

AMERICAN

WINTER/SPRING 2026

FORESTS



AN ECOSYSTEM OF PEOPLE

Partnering to restore whitebark pine
across America's iconic national parks

IF NATURE CAN MAKE A LAKE PINK. NATURAL TOOTHPASTE CAN WHITEN TEETH.

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to protect nature.



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CLOCKWISE FROM BELOW: CAMILA RESTREPO / TREEFOLKS; CASEY JOINER / AMERICAN FORESTS; AMERICAN FORESTS; ANDREW STUDER / AMERICAN FORESTS
COVER PHOTO: ANDREW STUDER / AMERICAN FORESTS

Roots that intertwine: A legacy and continued impact grounded in partnership

BY HILARY FRANZ

THERE'S A PARTICULAR kind of beauty that appears only when people create something together — something no one could shape alone. It's a beauty made of connection.

Last year, as I stepped into my role as president and chief executive officer, American Forests was celebrating its 150-year legacy. This organizational milestone was, at its core,

a celebration of the power of collective action and impact. For 150 years, American Forests has stood boldly at the forefront of the conservation movement, working innovatively with partners to generate far greater impact than we could accomplish alone. Partnerships are the roots from which we've grown, intertwined throughout every facet of our work.

The next 150 years begin now. And they begin with all of us.

The threats facing our lands, waters and people are immense. Wildfires are ravaging our forests across the West, leaving behind charred burn scars. Erosion and flooding are wearing away the East coastline, destroying habitats and damaging infrastructure. And extreme heat is radiating off the concrete and asphalt of cities across the entire country, increasing heat-related illness and death tolls. It will take continued collective action to

create and sustain resilient forests and communities in the face of these and other growing threats.

I've visited more than 15 states and traveled more than 60,000 miles since September, and no matter the city or landscape, one commonality is consistently woven throughout: partnership. Each partner brings a thread — an idea, a skill, a question, a challenge — and through cooperation those threads are woven into something stronger and richer than any individual strand. This tapestry of our work represents our shared purpose.

In October, I walked among rows of 15-gallon containers holding desert-adapted saplings at Treeland Nurseries in Mesa, Ariz. Here, I helped our partners, the Arizona Sustainability Alliance, The Nature Conservancy and the City of Mesa, select trees for an upcoming planting to combat extreme heat. I sat with Mesa Mayor Mark Freeman and Phoenix Mayor Kate Gallego, engaging in discussions on Tree Equity in Maricopa County. And I shared a cup of coffee with Emma Viera, executive director of Unlimited Potential, to learn how the organization is using their American Forests' Catalyst Fund grant to engage the community in advancing Tree Equity through bilingual communications and a unique community health approach.

In November, I stood among charred clusters of trees in my home state of Washington — muted crackles sounding from beneath my boots with each step. But as I looked out over the City of Camas watershed, I saw more



Collective efforts between American Forests, the Washington Department of Natural Resources and AKS Engineering and Forestry are helping to restore the City of Camas watershed, which was burned in the 2022 Nakia Creek Fire, through the planting of tens of thousands of seedlings.

than just remnants of the 2022 Nakia Creek Fire, which burned nearly 2,000 acres in a matter of hours. I saw hope and recovery. Standing there alongside my colleagues discussing collaborative reforestation efforts amid shifting fire regimes, my gaze focused not on the remaining towering, burnt trees, but on the tiny seedlings budding with new life. There were tens of thousands of them — primarily Douglas-fir — thanks to a web of collaboration. While American Forests secured private funding for the seedlings, we coordinated with the Washington Department of Natural Resources to grow those seedlings, which eventually were planted by AKS Engineering and Forestry — all in collective efforts to help this watershed heal.

And in December, I had the privilege of delivering the keynote address at The Understory conference outside of Sacramento, Calif. This event, hosted by our California Reforestation Pipeline Partnership, forged the partnerships we need — among NGOs, academia, private forest industry, public agencies and Tribes — to restore resilience in California's fire-affected lands. It was two inspiring days of learning and

creating solutions that work across boundaries. One shared value rang clear: Replanting after high-severity forest fires is an important tool to address novel conditions and restore local ecosystem services in the era of mega fires. The key to success in these efforts will be sustaining our collaborative momentum.

When we work together, success becomes communal, and so does resilience: From the ecosystem of people working tirelessly to conserve and restore the whitebark pine — gnarled by the harshest of elements in the highest of mountain elevations, yet resilient still — to the municipalities, frontline organizations and faith-based groups driving local action to advance a nationwide Tree Equity movement, to you — our devoted supporters.

Together, we are transforming collective efforts into meaningful, shared and enduring impact. I hope you'll continue to join us as we drive this progress forward.

For more news and updates from Hilary, connect with her on LinkedIn at [linkedin.com/in/Hilary-Franz](https://www.linkedin.com/in/Hilary-Franz).



Above: Hilary Franz, American Forests' president and CEO, tours the Treeland Nurseries in Mesa, Ariz., alongside representatives from local partners, including the Arizona Sustainability Alliance, The Nature Conservancy and the City of Mesa. Right: Franz (left) and Phoenix Mayor Kate Gallego (right) recently spent time engaging in discussions on advancing Tree Equity in Maricopa County. Phoenix has been a leader in the Tree Equity movement since its 2021 commitment to achieve Tree Equity by 2030 — the first citywide commitment of its kind.



LEFT AND RIGHT: AMERICAN FORESTS

ABOVE, LEFT AND RIGHT: CITY OF CAMAS



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PLACE-BASED PARTNERSHIPS

Deepening collaboration and expanding impact in Austin

BY ASHLAN BONNELL

THE CITY OF AUSTIN is often characterized by its eclectic vibe — a tapestry of culture, music and art — and a dichotomy of urban skylines against vast green spaces. However, while the city’s tree canopy cover has been mapped at approximately 49% in West Austin, there is only about 29% cover in East Austin, broadly tracking economic and demographic lines. The city has been working aggressively to correct this disparity: Austin is aiming to achieve at least 50% citywide tree canopy cover by 2050, with a focus on low-income communities and communities of color.

For more than a decade, American Forests has been quietly showing up in Austin — planting trees, developing technical resources and building partnerships that, at first glance, looked like small, local moments. But over time, those moments began to connect, forming a web of relationships strong enough to shift the trajectory of the city’s canopy. Today, that steady groundwork has culminated

in a milestone: The City of Austin’s official adoption of American Forests’ Tree Equity Score, becoming the first municipality in the nation to do so.

DEEPING COMMUNITY ROOTS TO GROW CHANGE

The story of Tree Equity in Austin is not one of a single campaign or a single partner. It is the story of persistence — of returning year after year and investing in people as much as in trees. American Forests’ collaboration with local nonprofit TreeFolks stretches back to 2015, beginning with projects like establishing the Festival Beach Food Forest, a city-owned blend of community garden and food forest that has grown alongside the partnership. Those early efforts were less about scale and more about trust: learning the rhythms of neighborhoods, understanding local needs and demonstrating that tree planting could be both practical and deeply personal.

As the years passed, those roots deepened. Community engagement became as important as canopy cover. In 2024, TreeFolks, Austin Independent School District, Takeda and American Forests teamed up with Norman-Sims Elementary School, located in a neighborhood with only 8% tree canopy, to host bilingual outreach activities inviting students, teachers and families to write about why trees matter to them. Their words were later hung on the 30 trees they helped to plant on school grounds the next day — living affirmations growing within the community alongside its canopy growth.

Just a year later at Menchaca Elementary, a similar-style planting built on previous efforts to become a hands-on classroom where young people learned not just how to dig a hole or water a sapling, but how urban forestry could shape their own futures. Youth leadership emerged

as a defining force. Through the Austin Youth Forest Council, high school students and young professionals gained paid opportunities to explore careers in urban forestry and environmental stewardship. Interactive demonstrations of the Tree Equity Score tool transformed data into discovery — a way for young Austinites to see how neighborhood history, investment and tree canopy intertwine. Nursery tours, shadowing trained volunteer “Super Stewards” and career panels further bridged the gap between curiosity and capability.

BRANCHING OUT BEYOND TRADITIONAL CIRCLES

American Forests’ partnerships in Austin have continued to expand beyond traditional environmental circles. Music and culture — central to Austin’s identity — have become unexpected allies. Collaborations with organizations like REVERB, an environmental nonprofit driving sustainability across the music industry, mobilizing millions of music fans to take action, and amplifying social and environmental nonprofit campaigns through the cultural power of music, are channeling their energy into neighborhood restoration. In March 2026 at Austin’s renowned Zilker Park, volunteers from across sectors will gather to plant

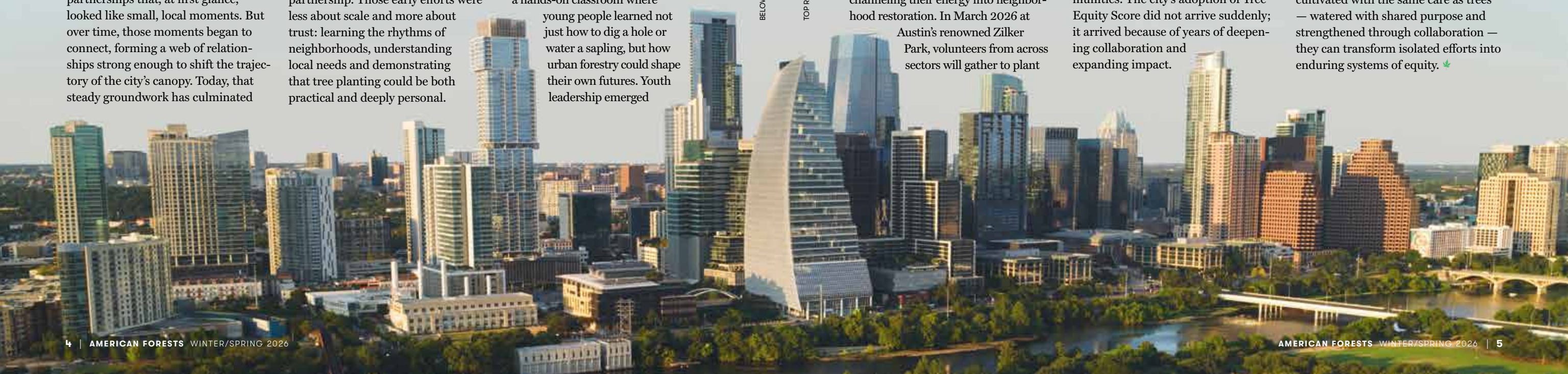


As part of the community planting at Menchaca Elementary School, partners and volunteers planted 25 trees on the school campus, which is located in a neighborhood with only 22% tree canopy.

dozens of trees as part of ecological restoration efforts that also incorporate green stormwater infrastructure, ensuring that water nourishes the landscape long after the crowds disperse.

These projects illustrate a powerful truth: Tree Equity is not a niche initiative; it is a civic value that can resonate across industries and communities. The city’s adoption of Tree Equity Score did not arrive suddenly; it arrived because of years of deepening collaboration and expanding impact.

