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"Foundations" - A Q&A with Tom Steinbach, Environment Program Officer

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"Foundations" is a series of informal question-and-answer sessions with employees and others affiliated with The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation to give them an opportunity to explain their work.

Tom Steinbach, an officer with the Foundation's Environment Program, manages grants to promote conservation in western North America. Here he offers an overview of that work and explains how it is changing.

Steinbach joined the Foundation in 2007 after working for eight years as executive director of the nonprofit Greenbelt Alliance, a San Francisco Bay Area-based land conservation and urban planning organization. He holds a B.A. in economics from the University of Rochester and a Master of Public Policy from the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.

What geographic area does Hewlett's work in the West cover, and what are the conservation issues?

Our grantees' work in the West extends from the Rockies to the Pacific and from western Canada and Alaska down through a bit of northwestern Mexico. One reason for that focus is that environmental protection of the West was an interest of the Hewlett family when it started the Foundation and continues to be a priority for the Board today.

Conservation throughout the West has common themes. It is an unparalleled landscape with vast open spaces, both public and private, unique plants and animals, and rivers that connect the interior to the coast. The West has also been the source of a vast amount of natural resources for all of North America, providing timber, food, minerals and energy. Among westerners, there is a strong connection to the land and a sense of responsibility for it. Hunters and anglers, farmers and ranchers, and native peoples are among the most active groups working to keep the West unspoiled.

The central challenges as we see them are to keep the air clean, to ensure rivers have the water needed to support plants, animals, and people, and to protect large pristine landscapes from being carved up. The biggest environmental pressures here are the result of urban and rural growth, demand for water, and drilling and mining for oil, gas, and coal.

A formidable list. So how do we tackle all of that?

We support groups working on land, water, and energy issues, and look for opportunities to engage people on the ground where particular issues are unfolding. For example, we've made many grants to hunting and fishing groups throughout the West for their work to conserve roadless areas and prevent inappropriate oil and gas drilling. These are

people who know the land, have been enjoying it for years, and are very effective at ensuring that wildlife and habitat are taken care of.

We're also outcome-focused, which means we want to understand the tangible end results of each project and how those lead to cleaner air, improved river flows, or wilderness conservation. This approach has led us to focus our western land work on two things: increasing the amount of public money available for land conservation and building diverse local support for conservation of existing roadless areas.

Our water work is focused on getting more water into western rivers. Foundation grantees work with state regulators to try to ensure that water flows are high enough to preserve the animals and plants that depend on them. Other grantees work with the federal government, which licenses hundreds of dams. There are dams on almost every river in the West. And the way they're managed can have a huge effect on the broader environment. Working on the regulation of a dam is a way to have an impact far beyond the dam itself.

In addition to preserving the good, there is stopping the bad, which in the West often means stopping construction of coal-fired power plants and minimizing the harmful effects of oil and gas exploration. The ripple effect of each new coal power plant is staggering. Each one lasts fifty to sixty years. If we're talking about a 500 megawatt plant with a 60-year lifetime, and it operates at just fifty to seventy-five percent of capacity, it will burn 63 million tons of coal over its life. A plant that size typically emits 3.3 million metric tons of carbon a year, equivalent to 400,000 cars on the road. Then there is the issue of water use-it goes on and on.

We're going to need the energy. Are there better alternatives for getting it?

The answers are energy efficiency and finding places to locate renewable energy facilities. In our case, a lot of our grantees' work focuses on wind and solar energy. The question used to be, "How do we help these new technologies become economically feasible?" Today, nonprofits don't need to do much of that work anymore. Businesses are doing it.

The work we need to do these days is helping find places to build renewable energy facilities. How do you get permission to construct them-some are quite large-and get the transmission lines you need? If you look at a map of the United States, most of our transmission lines are designed to transmit power from coal- or oil-rich places to population centers. Not surprisingly, most of those lines don't go through the locations with the greatest renewable energy resources-the high-sun, high-wind locations. So there will be a need to build new transmission lines.

This is an area where there are two camps in the environmental community: the renewable energy camp and the land camp. And those two camps don't always see eye to eye. The land camp is worried about the local effects on the land of these very big, industrial wind farms and solar plants. A lot of our funding today goes to finding solutions so these constituencies can work together on the shared goal of clean energy.

What's your best guess as to when these renewable energy sources actually will supersede the dirty sources?

A switch to getting most of our energy from renewable sources? I wish I knew. I think getting approval to build these new, large-scale renewable sources will take five to ten years. Then construction and having them all come online? Maybe fifteen years. There's no technological reason it can't happen more quickly. If the politics continue to move the way they have over the past five years, it could go much faster. But it's all guesswork.

How else is the conservation movement changing?

For many years now, the Foundation has been working to broaden the range of people involved in these issues. It's only natural-they affect everyone. In recent years we've funded environmental groups of Latino, African American, and Asian citizens who've become strong advocates for improved air quality around California's ports and in the California Central Valley. But the movement continues to grow ever more diverse. It's starting to look like the nation as a whole, which is as it should be.

Three years ago, it might have been surprising to some people that hunters and anglers were so involved in conservation issues, even though they were some of the first conservationists. It's really evolved. Today there are Foundation-funded groups of hunters and anglers that are leading the charge on things like wilderness protection, water issues-even fossil fuel development. That's not to say that everyone agrees on every issue, but people realize they have common interests. And now we're seeing evangelicals and other socially conservative groups taking up these issues.

Are there intersections between the land and water work that you mentioned and our energy priorities?

One place where all our worries come together is in northeastern Alberta, Canada. There, in an area the size of Florida, is a massive deposit of oil mixed with sand. It's the second largest oil reserve after Saudi Arabia, and work has begun to extract it. Processing these so-called tar sands is a nasty business that involves large amounts of water and natural gas. It's hard to imagine a worse situation.

For starters, extraction and runoff clearly pollutes the rivers up there, one of which-the Athabasca-runs toward the Boreal Forest, the largest intact forest on the planet. Then there are First Nation populations all along that river who drink its water and eat its fish. The extraction, refining and burning of tar sands oil also puts a lot of carbon into the atmosphere. It is a major contributor to global warming. Foundation grantees are working on many fronts to slow and stop these problems.

Do you think the recent concern about climate change has helped to make conservation more of a mainstream concern?

I think that's right. I haven't experienced enough of these sea changes in public opinion in my lifetime to know if this concern will be lasting. But I'd add that this is something coming full circle. Ranchers would say they are the oldest conservationists. For generations, they were the ones looking after the land. And somewhere along the way "environmentalists" alienated the very core constituencies that cared about the environment in a very direct way.

What we're seeing now is a reunification of many environmentalists with some of these more traditional defenders of the land. We're coming back home again. It was a real mistake to forget the roots and ignore them. Particularly for the West, having these interest groups-ranchers, hunters, anglers-come back together gives me a lot of hope that the West's environmental issues-air, water and land-will be addressed. It's too soon to say we're winning, but I'd say we're taking the right steps for a healthier environment.