State College, August, 1970.

By 1968, smog had become a risk to public health, especially in California. That year marked the first competition between MIT and Caltech, where teams drove low emissions vehicles westward for six days, with one team setting up electric charging stations every 50 miles. Another car ran on jet fuel. In 1970, the second race saw 43 teams compete from colleges across North America, as long as their vehicles met national emissions standards that were slated to take effect in 1975.

Explore more history at [75.rbf.org](https://75.rbf.org)