Austin’s journey demonstrates that citywide impact is rarely confined to city hall. It begins in classrooms, community gardens, nurseries and neighborhood parks. It begins when organizations commit to staying present long enough for trust to grow. American Forests’ work in Austin shows that when partnerships are cultivated with the same care as trees — watered with shared purpose and strengthened through collaboration — they can transform isolated efforts into enduring systems of equity. 🌱



BELOW: FILMRAW / SHUTTERSTOCK
TOP RIGHT: CAMILA RESTREPO / TREEFOLKS



Landowners and forestry professionals navigating reforestation decisions often need trusted, actionable support. American Forests' new landowner-centric platform helps connect them with nationwide funding opportunities, reforestation guidance and curated widgets, such as water and carbon benefit valuation estimators.

INNOVATION

For today and for our future: Developing innovative solutions for people and the planet

BY TORI JOWERS

FOR 150 YEARS, American Forests has incubated science-backed innovations to tackle the complex challenges facing communities and the landscapes they call home. From the idea that spawned the U.S. Forest Service to the data behind the Tree Equity Score tool, our work is rooted in real needs identified through collaboration with partners.

We place people at the center — because tools are only effective if they are available, accessible and actionable.

“We believe access is power,” says Julia Twichell, American Forests’ senior director of data, design and UX. “That’s why our tools are free, increasingly multilingual and designed for usability so anyone can use them to restore forests and reforest communities.”

SCIENCE-BACKED DECISION SUPPORT FOR THOSE NEEDING IT MOST

Climate change, economic conditions and an evolving network of landowner support programs make for increasingly complex and consequential decision making by those on the front lines of climate impacts. Climate and forestry data are often highly technical, difficult

to interpret, locked behind paywalls or a combination of all three. These barriers limit access to the information forest stewards weigh when making decisions.

Gaps in information access are most pronounced among underserved family forest owners and Tribal Nations reeling from profound wildfire impacts. While emerging markets for ecosystem services like carbon, water and biodiversity hold promise to empower stewards to take restorative actions, landowner-centric information about these markets remains limited and difficult to interpret. Related barriers include access to foresters and upfront costs for land preparation and seedlings.

To help close these gaps, American Forests has developed new tools that connect private landowners and Tribal Nations with foresters, technical assistance and financial resources. In collaboration with market and forest-modeling experts, we have developed carbon and water benefit calculators that help landowners and foresters make informed decisions on market participation, potentially unlocking access to funding aligned with their ecological, financial and cultural values.

Beyond developing tools, American Forests works directly with private landowners and Tribal Nations to support reforestation planning and market feasibility assessment — without pressure to enroll in market-based programs or access public funding. Our goal is to provide best-in-class, science-based and culturally relevant support for reforestation and restoration.

“As the saying goes, knowledge is power, and we’re aiming to empower landowners with the ability to make informed decisions for themselves,” says Frank Curtin, American Forests’ director of private lands reforestation.

Curtin and his colleagues are helping landowners find the right resources in a fragmented information environment. Today, reforestation information is scattered across agencies and websites, making it difficult for landowners to know where to begin. To address this, American Forests will launch a new web platform in early 2026 to help landowners navigate reforestation programs, funding opportunities and events, and connect directly with local foresters, agencies and American Forests’ place-based forestry staff. The platform will allow landowners to identify and leverage resources that support their unique restoration goals.

Reforesting private lands requires all hands-on deck — and access to the right resources at the right time. A win for one ecosystem is a win for all.

INVESTMENT IN DATA EVOLUTION TO INCREASE ACCESS FOR ALL

Creating a new tool is just one step. Ensuring it remains relevant requires continual investment. Data evolves, as does its applications.

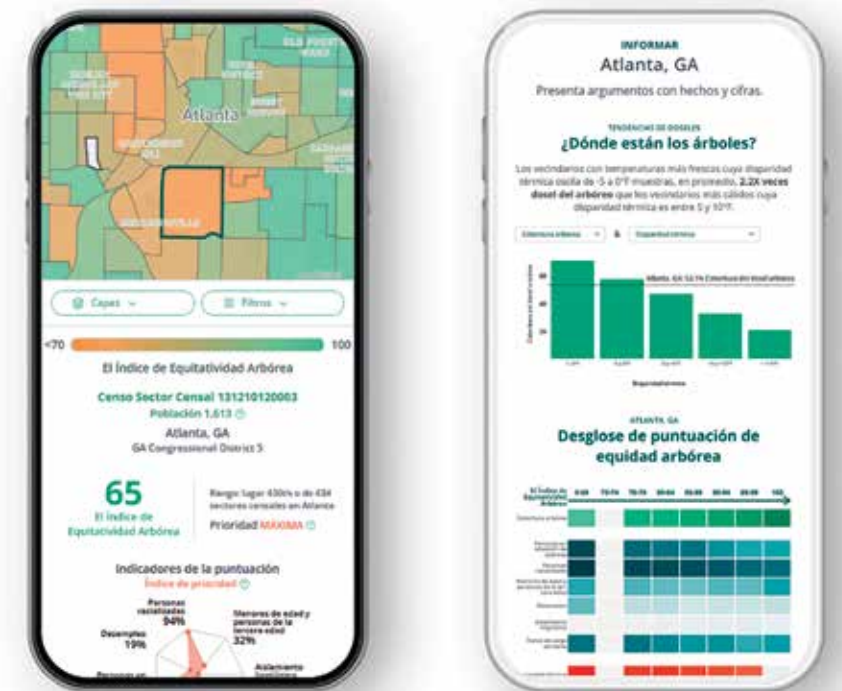
At its inception, American Forests’ Tree Equity Score was barely more than a radical idea. A map of nationwide tree cover seemed a tall order — yet Tree Equity Score launched in 2021, not just with nationwide tree-cover data, but also with deeper views of each neighborhood that included socioeconomic status, public health, race, age, heat severity and more. It became more than just a map of trees, reflecting everyday lived experiences in cities across the United States.

Now with 16 applications and counting, Tree Equity Score is a groundbreaking international platform paving the way for more than 1,000 cities to champion the Tree Equity movement. Five years since its launch, Tree Equity Score continues to evolve and reach

new communities. Last November, the platform unveiled a Spanish-language version to expand access.

Earlier in June, American Forests and the Washington State Department of Natural Resources announced the first statewide Tree Equity Score Analyzer, designed to help policymakers and leaders leverage high-resolution data to equitably plan for urban forestry one city lot at a time. And this year, the City of Austin became the first municipality in the nation to officially adopt Tree Equity Score as their tree prioritization tool. American Forests has always sought to better meet local needs by improving the Tree Equity Score platform, incorporating ideas ranging from localized to aspirational.

Data is only as powerful as the uses we put it to. Whether with Tribal stewards or community advocates, the most powerful tools place the right data in the right hands — so the benefits of trees reach everyone. 🌿



Tree Equity Score — Spanish reaches an additional 42 million Spanish-speaking Americans, making it easier for more communities to grow a greener, fairer future.

ABOVE: MARK JANZEN / AMERICAN FORESTS

RIGHT: AMERICAN FORESTS

MOVEMENT BUILDING

Tending the understory: Partnering to restore California's forests

BY CHRIS BRODA-BAHM

IN A STATE where fire is no longer confined to a single season, the work of restoring forestlands has taken on new urgency. Each year, more seed sources are lost in fires, damaged landscapes expand and the window for recovery shrinks. Without timely action, vast areas could convert permanently into non-forested shrublands. Meeting this moment will require not only technical solutions, but deep collaboration across the people and systems that make reforestation possible.

This urgency brought more than 150 practitioners, researchers, Tribal leaders, agency staff, industry partners and community members together last December in Roseville, Calif., for The Understory, a three-day gathering focused on building the systems, capacity and relationships needed to restore forests at scale.

Hosted by American Forests through the California Reforestation Pipeline Partnership, The Understory was framed not as a traditional conference,

but as a chance to explore what fuels forest recovery beneath the surface: people, knowledge, trust and shared purpose. The Partnership was created in response to information gaps identified by Governor Newsom's California Wildfire and Forest Resilience Task Force and is designed to strengthen public-private cooperation necessary for expanding seed supplies and reforestation capacity statewide.

The event opened with a visit to California's state seedbank and nursery,

where attendees traced the journey from cone to seed to seedling. Inside vaults chilled to zero degrees, cones are cleaned, tested and cataloged by elevation and origin to match future forests to the conditions they will face. The tour offered a clear message: Reforestation is meticulous and time-sensitive, and bottlenecks at any point can stall recovery for years.

Throughout two days of conversations, several themes stood out. First, people are central to successful restoration because many forests cannot recover on their own. The strongest solutions emerge where science and knowledge meet lived experience and insights that inform policy. Keynote speaker Dr. Cristina Eisenberg, PhD described this convergence as "two-eyed seeing," when we approach landscapes with a holistic, place-rooted approach to stewardship grounded in reciprocity,

respect and the braiding of Indigenous knowledge and Western science.

Second, restoration is unfolding under unprecedented conditions. Climate change, drought stress, pests and increasingly severe fires mean yesterday's playbooks need revisiting and updating. Rather than search for universal answers, discussions focused on adaptive strategies, matching actions to ecological and landowner goals, and acting quickly enough to take advantage of favorable post-fire conditions.

Workforce development surfaced as another defining challenge. To meet California's current restoration goals, the workforce will need to roughly double. Participants emphasized the need for clearer career pathways, training and mentorship that can sustain a new generation of forest stewards. Programs like the California Cone Corps and Cone Camps, flagship efforts of the Partnership, are building that capacity by expanding the state's pipeline for seed collection and processing.

Perhaps the most consistent thread was the need for sustained momentum. Severe wildfire leaves a narrow window when landscapes remain suitable for replanting. Streamlining steps across the reforestation pipeline while maintaining ecological integrity will be critical to keeping forests from converting to grasslands and shrublands.

"The challenges created by the circumstances we're seeing in California's forests require us to be both swift and bold with our problem solving. If there were ever a time to collaborate radically across our differences to save the forests we love, that time is now, and that's what The Understory was about."

— SHELLEY VILLALOBOS, SENIOR MANAGER OF THE CALIFORNIA REFORESTATION PIPELINE PARTNERSHIP, AMERICAN FORESTS

"The challenges created by the circumstances we're seeing in California's forests require us to be both swift and bold with our problem solving," says Shelley Villalobos, manager of the Partnership with American Forests. "If there were ever a time to collaborate radically across our differences to save the forests we love, that time is now, and that's what The Understory was about."

The Understory affirmed that California already has the knowledge, talent, tools and commitment necessary to meet this moment if those across agencies, Tribes, nonprofits, research institutions and communities continue to coordinate and support one another.

In the coming months, the California Reforestation

Pipeline Partnership will build on the momentum of The Understory through science huddles, workforce training, Cone Camps and deeper integration of traditional ecological knowledge. The seeds of collaboration and knowledge planted in Roseville now return with participants into their daily work.

