

Turning passion into practice: How ASU is preparing the next generation of conservation leaders

Rob Walton School of Conservation Futures holds Earth Week panel

By Donovan L. Johnson, ASU News
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Every April, Earth Month prompts a familiar ritual; pledges, posts and recycling drives. But at Arizona State University, Earth Month 2026 looked different. It looked like a conversation about careers, urgency and what it actually takes to build a life in conservation.

In celebration of Earth Week, the [Rob Walton School of Conservation Futures](#) hosted its first [Conservation Forward panel](#), gathering students, faculty and practitioners for a candid discussion about the future of the field. The event's central question cut straight to what students in the room were already asking themselves: How do you turn passion into practice?

The answer, it turns out, is both more complicated and more attainable than it might seem.

The School of Conservation Futures, the newest addition to the [Rob Walton College of Global Futures](#) and the [Julie Ann Wrigley Global Futures Laboratory](#), emerged as a direct response to support the field of conservation. The conservation sector is under pressure, facing the “twin crises” of biodiversity loss and climate change — with a workforce in transition and an urgent need for practitioners who can operate across disciplines, borders and knowledge systems.

"We face the twin crises of climate change and biodiversity loss. Those two crises are highly interrelated, and they are accelerating. And we are not meeting that acceleration with a commensurate effort level," said [Jack Kittinger](#), director of the Rob Walton School of Conservation Futures. "That's what we aim to do here at the school, is to tool up, skill up and build the workforce of the future to meet that challenge head on."

The school's founding premise is straightforward: The next generation of conservation leaders cannot be trained the same way previous generations were. The problems are expanding and becoming more complex. New technologies and approaches are emerging. And the stakes are higher.

That gap is exactly what the Conservation Futures Academy [was built to address](#).

An educational arm of the Rob Walton School of Conservation Futures, the academy serves two distinct audiences: working conservation professionals looking to expand their skill sets and prospective students exploring a career in the field. Its [growing suite of programs](#) reflects the transdisciplinary, field-ready approach at the heart of the school's mission.

Conservation challenges are not solved at a desk. Solutions to today's conservation problems demand practitioners who can think across disciplines, build trust and navigate the complex relationships between people and the natural world. That kind of thinking is forged in the field, requiring embedded understanding, a shared knowledge system that weaves together diverse expertise, and a collective impact model that brings stakeholders together.

"Students need to understand how to integrate these skills and how to think beyond a single discipline," said [Jesse Senko](#), assistant professor at the school. "They need to learn to think holistically and creatively to solve problems. This also involves building relationships with communities and various stakeholders. Learning in a classroom will only take you so far."

[Karla Vargas](#), an assistant teaching professor in the school whose work sits at the crossroads of wildlife genetics and on-the-ground management in the Sonoran Desert, brings that principle to life close to home. Her work is a model for the kind of applied, place-rooted science the school aims to instill in every student who comes through its programs.

"I wish I had known, for example, how different it is to work in private land versus federal land, and Indigenous land, and working with policy," Vargas said. "I had no idea what I needed to know. Once you're out there sitting across the table with people who are actually making the decisions, you need to know these other things that had nothing to do with the science I was trained on."

A philosophy only goes as far as the infrastructure behind it. To bridge classroom and field at scale, the Rob Walton School of Conservation Futures has partnered with [Conservation International](#), one of the world's leading conservation organizations, operating in more than 100 countries through science-forward, partnership-driven work.

The partnership is designed to connect ASU students to active conservation projects in real places, with real consequences, and gives practitioners already working in the field access to professional development opportunities rooted in the school's growing expertise.

"Universities like ASU have an amazing opportunity to modernize their conservation programs by partnering with an organization that can bring in the field experience of delivering conservation on the ground while also providing opportunities for students for place-based learning in real conservation projects," said [Percy Summers](#), senior director of science and development at Conservation International.

For Summers, who has spent decades doing fieldwork across the globe, the partnership represents something larger than a single institution. It is a signal that the boundary between

academia and practice is closing, and that it needs to.

"Investments we make in upskilling and providing professional development opportunities have tremendous upside in giving our practitioner community the tools they need to be able to do more with their existing resources," Kittinger said.

The Conservation Forward panel did not shy away from the harder questions. The practitioners on stage spoke openly about failures, pivots and the lessons they wish they had learned earlier. But woven through those reflections was a consistent theme: The conservation workforce is changing and universities have a role to play in shaping what it becomes.

"More organizations are recognizing the need to build capacity by hiring and developing local talent," Kittinger said. "This shift is in the right direction, and long overdue. Conservation is inherently a local affair, and local communities know the right solutions for their place. The workforce is starting to reflect that shift."

That shift has implications for how conservation programs recruit, teach and place students. It means centering diverse knowledge systems, including Indigenous knowledge, alongside scientific methodologies. It means preparing graduates not just to do conservation work, but to do it in partnership with the communities most affected by it.

"If you go to a conservation organization like CI today, you're going to find a mix. It's no longer a conservation biologist kind of predominance," Summers said. "It's policy, it's lawyers, it's finance people, it's communications people, marketing, social scientists. We have gone from working in protected areas to asking: How do we actually make a dent in conservation if we don't address all those other sectors putting pressure on our natural spaces?"

The Conservation Forward panel was the school's first public event, and in many ways, a preview of what the institution intends to become. The audience that filled the Walton Center for Planetary Health auditorium was not just there to listen. They were there because they are the people this school was built for.

As the Rob Walton School of Conservation Futures continues to develop its curriculum, programming and field partnerships, the question at the center of that first panel remains its north star: How do you turn passion into practice?

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



Jack Kittinger, director of the Rob Walton School of Conservation Futures, speaks alongside assistant professors Karla Vargas and Jesse Senko at the Conservation Forward panel on Thursday, April 16, at the Walton Center for Planetary Health. Photo by Donovan Johnson/ASU