Restoring California's forests is a generational effort. But by tending the human connections beneath the work, the reforestation community is laying the foundation not only for future forests, but for a more resilient California. 🌱



Above: Attendees respond and engage during a Q&A session at The Understory event in December 2025 in Roseville, Calif. Left: Marisol Villareal, assistant seedbank manager with the CAL FIRE Reforestation Services Program, explains protocols for testing the viability of collected seeds for storage during a tour of the state nursery and seedbank in Davis, Calif., as part of The Understory event.



LEFT AND RIGHT: ASHLAY CATALINA PERKINS / AMERICAN FORESTS

LEFT: MARK JANZEN / AMERICAN FORESTS; RIGHT: LEON VILLAGOMEZ / AMERICAN FORESTS



Above: A Cone Camp attendee consults The California Cone Hunter's Pocket Guide (First Edition) to identify the ripeness and viability of the seed from a variety of cones during Cone Camp North in Shasta County, Calif., in July 2024.

Left: Joshua Miller (left) of the U.S. Forest Service and Noé Romo Loera, American Forests' Cone Corps member, (center back) and Kat Barton, American Forests' senior manager of Southern California forest restoration (right) in a cleared and recently replanted area of the Rough Fire scar on the Sequoia National Forest.

WASHINGTON OUTLOOK

Navigating change while advancing forest solutions

LEVERAGING DEEP EXPERTISE and long-term partnerships, American Forests successfully navigated an evolving political landscape in 2025 — reaffirming that forests and trees remain a uniquely bipartisan priority in Washington, D.C. At a moment of heightened scrutiny for federal programs and conservation investments, we focused on steady leadership, coalition building and practical solutions that advance forest health across all landscapes.

A cornerstone of this work was the **9th American Forest Congress**, which convened nearly 500 forestry professionals, policymakers, Tribal leaders, researchers and partners from across — and beyond — the sector. Together, participants co-created **10 guiding principles and 16 resolutions** designed to usher in the next era of forest stewardship. These outcomes reflect a shared commitment to reforestation, resilience, equity and collaboration, and they now serve as a durable framework for American Forests’ policy work moving forward.

Forests and trees remain a uniquely bipartisan priority — and essential infrastructure for climate resilience, public health and community well-being.

Throughout 2025, American Forests mobilized coalition partners and key congressional champions to protect Inflation Reduction Act funding and defend critical forest research and programs supporting the health and resilience of state, private and Tribal forests. In parallel, we introduced and helped advance bipartisan legislation to expand reforestation resources and capacity, strengthen Tribal co-management, create new options for permanent forest conservation, support local sawmills, and scale “cool corridor” strategies to address the growing threat of extreme heat in communities nationwide.

ANDREW STUDER / AMERICAN FORESTS

Beyond legislative work, American Forests continued to broaden its reach and influence. Through speaking engagements and partner events across the country with both longstanding allies and new audiences, we strengthened relationships and elevated the role of forests as essential infrastructure for climate resilience, public health, economic opportunity and community well-being. We also rallied new advocates in support of the Fix Our Forests Act, working closely with partner organizations to educate Senate offices on the opportunities the legislation presents to improve forest health, reduce wildfire risk and accelerate restoration at scale.

SETTING OUR 2026 POLICY PRIORITIES

Looking ahead, the principles and resolutions developed at the American Forest Congress will guide our policy priorities in 2026. A top focus is passing the **Fix Our Forests Act**. We will continue to track and weigh in on proposed changes to the USDA Forest Service and other land-management agencies, as

well as executive orders and administrative actions that affect the Roadless Rule and the role of forests as climate solutions.

American Forests will also work to secure robust, sustained funding for federal programs that support forests and trees in communities and across landscapes, while expanding our capacity and engagement on state-level policy in key regions where leadership and innovation are accelerating. We are also deepening our expertise on wildfire policy, leading efforts to secure long-term funding that reduces wildfire severity and strengthens overall forest health.

In the year ahead, we invite your continued partnership and support as we advance innovative, collaborative solutions to steward and conserve our nation’s forests for climate, communities, clean water and wildlife.

Stay up to date on opportunities to use your voice to advance this work by visiting americanforests.org/ActionCenter or by scanning the QR Code. ↴



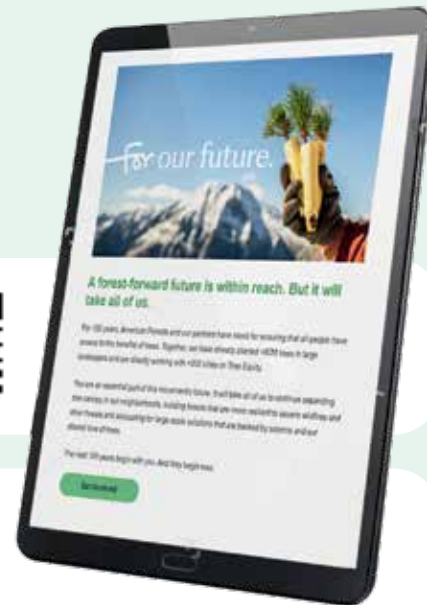
MOTIVATIONAL MUSINGS

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READ STAFF EXPERTISE AND REFLECTIONS

"For our future: Turning rooted memories into urgent action"

"As I stood at the incident command center, I found myself gazing up at the familiar cliffs of my childhood, heartbroken by what I was witnessing — water cascading from our air assets as fire consumed the ancient evergreen giants that have captivated me since I was a child...[But, the community's response] was a reminder that the strength of our forests doesn't live in the trees alone, but in the people who rise to care for them."

— Hilary Franz, president and CEO, American Forests

DIVE EVEN DEEPER INTO THIS ISSUE'S MOST COMPELLING STORIES

"Leaving a lasting legacy"

"I've pretty much always lived in remote places and spent a lot of time in nature. It's always been where I've felt really comfortable. So, I think it's a pretty intrinsic part of me. Forests have given me so much that I want to give back."

— Eve Bernhard, restoration ecologist, American Forests



MEET NEW ORLEANS LOCAL LEADERS DRIVING CHANGE

"From the inside out: How New Orleans trains its next line of defense"

"I always believe that innovation comes out in necessity. The people that are in the trenches of something will be the ones that ultimately come up with the solutions to solve those problems."

— Joel Holton, program manager, Louisiana Green Corps

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PHOTOS: FROM TOP TO BOTTOM: KING OF HEARTS / WIKIMEDIA COMMONS; ANDREW STUDER / AMERICAN FORESTS; CASEY JOINER / AMERICAN FORESTS



Staying power

How commitment to place has transformed American Forests' approach to long-term impact

BY ADRIENNE BERMINGHAM

FOR 150 YEARS, American Forests has worked across the country to restore large, natural landscapes and bolster urban forests. But as our approach to restoration has evolved, we've spent the last 35 years focused on building and deepening relationships with the places and people we have supported. It's been our privilege and responsibility to lift up partner organizations at the local level all over the country. It's also been strategic: We build capacity and staying power, and the ideas and intentions of our work are carried forward through our local partners, making American Forests much larger than a single organization.

American Forests' legacy is now grounded in a long-term commitment to place — shaped by the people, ecosystems, policies, culture, climate and, of course, forests co-existing together.

Building resilient forests and communities has meant investing not just in trees, but also in the infrastructure, workforce and policies that allow forests to thrive. Each place requires its own solutions informed by local knowledge and needs and sustained over time. This evolution has guided American Forests toward an approach that allows us to respond to the distinct needs of both large, natural landscapes and cities, linking forest health with community well-being and long-term resilience.



American Forests believes that enduring impact relies on continuity, trust, collaboration and a willingness to evolve with the places we serve. That philosophy is best understood through the places where American Forests has maintained some of its longest commitments.

LEARNING BY STAYING

In our early years, American Forests focused on protecting and restoring forests through supporting on-the-ground partners leading hands-on conservation and reforestation efforts. Our support followed the need — often resulting in one-off plantings and projects where we felt we could make a difference. But we learned that our community and forest resilience issues are deeper, often requiring more investment and greater focus to ultimately fix. What distinguished this work was not its scale, but its presence. Eventually over time, we began to collaborate with the same partners across the same landscapes and in the same cities year after year, building relationships with land managers, community leaders and local organizations. That growing commitment to people and place taught us key lessons about restoration strategies and practices specific to regional landscapes and cities. It also taught us the value of long-term, consistent commitment to partners and landscapes — generating impact at scale through efficiencies gained from multi-year and multi-decade partnerships.

Many of American Forests' longest-standing commitments to place-based partners began in the early 1990s and the years that have followed, including work in longleaf pine ecosystems in the Southeast and in the streets and communities of Boston, among many others. These places became classrooms as much as project sites, offering lessons that would shape our approach for decades to come.

Today, our impact is reflected in individual stories of our work across the nation that come together as a mosaic of trust.

These stories represent the real relationships, investment and systems built over time that ensure forests and people can thrive together.

THIS PAGE, LEFT: NICK HAGEN / AMERICAN FORESTS; THIS PAGE, RIGHT: ALEKSANDR WATSON / AMERICAN FORESTS

PAGES 14 AND 15, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: ERIC DOXEY; HANNAH GREGORY / AMERICAN FORESTS; JUSTIN MEISSEN / FLICKR; TRENTON J NIEMI / SHUTTERSTOCK



Southeastern U.S.: Learning a landscape

In the Southeast, longleaf pine once defined the landscape. These fire-loving forests supported some of the most biologically rich ecosystems in North America. Today, only a small fraction of the original range remains.

American Forests' work in longleaf pine ecosystems began in 1992 and has continued through changing conditions, partners and priorities. Rather than approaching restoration as a single activity, American Forests has worked alongside public agencies and local organizations to address the full set of conditions required to restore longleaf forests.

In places such as Florida's Blackwater River State Forest, restoration has included expanding access to seeds and seedlings, supporting prescribed fire, strengthening local workforce capacity, and aligning conservation goals across public and private lands. Each step is informed by what the landscape needs to thrive.

Beyond partnering with local restoration leaders, American Forests is now building our own capacity to fill in key longleaf pine restoration pipeline gaps. Our place-based regional staff and foresters are developing a longleaf pine restoration workforce, providing technical and financial assistance to private non-industrial landowners; assessing the weak links in the longleaf reforestation supply chain; and coordinating landscape-scale, cross-boundary longleaf restoration on public and private lands across the Southeast.

This work has helped restore habitat for threatened species, reconnect fragmented forests and advance a broader vision for longleaf pine recovery across the region. Just as importantly, it has reinforced a central lesson that continues to guide American Forests' work: Resilient forests are not rebuilt quickly, and their health and success relies on thoughtful, long-term stewardship.



In 1992, American Forests partnered with the Florida Forest Service to plant longleaf pine seedlings (pictured left) in the Blackwater River State Forest in efforts to restore the region's longleaf landscapes. Twenty years after the initial seedlings were planted, in 2012, a maturing longleaf pine forest was establishing (pictured middle). And 30 years later, in 2022, this fire-resilient landscape is once again thriving (pictured right).



LEFT: FLORIDA FOREST SERVICE; MIDDLE AND RIGHT: AMERICAN FORESTS



Left: A collaborative approach, leveraging place-based knowledge, is essential to the long-term success of restoring Hawai'i's native forests
Below: Mauna Kea Watershed Alliance volunteer Leila Dudley and a Kupu intern load trays of Koa seedlings at Hakalau Greenhouse as part of a collaborative effort between American Forests, Mauna Kea Watershed Alliance, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and local community groups to plant the Kanakaleonui Bird Corridor to help endangered songbirds escape mosquitoes on Mauna Kea in Hawai'i in 2022.



Hawai'i: Restoring forests found nowhere else

Hawai'i's native forests are unlike any other. Isolated by geography and shaped over millennia, they are home to plants and wildlife found nowhere else, forming ecosystems of extraordinary ecological and cultural significance. These forests also play a critical role in protecting water resources, stabilizing soils and sustaining communities.

Since the early 1990s, American Forests has been working with local partners like the Hakalau Forest National Wildlife Refuge and the Mauna Kea Watershed Alliance to conserve and restore Hawai'i's native forests. These partnerships are focused on rebuilding upland native forests, including within the Kanakaleonui Bird Corridor — a strategic strip of forest that will enable endangered bird populations to escape non-native, disease-carrying mosquitoes that are expanding their range uphill as the climate warms.

With partnerships that bring together public, private, academic and Native Hawaiian-led organizations, American Forests is collaborating with a diverse group

of stakeholders to develop innovative models that drive more funding and financing into forest restoration for water, climate, biodiversity and cultural benefits.

“In Hawai'i, everything is dependent on relationships, especially our relationship to place,” says Nick Wilhoite, American Forests' senior manager of Hawai'i restoration. “Successfully integrating science and best management practices into forest stewardship requires an in-depth understanding of local conditions. This place-based knowledge is critical to guiding forest restoration and management in ways that balance ecological complexity, forest health and real-world challenges alongside the needs of our communities connected to these forests.”



LEFT AND RIGHT: MATT YAMASHITA / AMERICAN FORESTS

LEFT AND RIGHT: ERIC DOXEY



Right and below: Over 60 volunteers from our partners and the community joined American Forests at one of Spokane Valley's most popular hiking spots, the Appleway Trail, to water, weed and mulch nearly 700 recently planted trees. Appleway Trail is a vital, ADA-accessible commuter and recreational path with only 13% tree canopy cover — leaving residents exposed to the heat during the summer. These collective efforts by a range of partners will increase critical tree canopy that will help cool temperatures in the hotter months, increase accessibility and improve the appearance of the trail.



with the City of Spokane, Lands Council, Spokane Conservation District and the Washington State Department of Natural Resources. Together, these partners have supported initiatives that provide free trees to underserved neighborhoods, helping residents access the benefits of shade and healthier community spaces.

Spokane's progress is also connected to broader statewide collaboration. In 2025, the city co-hosted an event for the Washington State Tree Equity Collaborative, which is co-led by the Washington

State Department of Natural Resources and American Forests. This effort brings together partners across the state to align leadership, policy and planning in support of Tree Equity goals.

“Our partners in Spokane understand that achieving equitable canopy means more than just planting trees where they are needed the most,” says Drue Epping, American Forests' director of Pacific Northwest and West Coast. “It requires building shared understanding, support and community capacity to care for the urban forest at every step, from planting through long-term maintenance and stewardship.”

Spokane: Scaling Tree Equity through partnership

In Spokane, Wash., American Forests' work reflects how long-term partnerships can translate shared commitments into action on the ground. The city is working toward a goal of 30% tree canopy cover in every neighborhood by 2030, supported by federal investment aimed at expanding tree planting in low-income areas.

American Forests has played a central role in advancing work in this region through collaboration

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Donate monthly. Grow a forest.

Visit americanforests.org/MagMonthly or scan the QR code to start planting today.



Left: In October 2018, American Forests and local nonprofit Speak for the Trees, Boston collaborated on a planting to increase access to green space in a Boston neighborhood.

Below: In April 2025, American Forests partnered with Speak for the Trees, Boston; Mount Hope Cemetary; The Boston Urban Forestry Division; and community volunteers to plant trees in Mount Hope Cemetary, a historic cemetary which doubles as the largest open space available to the community for outdoor activities.



Boston: Advancing Tree Equity at the city scale

In Boston, trees play an essential role in shaping how neighborhoods experience heat, air quality and public space. American Forests has worked alongside the City of Boston and local partners for years, supporting efforts to address disparities in canopy coverage and helping to establish the local nonprofit Speak for the Trees, Boston. These trusted relationships made way for a more coordinated, citywide approach to urban forestry that recognizes trees as part of the city's climate and community infrastructure.

Today, Boston is advancing Tree Equity by prioritizing investment in neighborhoods with fewer trees and higher exposure to extreme heat. American Forests was a core member of a technical team that developed Boston's Urban Forest Plan — aligning data, policy and community input to guide where trees are planted and how they are cared for. This work reflects a shift from individual projects toward long-term planning

that supports canopy growth, maintenance and accountability. To support and grow Boston's urban forestry workforce, American Forests is collaborating with local partners and Boston's Climate Ready Workforce Action Plan to map green jobs, connect training programs to employers, and equip tree-care companies to better serve the diversity of new workers.

At the heart of Boston's approach is an understanding that lasting impact depends on sustained care and collaboration. By supporting planning processes and local partnerships, American Forests has helped the city build a foundation for an urban forest designed to grow more equitably and endure into the future.

Mapping the next 150 years

American Forests believes that forests thrive when communities are supported, ecosystems are connected and long-term care is built into every solution. Our work will continue to evolve as we embark on the next 150 years of generating impact on the ground, responding to new challenges while remaining anchored in the places and people who make that work possible.

Together, these stories and our vision for the future reveal a picture of American Forests' work shaped by

decades of commitment to place. They show how enduring, national-scale impact continues to be achieved through local, place-based collaboration and the grit to stay long enough for change to take root.

Explore our nationwide impact and read more stories of American Forests' work by visiting americanforests.org/ImpactMap or by scanning the QR code. ↓



Adrienne Bermingham serves as American Forests' director of corporate partnership marketing and writes from New York.

LEFT: AMERICAN FORESTS; RIGHT: HANNAH GREGORY / AMERICAN FORESTS



AN ECOSYSTEM OF PEOPLE

Partnering to restore
whitebark pine across
America's iconic
national parks

BY ASHLAN BONNELL

The gnarled trunk of a whitebark pine holds strongly to the side of a cliff in the Central Cascades mountains as the sun rises over Mount Rainier.

ANDREW STUDER / AMERICAN FORESTS

AS THE SUN CRESTS over the Cascade Mountains on a crisp September morning, warm light washes over the towering silhouette of Mount Rainier, painting the dormant volcano's snow-covered ridges with alpenglow. The moment is fleeting — a quiet passage between night and day in one of the country's most storied forest landscapes.

At Sunrise Rim, the highest point in Mount Rainier National Park accessible by car, the stillness has already given way to motion. Tourists from all over the world shoulder daypacks while scanning the horizon. Volunteer park rangers field questions. And nearby, restoration crews prepare for a long day ahead.



Eve Bernhard moves with purpose. She checks her supplies, cinches her pack and secures her copper-colored curls with a few practiced twists of bobby pins. Experience has taught her to move with mastered efficiency. Before heading out, she exchanges easy jokes with a crew of tree-climbing contractors — camaraderie forged in shared work and short timelines.

As Bernhard approaches the trailhead, a ranger stops her. “You’re on the whitebark crew, aren’t you?” he says, grinning with gratitude. “It’s really great work you’re doing.”

Bernhard smiles warmly back at him as she begins the 2-mile hike to the day’s restoration site. Clark’s nutcrackers call overhead, their sharp kraaks cutting through the steady crunch of her boots on the trail. A mix of subalpine fir and whitebark pine flank the way, offering brief shade as the sun climbs higher.

Bernhard, an ecologist working with American Forests and the National Park Service, has just five days in Mount Rainier National Park to conduct restoration activities to conserve and restore the iconic whitebark pine. After a two-day detour home, she will move on — first to Olympic National Park, then remote sites in North Cascades National Park Complex — racing against the close of the narrow window between when whitebark pine cones reach peak ripeness and when landscapes become inaccessible due to snow.

Each stop is part of a broader, ongoing effort to restore the keystone species across its range.

Racing to restore a resilient species

A true representation of resilience, the tenacious whitebark pine grows in some of the most extreme high-elevation environments and can withstand the harshest conditions.

Reaching elevations of up to 12,000 feet, the whitebark pine’s range covers more than 80 million acres across seven U.S. states and two Canadian providences, throughout which the species plays a critical role.

“A lot of people refer to whitebark pine as a keystone species,” Bernhard says. “That term is echoing the keystone in a bridge — the one stone that’s holding it all together. In a similar fashion, whitebark pine plays a crucial role in holding the entire ecosystem together so that it does not collapse.”

Whitebark pine supports the regeneration of many other plant species within the ecosystem. Its canopy helps to shade and regulate snowmelt, ensuring timely dispersion into many key West-

ern waterways that provide millions of people with drinking water. And its seeds — locked away in difficult-to-penetrate cones — are highly nutritious and feed more than 20 different wildlife species, including foxes, squirrels, bears and the Clark’s nutcracker.

But right now, the whitebark pine faces a quartet of threats, placing its important role in the ecosystem at risk. Climate change, changing wildfire regimes, mountain pine beetle infestations and an invasive fungus known as white pine blister rust have wiped out an estimated 325 million whitebark pine. This is why Bernhard, and



ABOVE AND RIGHT: ANDREW STUDER / AMERICAN FORESTS

Above: Eve Bernhard, restoration ecologist in a dual role with American Forests and the National Park Service, heads out on a 2-mile hike to her restoration site in Mount Rainier National Park. **Right:** More than 20 different wildlife species rely on whitebark pine seeds, which contain more calories per gram than chocolate, as a key source of nutrition.





many others, are working so hard to restore the species through a variety of restoration activities.

Employing every tool in the restoration toolkit

Moving at a quick pace, Bernhard reaches her restoration site — a basin cleared in the '30s for a drive-in campground that was ultimately decommissioned. Now, the meadow is only sprinkled with trees. Bernhard's job is to help restore it with whitebark pine with the assistance of her National Park Service colleagues.

"There are a lot of happy and sick whitebark nearby," Bernhard says. "We're just trying to restore the whole basin with native vegetation. It's been a huge restoration effort right smack-dab in the middle of prime whitebark habitat."

To do so, Bernhard is employing a technique known as direct seeding. She thoughtfully maps out plots using a 9-by-9-inch PVC frame, relying on knowledge and a bit of curiosity to guide her choices for each planting location. She then digs 1-inch openings, placing five seeds directly in each hole.

This emerging restoration method provides ecologists like Bernhard with an efficient way to replant whitebark pine in logistically challenging locations. Because the species grows in such difficult-to-access landscapes, planting crews can bypass lugging large pallets of seedlings up the mountain to restoration sites. Traveling light in this way is a reasonably welcome gift for Bernhard

"It takes a whole ecosystem of humans to work on trying to save this species. There's the National Park Service, nonprofits, the U.S. Forest Service, volunteers. There's plant pathologists, botanists, entomologists, wildlife biologists and Tribal partners."

— EVE BERNHARD, RESTORATION ECOLOGIST, AMERICAN FORESTS AND THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

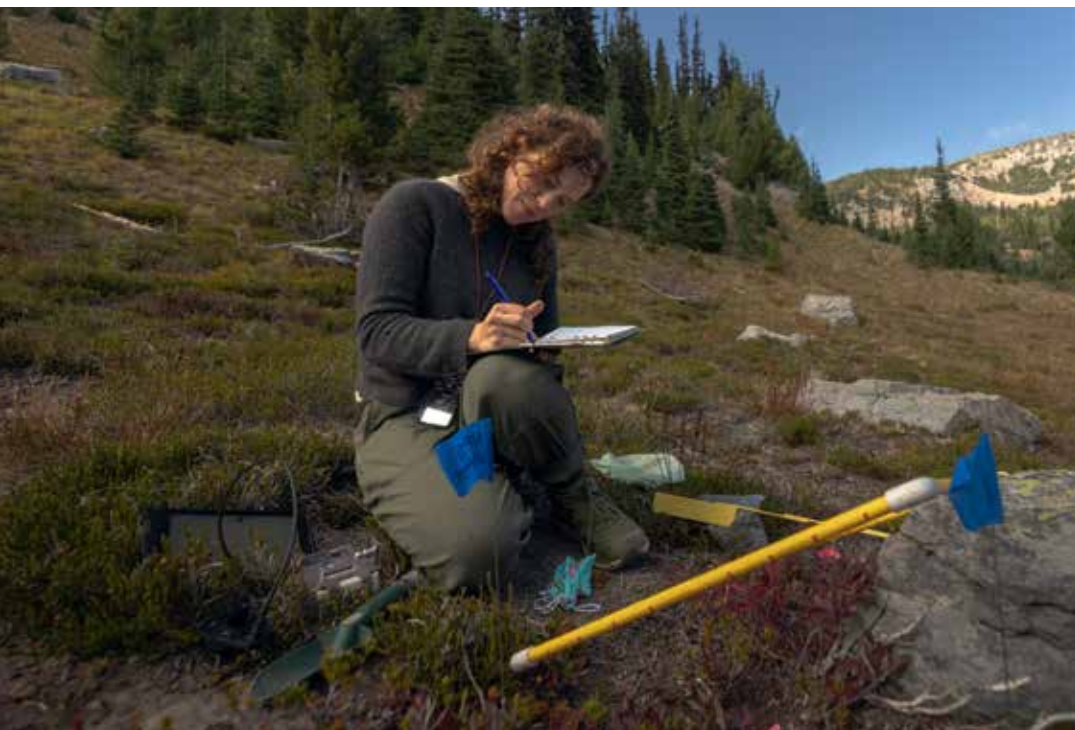
today but a true necessity for accessing her upcoming field visits in Olympic and North Cascades National Parks, some of which require double-digit round-trip hikes covering thousands of feet in elevation. Additionally, by testing and assessing direct seeding, the results can inform restoration practices at all the parks, using science in action to continue to improve efforts.

Bernhard records every measurement and detail meticulously before shifting her attention to nearby newly germinated seedlings planted during previous seasons.

"In this cache, there were five seeds, and now five germinants," Bernhard says of a group of tender sprouts. "This plot overall had good early establishment for a harsh high-elevation environment — just over 50% survival from the first year — which is a really good sign."

Bernhard checks on the tiny yet thriving seedlings as she encourages them — like a mother to her young child — before embarking on her next task. "Alright, little babies. Time to keep growing up big and strong."

To conduct direct seeding, Bernhard and her colleagues need high-quality seeds. The trees only produce cones once every 3–5 years, which is why Bernhard, tree-climbing contractors



Above: Bernhard, a crew of National Park Service colleagues and contractors spend five days in Mount Rainier National Park conducting cone collection and direct seeding as part of broader efforts to save the whitebark pine under a five-year agreement to restore the species in national parks across its range.

Left: Bernhard records data as part of her direct seeding efforts to help track progress in the coming seasons and identify conditions that may contribute to successful seedling survival.

Facing page: Through collective efforts, Bernhard and her National Park Service colleagues plant 425 seeds in 86 caches throughout 28 direct seeding subplots in their short five days in the field. Direct seeding has the potential to greatly reduce the cost and timeline of whitebark pine restoration efforts.

ABOVE: NICK GRIER / AMERICAN FORESTS; LEFT AND FACING PAGE: ANDREW STUDER / AMERICAN FORESTS





and National Park Service crews work swiftly throughout the season to collect the trees' ripe cones.

Whitebark pine cones experience a several-week window of peak ripeness. During this time, crews climb and retrieve cones from trees that have been identified as having natural resistance to white pine blister rust. The cones they collect are usually surrounded by protective mesh cages placed earlier in the year to keep the seeds safe from critters, particularly the Clark's nutcracker.

The Clark's nutcracker is a crow-sized bird on which the whitebark pine is reliant for natural regeneration — an essential partnership within its ecosystem. The bird uses its beak to break the cones and release the seeds, then buries thousands of caches of those seeds across the landscape — the process mimicked by direct seeding. While the small nutcracker's mighty memory allows it to retrieve many of those caches later, some of those it forgets are able to grow into whitebark pine trees.

Bernhard, who completed climbing training in June 2025, carefully ascends a whitebark pine and methodically navigates the canopy to remove the cages and collect the cones.

"Looks like 35 cones in total. That's good," she says. "There's some more great-looking cones here, but I'll leave those for the critters."

Bernhard and the other crews go on to gather nearly 1,500 cones, totaling 75,000 seeds, during their short five days in Mount Rainier. By the end of the season, they will collect 2,000 cones and more than 110,000 seeds in western Washington parks alone.

Although Bernhard is conducting these activities in just three national parks in Washington, her American Forests colleagues and an array of partners are carrying out similar activities across national parks in other focal regions. With the whitebark pine's vast range, this collaborative approach is essential to success.

Leveraging an ecosystem of people

Just like the interconnected web of partnerships that the whitebark pine relies on and supports, restoration efforts are using a similar collective system that brings people from a range of sectors together.

"It takes a whole ecosystem of humans to work on trying to save this species," Bernhard says. "There's the National Park Service, nonprofits, the U.S. Forest Service, volunteers. There's plant pathologists, botanists, entomologists, wildlife biologists and Tribal partners. There's all different people contributing to this work."

RIGHT AND BELOW LEFT: ANDREW STUDER / AMERICAN FORESTS; FACING PAGE, BOTTOM RIGHT: NICK GRIER / AMERICAN FORESTS



Top: Bernhard collects 35 cones from a whitebark pine identified as a "plus" tree or candidate showing strong signs of natural resistance to blister rust. The seeds from the cones she collects will aid in future-season restoration efforts. **Right:** Tree-climbing contractor Chris Crawley collects caged cones from a whitebark pine in Mount Rainier National Park. Collaboration across sectors is essential to achieve success during the narrow cone collection window. **Facing page:** In the spring, cages are placed around a portion of cones on whitebark pines identified as having natural resistance to white pine blister rust to protect them from being eaten by Clark's nutcrackers. Crews return during the fall, when cones are ripe, to collect the seeds to use for future restoration efforts.





TOP: ANDREW STUDER / AMERICAN FORESTS; BOTTOM: NICK CRIER / AMERICAN FORESTS

During the 2025 collection season, these efforts resulted in more than 5,700 cones collected across these landscapes. This collaboration provides a prime example of how cross-sector partnerships are essential to conservation and restoration success.

“Partnerships across landscapes and agencies improve our potential for success because local individuals understand their landscape conditions and can adapt the knowledge gained from research to their own environment to enhance our success,” says Regina M. Rochefort, Ph.D., a retired National Park Service ecologist, who spent 24 years of her career devoted to whitebark pine restoration efforts. “The partnership between American Forests and the National Park Service strengthens the network of land stewards and information sharing, providing a keystone collaboration to long-term restoration success.”

Restoring whitebark pine across some of America’s most iconic national parks will have benefits that extend beyond their mountain ecosystem. Pansing, whose love of whitebark pine was born out of childhood memories in high-elevation parks, stresses the tree’s importance for recreationists and others who have treasured memories within these landscapes.

“Whitebark pine is an iconic tree species in many of our Western recreation meccas,” Pansing says. “If you are mountain biking, running or backpacking — no matter what way you’re accessing these cherished spaces — you’re likely going to be coming into contact with whitebark pine.”

Because the whitebark pine’s range crosses jurisdictions, which include varying land-management practices, regulations and guidelines, deep collaboration has emerged as the linchpin for success. This holistic, collaborative approach is something Bernhard’s colleague Dr. Elizabeth Pansing, American Forests’ senior director of forest and restoration science, has spent more than a decade fostering.

“A holistic approach to whitebark pine conservation and restoration is necessary to get the work done across the range,” Pansing says.

“We really do need to have an all-hands-on-deck approach to ensure that we’re getting the right prescriptions for conservation and restoration implemented on the ground.”

A hallmark of this collaborative approach is a five-year agreement between the National Park Service and American Forests, signed in 2023, to conserve and restore whitebark pine in national parks where it grows. This monumental agreement is supporting Bernhard and her colleagues’ work in western Washington, as well as efforts in the southern Sierra and Northern Rockies.

Above: Whitebark pine serve as a backdrop for iconic recreation destinations, including treasured national parks like Mount Rainier, helping to draw support from a wider community of people who are passionate about these landscapes.

Right: The five-year agreement between the National Park Service and American Forests is a prime example of how cross-sector partnerships are essential to conservation and restoration success.





Top left: Ultramarathoner and Life Time Foundation Athlete Barbara Powell describes the intimate connection between her trail running career and the beauty of the great outdoors: “It’s given me this opportunity to respect what Mother Nature has laid out for that day whether it’s the terrain, the weather or the conditions of the trail itself. And it’s given me a place that allows my body to feel at home. And if I can come out onto the trail and feel home in my body, I get to carry that feeling with me everywhere that I get to go in life. There’s no dollar amount that can be put on that.”

Top right: Powell (left) and Sarah Emola, director of Life Time Foundation, (right) examine a whitebark pine on a field visit in the North Cascades mountains.

Center right: Bernhard (left) and Dr. Elizabeth Pansing, American Forests’ senior director of forest and restoration science, (right) search the landscape for whitebark pine on a scouting visit in the North Cascades.

Bottom: Pansing shows a whitebark pine cone and details the season’s success to Life Time Foundation representatives, including (from L to R) Valeria La Rosa, program director for Life Time Foundation, Emola and Powell.

Conserving our iconic, beloved recreation backdrops

Whitebark pine’s presence in beloved recreation backdrops is part of the major draw for support from a wider community to conserve and restore the species.

Just days after Bernhard completed her field tour, many whitebark pine landscapes — including in the North Cascades — were blanketed with snow. It’s here that Bernhard and Pansing are collaborating with Life Time Foundation, a major supporter of American Forests’ whitebark pine efforts through the Foundation’s Healthy People, Healthy Planet, Healthy Way of Life initiative.

“For us, the right thing now is to invest in these very important projects so that the entire ecosystem that the whitebark pine is part of doesn’t cease to exist. It has to happen, and it has to happen now. It’s urgent.”

— VALERIA LA ROSA, PROGRAM DIRECTOR, LIFE TIME FOUNDATION

Sarah Emola, director of Life Time Foundation, says American Forests’ collaborative, holistic approach mirrors that of Life Time Foundation’s perspective on wellness and is a driving factor in their support of this work.

“I really value the collaborative approach that American Forests takes,” Emola says. “It feels like not just us partnering with American Forests, but us taking on many partners to create a solution as a whole. Life Time Foundation looks for partners that take a very holistic and systematic approach that isn’t just going to change the problem today, but really generate positive impact for the future.”

The positive impact whitebark pine restoration can have on beloved high-elevation landscapes is of deep value to the larger Life Time Foundation community and recreationists as a group, says Barbara Powell, ultramarathoner and Life Time Foundation athlete.

“These landscapes where whitebark pine live are the very places that athletes like myself go to be challenged and to experience something greater than ourselves — to experience a sense of awe and wonder that one might not be able to find living in the city,” Powell says. “Being able

to commune with the natural habitat instills a deeper sense of purpose. And with a deeper sense of purpose comes a deeper sense of well-being.”

Powell spends much of her time running in the mountains and has completed the Leadville 100 race twice while raising funds to support the Foundation. She believes the connection between recreationists and nature is what should compel people to become part of the whitebark pine’s conservation story.

“When you are hiking or running, you’re able to look up, look around you and realize that each and every species, including the whitebark pine, is part of this interconnected ecosystem that all depends upon each other,” Powell says. “And then you realize that you showing up into that ecosystem gives you an opportunity to interact with it, to appreciate it, to be a part of its story.”

Because of its role in overall ecosystem health, as whitebark pine populations decline, these ecosystems could begin to unravel, and how we interact with them would look very different. That’s why Valeria La Rosa, program director for Life Time Foundation, believes so strongly in the Foundation’s commitment to support this work.

“I can imagine the many different consequences to this system failing,” La Rosa says. “For us, the right thing now is to invest in these very important projects so that the entire ecosystem that the whitebark pine is part of doesn’t cease to exist. It has to happen, and it has to happen now. It’s urgent.”

The passionate collaboration and support from partners like Life Time Foundation is exactly what is needed right now to further advance conservation and restoration efforts, says Pansing.

“American Forests has been really lucky to be supported by Life Time Foundation,” Pansing says. “We wouldn’t be able to do what we do for whitebark pine without that support and the shared visions that we have for the future of this planet. Together we can achieve not only the restoration and conservation of whitebark pine, but also the broader mission of conserving and restoring forests for people, for water and for wildlife.”

This shared vision is centered on a hope of creating a better future for our forests and for the next generation.

“Nobody in this game for whitebark pine restoration and conservation is doing it because they expect to see or bear the fruits of the restoration efforts,” Pansing says. “They’re doing this because they treasure the ecosystem. They treasure the forest. They treasure the next generation of people who are going to be able to have these experiences.”

FACING PAGE, BOTTOM: NICK GRIER / AMERICAN FORESTS; ALL OTHER IMAGES: ANDREW STUDER / AMERICAN FORESTS



Leaving a legacy for the future

Back on the side of a mountain in Mount Rainier National Park, Bernhard reflects on her own relationship with and passion for the whitebark pine, which she describes as “love at first sight.” For Bernhard, the tree — and her personal drive to save it — goes well beyond a career choice.

“I think whitebark pine is something that’s bigger than myself that I feel like I can still make a difference about,” Bernhard says. “Kind of like when you look at the night sky and you feel really overwhelmed by how tiny you are. I think I look at the world of whitebark pine, and it’s this vast ecosystem that in a way makes me feel that sense of awe. But I also feel like it’s something that I can make a difference in.”

That difference is what Bernhard hopes will be a lasting legacy she can leave behind long after her time.

“One of the reasons that I personally care so much about this work is that I can’t have children,” Bernhard says. “It’s made me think a lot because many people see their children as their legacy. But in a way, this work with whitebark pine has really come to feel like something that could be my legacy. And I think that plays a role in why, when I am working with the seedlings or planting seeds, it really does hit me deeply . . . I kind of feel like they really are my little babies.”

The millions of people who traverse whitebark habitat each year may never recognize Bernhard’s years of dedicated, collaborative work, and they may never hear her story of passion and drive.

But one thing is certain: Her legacy will live on in the baby whitebark pine seedlings that will continue to grow and help restore these beloved landscapes for generations to come. ↓

Ashlan Bonnell serves as American Forests’ editorial director and writes from Washington, D.C.

To learn more about American Forests’, and its partners’, efforts to save the whitebark pine, watch the short film “An Ecosystem of People” at americanforests.org/EcosystemOfPeople or by scanning the QR code.



TOP AND BOTTOM: ANDREW STUDER / AMERICAN FORESTS



Above: Bernhard’s passion for saving the whitebark pine is palpable — shown through her smile and joyous giggle as she works — and is a mechanism for leaving a lasting personal legacy. **Facing page:** While they begin as small seedlings, whitebark pine can live for more than 1,000 years. “The time scale of how the whitebark pine lives and grows is kind of unfathomable for us. I think the more people know the story of the tree and continue to tell that story and support the work in whatever way they’re able, the more likely we are to be successful in this effort.”

Growing a nationwide Tree Equity movement rooted in community, powered by local action

BY CIANA WILLIAMS

CASEY JOINER / AMERICAN FORESTS

WHEN THE ELKHART RIVER spilled over its banks in Goshen, Ind., in 2018, the rising brown water submerged roads and damaged homes — revealing how vulnerable communities can be when natural systems are stretched beyond their limits.

For city forester Aaron Sawatsky-Kingsley, the flood was a pivotal turning point.

Above: Members of the Louisiana Green Corps (LAGC) workforce training program unload trees for a planting on the Lafitte Greenway in New Orleans.



“That was kind of a wake-up moment for different members within our community,” he recalls, explaining that the trauma of the flood went deeper than physical damage. “Relationship with place is critical to our social health... Without it, we become unanchored in time and in place.”

That sense of being “unanchored” led directly to the 2020 launch of Goshen’s Department of Environmental Resilience, with Sawatsky-Kingsley appointed as its director. A central part of increasing the community’s resilience to future devastation became clear: trees — and lots of them.

Trees act as quiet guardians, their roots binding soil and slowing water’s rush while their branches and leaves soften rain before it hits the ground. Enabling water to sink instead of surge, trees ensure floods are less sudden and cruel.

So, Goshen set an ambitious urban forestry goal: to achieve 45% tree canopy by 2045. Since setting the goal, Goshen has documented

Above: Aaron Sawatsky-Kingsley, director of the Department of Environmental Resilience, works alongside his staff and Americorps volunteers to plant a tree along an industrial corridor in Goshen, Ind. Left: Sawatsky-Kingsley has spent his career caring for the city’s trees, working as a city forester with the Parks and Recreation Department before moving into his present role.

Above: Georgia Interfaith Power and Light (GIPL) and Trees Atlanta staff unload young trees in pots during the community tree adoption event at the Atlanta Masjid of al Islam. Right: “People who are closest to the problem are closest to the solution,” says Lida Aljabar, senior director of the Catalyst Initiative & Fund at American Forests. “That’s why we invest in the people most impacted by tree inequities.”

roughly 3% growth in overall tree canopy. While this number may seem modest, it represents a significant achievement in urban forestry, as the city has successfully reversed previous canopy loss and surpassed its former coverage. And with new resources and catalytic funding from American Forests, the city’s efforts to sustain this momentum are ramping up.

Goshen’s story is not an isolated one — it’s part of a larger national movement to create more equitable, sustainable communities, with trees at the center.

Communities across the United States are facing overlapping economic, social and environmental pressures. It’s why so many cities have embraced Tree Equity — the belief that all communities deserve access to enough trees to support people’s health, safety and wellbeing.

While each community is shaped by different histories, climates and challenges, they are connected by one clear need: All people deserve to experience Tree Equity. And the most effective way to achieve it is from the ground up.

Rooting nationwide resilience in local action

Many people think of trees as ornamental luxuries. But urban forests are part of a city’s lifesaving

infrastructure: They cool neighborhoods, lower energy costs, manage stormwater, improve air quality and allow people to gather outdoors safely. Lack of tree cover leads to higher temperatures, worse air quality and greater health risks — effects that are disproportionately experienced. On average, lower-income communities have 26% less tree canopy coverage than wealthier areas, while communities of color tend to have 38% less.

American Forests estimates closing the Tree Equity gap in U.S. cities will require the planting and care of roughly 500 million trees — a scale of need that makes clear this is not a problem any single city or organization can solve on its own.

With this understanding, American Forests is accelerating Tree Equity in cities nationwide, inviting local leaders to reimagine their cities to be greener, more just places to live.

TOP AND BOTTOM: EMILY ALLISON / AMERICAN FORESTS

TOP: STEVE SWISHER / AMERICAN FORESTS; RIGHT: CASEY JOINER / AMERICAN FORESTS



Top: Sister Terri Ali, farmer and garden teacher at the Mohammed Schools of Atlanta, manages a 4-acre farm, engaging students in the essential role of tending to the trees and crops grown. **Bottom:** Sister Ali says that she teaches children to see themselves as “khalifas,” an Arabic term that refers to one’s role as a steward of the Earth.

To do so, the organization is partnering locally and equipping leaders in the most impacted communities with the funding, tools, resources and coalition support needed to build local capacity and expand equitable tree canopy where it will make the greatest difference. To date, American Forests has inspired a groundswell of action in more than 1,000 cities and counting.

American Forests’ support through its Catalyst Initiative & Fund targets leaders directly from the frontlines — faith-based organizations, community groups, environmental justice organizations and small municipalities — and is designed to help them overcome barriers to action, build local capacity and unlock opportunities for systemic change.

“Change is best led by the community and for the community,” says Lida Aljabar, senior director of the Catalyst Initiative & Fund at American Forests. “We really see that proven in the cities we work in and in our value of service leadership by those on the front lines.”

While a nationwide movement, Tree Equity is rooted in community-level collaboration and powered by local action. From Goshen, Ind., to

Atlanta and New Orleans to Phoenix, and the dozens of other cities with Catalyst Fund grantees, the impact of American Forests’ local partners and their inspiring stories are driving progress toward Tree Equity and turning tree canopy into lasting community resilience.

Faith as stewardship

On a 4-acre campus garden in Atlanta, Sister Terri Ali is growing more than vegetables. She’s growing relationships between children and trees, faith and stewardship, and a city and its living systems.

Sister Ali is the farmer and garden teacher at Mohammed Schools of Atlanta, an Islamic school system closely connected to the Atlanta Masjid of Al-Islam. The school established the

TOP AND BOTTOM: STEVE SWISHER / AMERICAN FORESTS

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Above: Hannah Shultz, program director for GIPL, speaks with a local resident at a community tree adoption event.

garden in 2014, and what began as a single raised bed is now a USDA-certified farm with fruit trees and vegetables, woven into campus life through daily care. The farm immerses children in the rhythms and responsibilities of stewardship.

“Our children are our main focus,” Sister Ali says, “not only to affect transgenerational illnesses, but to put them in touch with their role in keeping the Earth healthy and to feed themselves.”

With the guidance of Sister Ali, students plant and tend crops and fruit trees. They learn when and how to water, and watch how food, shade and health connect through the living systems for which they’re caring.

“Our relationship with the Earth is very important,” Sister Ali says. “How we live with the Earth, what we take from the Earth and what we give back, it’s a balancing act.”

Sister Ali’s work is focused on her school community, but it’s also part of a broader network of faith-rooted stewardship across Georgia. Georgia Interfaith Power and Light (GIPL), a statewide, faith-based environmental nonprofit, supports communities of faith in implementing practical climate solutions.

For Hannah Shultz, GIPL’s program director, the connection is strong because many congregations already share a moral obligation for stewardship. “Almost every major faith tradition



has an ethic of caring for the natural environment and...an ethic of justice," she says. "We can't love each other well if we're not caring for the environment around us because these two things are directly connected."

This conviction is best seen through GIPL's "ReWilding" program. Supported by American Forests, the initiative aims to plant more than 1,850 trees through diverse congregational partnerships. Through her work, Shultz has seen trees become a uniquely tangible entry point into the urban forestry space. By rooting climate action in faith, organizations across Atlanta are modeling how caring for the land is also caring for one another.

People powering resilience

Joel Holton grew up in New Orleans, in neighborhoods where trees once shaped daily life without anyone having to think about them. Shade was just there, and streets felt cooler.

Then, Hurricane Katrina hit. The catastrophic 2005 storm didn't just flood homes and displace families, it stripped away a large portion of the city's urban forest — much of which never returned, leaving people more exposed to storms

and extreme heat. This is a reality that Holton is working to reverse.

"Tree Equity looks like bringing back what the city used to be like," he says.

Holton now manages a workforce development program at Louisiana Green Corps (LAGC), a nonprofit organization that connects environmental restoration with economic opportunity. The program trains young adults and adults for jobs in construction, green infrastructure and conservation. The work is both physical and public, with crews planting trees and installing green infrastructure that requires constant maintenance to ensure survival. Connection to community is a centerpiece of LAGC's programming and drives Holton's sense of belonging to the work.

"I planted these [one] hundred trees right on the Lafitte Greenway," he says of a recent planting along one of New Orleans' frequently used bike trails. "It gives you that sense of pride — that sense of ownership in your own community — and I think there's no better way to rebuild a community than from the inside out."

That matters, because LAGC's program is designed to reach people who are often excluded

Above: Joel Holton, program director for LAGC, unloads trees for planting along the Lafitte Greenway bike trail in New Orleans.

Above: The LAGC workforce development program provides paid training to bolster economic opportunities for members of its community. Right: Angel Harris, a LAGC workforce development program participant, has goals to enter the real estate field in the future. She views the program's training as providing critical knowledge of urban forestry to help her understand her future clients' environmental needs, in addition to the program's focus on teaching both soft and hard skills to aid career development.

from environmental careers before they even know those careers exist.

"I always believe that innovation comes out in necessity," Holton says. "The people that are in the trenches will be the ones that ultimately come up with the solutions to solve those problems. Traditionally, a lot of the individuals from Black and Indigenous communities here are left out of that upswing. So, systematically, they don't think that these opportunities are real."

Angel Harris is one of those participants. She didn't come in calling herself an "urban forester" but quickly realized how important the field was through her contributions to the Lafitte Greenway project.

"Now [Lafitte Greenway] is starting to be diverse," Harris says. "We have elders, middle-aged people, younger people and toddlers. We even have a space for dogs. I feel like everybody is actually making use of the land that we have here. We used to look at it and just go past it."

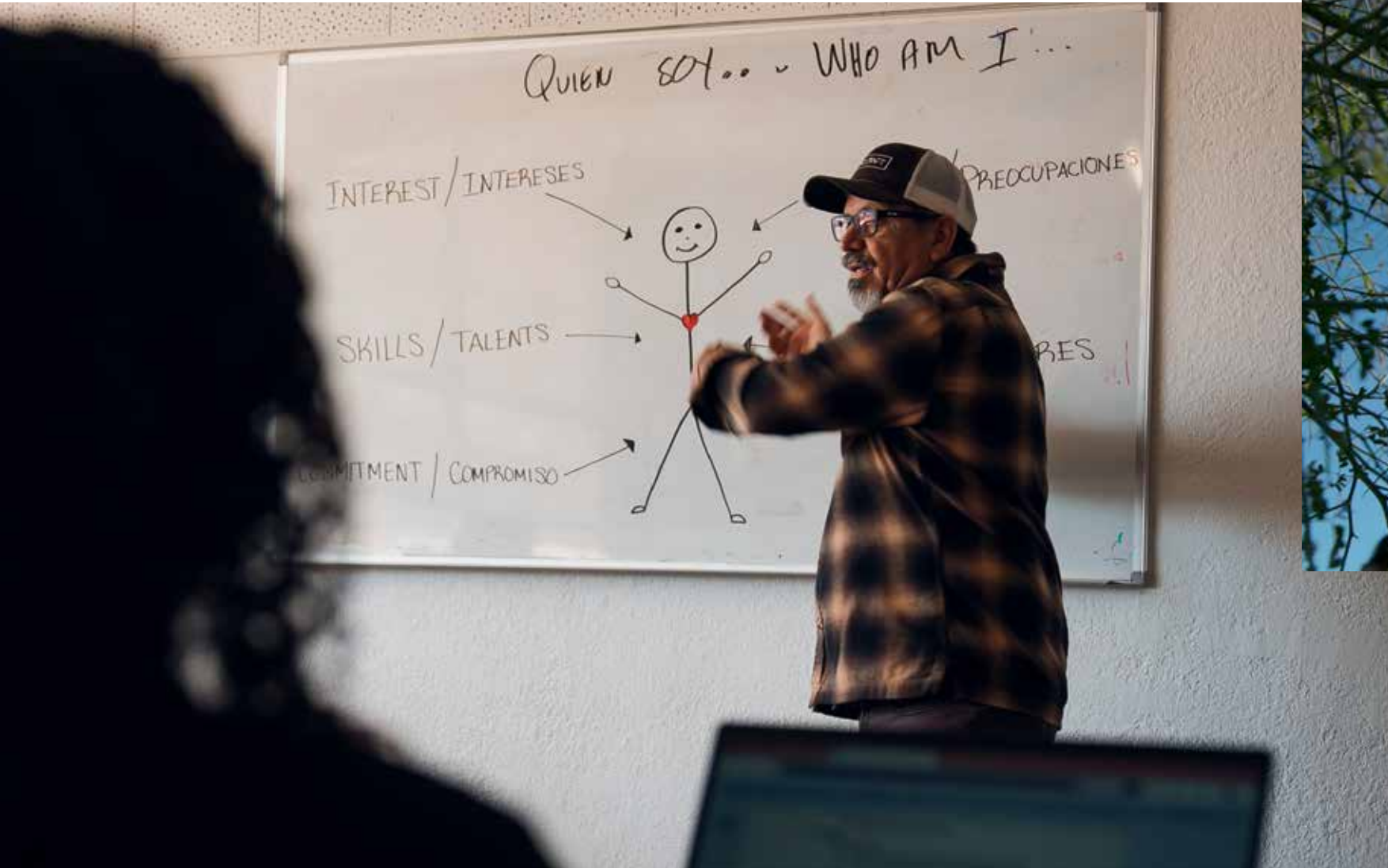
For Holton, that shift is the point. Tree Equity in New Orleans is about both restoring community and the capacity for environmental resilience.

"The environmental infrastructure in this city is critical to its continued success and existence," he says. "We don't have the option to act like [storms and extreme heat] don't exist, because we deal with them every day."

Meeting these daily challenges requires resources that few local organizations can provide alone. Since receiving support from American

OLIVER SARBIL / AMERICAN FORESTS

TOP AND RIGHT: CASEY JOINER / AMERICAN FORESTS



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— JOEL HOLTON, PROGRAM DIRECTOR, LOUISIANA GREEN CORPS

Forests, LAGC has been able to bridge this gap, utilizing catalytic funding and technical expertise to advance workforce development and environmental resilience. This support has directly empowered projects like the Lafitte Greenway, where residents receive paid training while restoring the city’s historic canopy.

Ultimately, the support does more than plant trees; it helps residents realize they belong in the

work of restoring their own city by providing jobs that pay, skills that last and the pride of contributing to something visible and enduring in the community.

Trees as public health

In South Phoenix, Masavi Perea spends his days knocking on doors, organizing neighborhood meetings and answering questions about heat. As

Above: Masavi Perea, a community organizer for nonprofit Unlimited Potential, teaches a workshop on community engagement for the organization’s staff and volunteers. The organization focuses on bilingual outreach as an essential part of its strategy.

ABOVE AND FACING PAGE, BOTTOM: QUINN TAPLIN, DRIFTHOUSE MEDIA / AMERICAN FORESTS



Above: Tawsha Trahan, Unlimited Potential’s director of healthy communities, helps to shape programs and trainings that convey the explicit connection between human health and environmental conditions.

TOP: OLIVIER SARBIL / AMERICAN FORESTS

a community organizer with Unlimited Potential, a local organization focused on supporting and enabling equitable solutions for the community, Perea is helping residents understand what extreme heat means for their daily lives and how trees can make a difference.

For Perea, the work is not just a job, it’s personal. “The work that I do is very important for me because I live here — my kids live here, my grandkids are gonna live here,” he says. “I see people getting sick, and I feel that it is my responsibility to leave a better world than what I found.”

In Phoenix, summer temperatures regularly exceed 110 degrees Fahrenheit, making trees a form of protection for residents. Perea talks with families about heat illness, rising electricity bills and why some blocks feel unbearable, yet others stay cooler. He and other members of Unlimited Potential are building support for trees as a solution and serving as a bridge between communities and those ready to invest in the work.

Tawsha Trahan, Unlimited Potential’s director of healthy communities, has spent hours driving around different neighborhoods in Phoenix logging the amenities available in each, including access to green spaces. What she comes away with is an eye-opening picture of how infrastructure changes from one neighborhood to the next.

It exposes a lack of equity, and for Trahan, these comparisons are a way of grounding herself in the organization’s “one health”



perspective — the idea that human health, environmental conditions and community well-being are inseparable.

“We think of the planet, we think of people, we think of plants and animals as all part of an ecosystem that makes a healthy person,” she says. “And trees — whether it’s your local park, your school or places that you gather — are very important.”

That perspective shapes everything from how Unlimited Potential designs its programs to how it trains staff. Tree planting is paired with



From the Ground Up

reached a historic milestone in 2021, when Phoenix became the first city in America to officially commit to achieving Tree Equity by 2030. This commitment translates into tangible action through policy change, such as the new Phoenix SHADE Plan, as well as the development of new resources and tools like

Left: Juana Silva is a community health worker and volunteered with Unlimited Potential for 14 years before becoming a staff member. Below: Nursery staff and interns help the city of Goshen grow the supply of trees needed to reach its ambitious canopy goals.

bilingual health education, resource referrals and long-term follow-up, and it's part of a broader strategy to reduce heat stress and improve quality of life. The bilingual nature of the program is essential to this strategy. By providing outreach in both English and Spanish, Unlimited Potential ensures that language isn't a barrier to those who might otherwise be excluded from understanding heat threats and the lifesaving benefits of trees.

"Community health workers are the heart of our organization," says Trahan, "[They] live and work in the neighborhoods that they're serving. So they understand the issues [residents] have, speak the language and have the ability to be a trusted person in a neighborhood, which is critically important."

With funding and technical support from American Forests, this network of community health workers has strengthened their technical knowledge and planning capacity, allowing them to bridge the gap between lived experience and climate data.

It's this trusted, on-the-ground outreach of organizations like Unlimited Potential which helps ensure that the resources of city- and state-level initiatives reach communities who need it most. American Forests has been working with the Arizona Sustainability Alliance, the City of Phoenix and local organizations — including Unlimited Potential — to build a statewide coalition for Tree Equity. This collective momentum

American Forests' local Maricopa County Tree Equity Score. It also supports infrastructure initiatives like shaded "Cool Corridors," which prioritize improving heat-vulnerable neighborhoods block by block.

Together, through this coalition model, American Forests' efforts align neighborhood and city-level action with statewide goals — ensuring an equitable, coordinated response to extreme heat as a defining public health challenge across Arizona.

The future, grown together

Back in Goshen, Sawatsky-Kingsley views trees as a decades-long commitment that only succeeds if a city supports its urban forest from seed selection to maturity. This full-cycle approach, carried out by Sawatsky-Kingsley and his team, reinforces that the real work of urban forestry happens long before — and well after — planting days.

This work starts by ensuring a healthy seed supply. Sawatsky-Kingsley operates the city's nurseries, allowing staff to grow trees locally and maintain control over species selection and supply — an increasingly important advantage as more communities compete for limited nursery stock.

Right: "Trees are a cornerstone — maybe the cornerstone — of a municipal plan to work towards any kind of environmental integrity, resilience or sustainability, at least in this part of the world, in the eastern part of the United States," Sawatsky-Kingsley says.



Above: New Goshen Mayor Gina Leichty has continued to champion the Department of Environmental Resilience and the impact its work will have on the future: "Whatever we do, we are shaping not only our present circumstances, but generations to come. Taking that long view and knowing that we're planning a hundred years into the future by the actions that we're taking today is extraordinarily important."

But just as important is what happens after trees go in the ground. In Goshen, maintenance is integral to the plan as improper care and neglect can quickly erase years of progress.

Sawatsky-Kingsley also knows this system won't hold unless more people understand it. That's why youth education and workforce pathways sit alongside nurseries and maintenance planning as key priorities. With funding and technical support from American Forests, Goshen runs an arboricultural training program helping students gain hands-on exposure to urban forestry. Mayor Gina Leichty sees this collective investment across generations as the true engine behind the city's progress.

"There's this very peculiar sense in Goshen where people are willing to put their differences aside... and come together for the common good," Leichty says. "There's a recognition that we rise together and we fall together. That's how these extraordinary things happen, like cherishing our tree canopy."

This spirit of selflessness is one of the key lessons Sawatsky-Kingsley hopes to impart to students, an understanding that the work is for

their community, and the generations that will inhabit it long after them.

"You may never benefit from [planting trees], and you may never know who's going to benefit from them, but somebody will," he says. "Caring for trees is caring for people. If you care for your kids, for your grandkids, then you got to plant a tree."



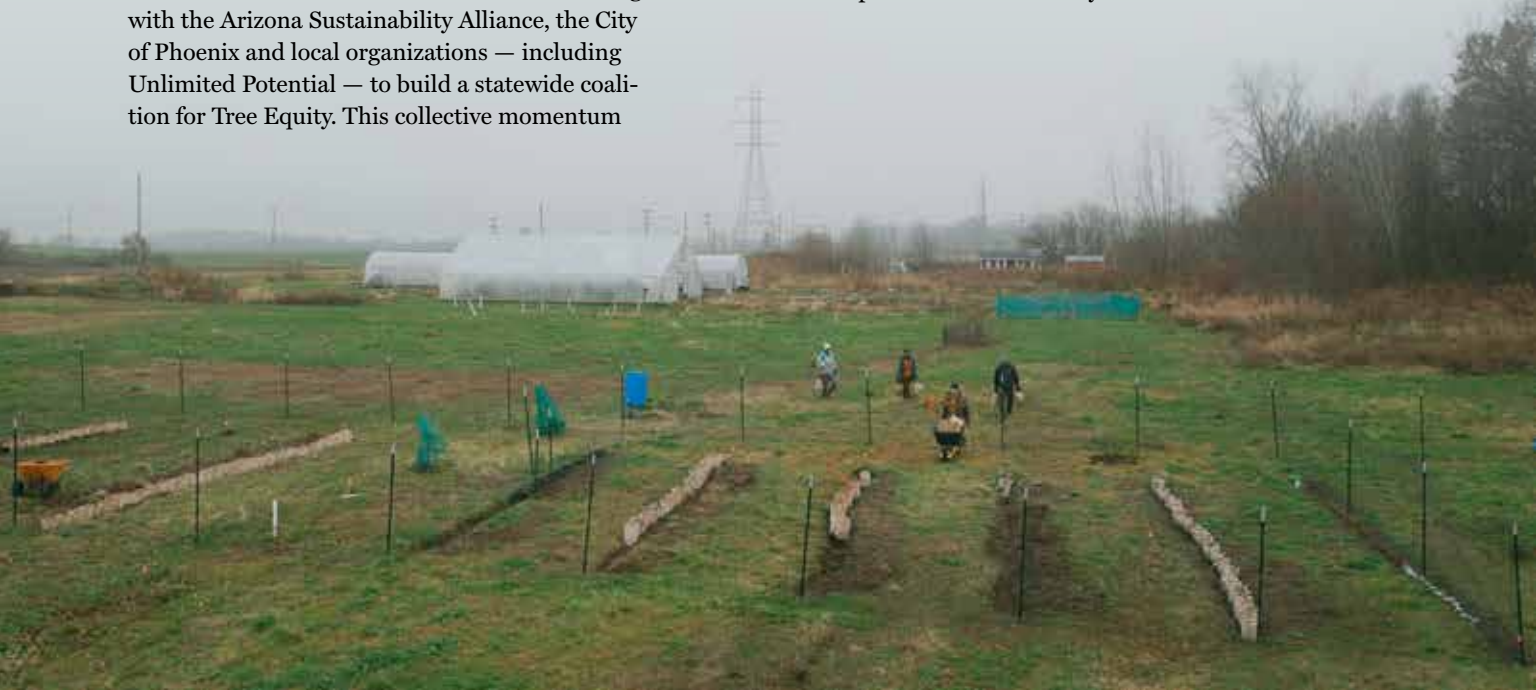
Advancing Tree Equity is not fast. But when rooted in trust, local leadership and long-term care, it endures and creates stronger bonds among people and places.

American Forests is there to nurture those bonds by equipping local leaders with the expertise and resources to sustain urban forests, ensuring the lifesaving benefits of canopy reach every resident, now and in the future.

Across the country, a more resilient future is taking root — not from the top down, but from the ground up. 🌱

Ciana Williams serves as an account executive for the global communications and creative agency Ruder Finn and writes from Washington, D.C.

To learn more about the growing Tree Equity movement, powered by local action, visit americanforests.org/RootedInCommunity or scan the QR code.



ABOVE: QUINN TAPLIN, DRIFTHOUSE MEDIA / AMERICAN FORESTS; BELOW: OLIVIER SARBIL / AMERICAN FORESTS

ABOVE LEFT AND RIGHT: EMILY ALLISON / AMERICAN FORESTS

last look



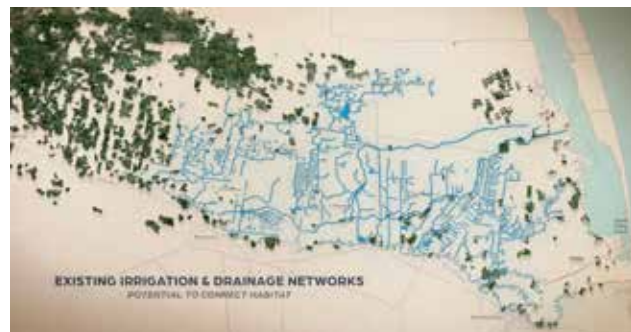
THORNFORD FILM

Collective action to restore a community's beloved thornforest

"Thornforest: Restoring the Wildlands of South Texas" tells the story of one of the most biodiverse ecosystems in North America, showcasing the vibrancy of both life in its understory and the communities with a strategy to restore it. In a continuation of our partnership to tell impactful stories from landscapes across the country, the Cornell Lab of Ornithology's Center for Conservation Media has captured this rugged, spiny habitat emblematic of the region. The short film weaves together stunning wildlife footage with expert voices and historical perspectives to highlight the threats to this unique, dwindling subtropical ecosystem while inspiring action to protect it. Watch the film by visiting americanforests.org/ThornforestFilm or by scanning the QR code. 🌿



Left: In addition to being the last remaining U.S. habitat for the endangered ocelot, the thornforest of Texas' Rio Grande Valley is also home to more than 530 species of birds, 300 species of butterflies, 1,200 species of plants, 50 species of mammals and approximately 1.4 million people. Below: Students at Antonio Mata Ochoa Elementary learn about the species endemic to the thornforest and their important cultural connection to the region through classroom and community activities.



Above: Agricultural land clearing, expanding urbanization, invasive species and a changing climate have reduced the thornforest to only 5-10% of its original range. The Thornforest Conservation Plan conceptualizes strategic usage of the region's pre-existing irrigation and drainage networks to grow wildlife corridors. Right: Every October, volunteers gather for the annual Rio Reforestation community planting event. Together, for more than 30 years, multiple generations have reforested hundreds of acres by planting thousands of native seedlings.



TOP LEFT PHOTO: FIN & FUR; ALL OTHER PHOTOS: CORNELL LAB OF ORNITHOLOGY'S CENTER FOR CONSERVATION MEDIA

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