

ASU expands conservation learning with new degrees, global partnerships

1 year after launch, Conservation Futures at ASU enters its next phase

By Carrie Peterson, ASU News
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One year ago at Climate Week NYC, Arizona State University [announced a \\$115 million investment from the Rob Walton Foundation](#) to establish the Rob Walton School of Conservation Futures.

The largest gift in university history gave the school the opportunity to build its conservation curriculum from the ground up to support a broad spectrum of learners — and now that ecosystem is beginning to take shape.

Starting in spring 2027, the [Rob Walton School of Conservation Futures](#), which is part of the [Rob Walton College of Global Futures](#), will offer a Bachelor of Science in conservation and three master's pathways in conservation, environmental management, and innovation and leadership. Online programs are anticipated for fall 2027.

"Conservation is deeply connected to the complex challenges our college was created to address, and these programs will give students the knowledge, skills and experiences to understand those connections and, most importantly, put what they learn into action," said [Miki Kittilson](#), dean of the Rob Walton College of Global Futures, which operates as the academic and research engine of the Julie Ann Wrigley Global Futures Laboratory.

At the same time, [Conservation Futures Academy](#), the professional learning arm of the school, has developed more than 30 courses and recorded more than 1,500 enrollments in its first year, creating flexible learning opportunities for people already working in conservation and those preparing to enter the field.

"A year ago we announced the launch of the Rob Walton School of Conservation Futures, with a transformative investment to build leadership capacity in the conservation sector," said [Jack](#)

[Kittinger](#), the director of the School of Conservation Futures.

“Our degree programs will prepare students with the interdisciplinary capacities and practitioner competencies to make a real-world impact,” Kittinger continued. “By the year’s end, more than 2,000 working conservation practitioners will have benefited from upskilling opportunities through our Conservation Futures Academy.”

The School of Conservation Futures is beginning to demonstrate the approach ASU set out to build: conservation learning that can support people entering the profession, practitioners whose work is changing and experienced leaders taking on increasingly complex responsibilities.

(Video: {https://youtu.be/16BbG0VuXzI?si=7H_bv9CVVSSdLxdO})

Launching 'one-of-a-kind' degrees in conservation

The School of Conservation Futures is reimagining conservation education for the 21st century, developing a best-in-class conservation training program.

In the spirit of advancing a global conservation community and workforce, the new [Bachelor of Science in conservation](#) and [Master of Science in conservation](#) will include tracks in innovation and leadership and environmental management.

The one-of-a-kind curriculum, taught by experienced practitioners, will produce well-rounded leaders ready to solve real-world problems in real-world settings from local to global contexts. The new degree programs let students pursue their specific interests while imparting the essential knowledge they’ll need to drive conservation impact.

Exploration and immersive learning will be a defining feature of the school’s conservation degrees. Every student will participate in hands-on field experiences, where they can immerse themselves in nature; work across cultures and build relationships with communities; navigate policy and business; and untangle complex problems.

The curriculum teaches high-demand, practical skills — from project management to conservation communications, with a strong technical backbone of science, policy, markets and technology — that workforce partners seek in all new hires and will set up graduates for lifelong success in a changing world.

Building for people already doing the work

The school's Conservation Futures Academy is designed to be responsive to the needs of practitioners doing conservation work. That means staying close to the field and listening to practitioners, organizations and communities to meet current needs with upskilling offerings that will support workforce development.

Through the academy, ASU brings the expertise of its world-class faculty together with experts from the conservation sector, to design upskilling offerings from early to senior executive career stages.

“What people need from higher education changes throughout their lives, and universities need to be able to respond to, and even anticipate, that,” said [Marco Serrato](#), vice president of ASU’s Learning Enterprise. “Conservation Futures illustrates the way we’re doing that at ASU, bringing together faculty, partners and practitioners around what learners and organizations need now and what they’ll need next.”

That approach can lead to learning in areas that do not fit neatly within traditional conservation education.

The breadth of the academy’s first-year portfolio reflects that approach. Courses focus on an array of topics including: conservation technology, finance, project management, Indigenous conservation collaborations and leadership. Rather than treating conservation as a single discipline, the academy is building learning around the range of skills practitioners draw on in their work.

This focus is shaping new executive programs, including the Women in Conservation Leadership Retreat and Conservation Futures Executive Fellowship. Both are being built around challenges experienced conservation leaders have identified in their work, from governance and funding to negotiation, organizational leadership and decision-making.

Partnerships connecting learning with practice

The investment that established the school and academy also created a formal partnership with [Conservation International](#), giving ASU the opportunity to build alongside one of the world’s largest conservation organizations.

In the first year, ASU and Conservation International have co-built 13 of the courses in the academy’s catalog. The relationship gives ASU access to practitioners working across geographies and conservation challenges while bringing ASU’s faculty, learning design expertise and ability to deliver education at scale to the partnership.

It has also helped move learning beyond individual courses.

“One of the key roles of Conservation International, with field programs in more than 40 countries, is to connect learning with practice,” said Percy Summers, lead senior director for the partnership from Conservation International’s side. “By bringing practitioners, communities, Indigenous peoples and place-based conservation experiences into the learning ecosystem, we are helping ensure that conservation education remains relevant, applied and responsive to the realities of the field.”

Over the summer, Conservation International hosted a six-person ASU delegation across the Tsavo, Amboseli and Chyulu landscapes in Kenya. The team met with conservation practitioners and community leaders, and saw how decisions about wildlife, land, livelihoods and conservation intersect on the ground.

[Lukas Wenrick](#), senior director of learning innovations at Learning Enterprise at Arizona State University, was part of the delegation.

“Our time in Kenya reinforced how much we have to learn from the people doing this work every day,” Wenrick said. “At Learning Enterprise, we’re bringing those perspectives together with ASU expertise to shape learning that is useful, relevant and grounded in what’s happening in the field.”

(Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2N4qeLdHsac>)

The visit also deepened relationships with Conservation International Kenya and the [Taita Taveta Wildlife Conservancies Association](#), opening conversations about how ASU can support learning for people already working across the landscape.

Those relationships are also beginning to connect the professional and academic sides of conservation futures at ASU.

This year, the Taita Taveta Wildlife Conservancies Association hosted some of the first interns from the Rob Walton School of Conservation Futures. Students studied human-wildlife conflict, participated in ranger patrols and joined community-led conservation meetings across the Tsavo landscape.

“Before coming here, I thought conservation meant protecting nature. Now, I understand that conservation is also about listening,” said Martin Ndegwa, a graduate student studying data science, analytics and engineering through ASU’s Ira A. Fulton Schools of Engineering. “Listening to communities, learning from local knowledge, respecting different perspectives and recognizing that lasting conservation happens when people and nature live together.”

Working with partners, the Conservation Futures Academy developed four short courses to prepare the students for the experience, giving them context about conservation finance, community engagement and the landscape.

That model points toward a broader role the academy can play — using targeted learning to help organizations prepare interns, staff or other practitioners for new landscapes before they arrive, while professional learning can support people already working in those places.

“One year in, what excites me most is that we are helping build a new conservation learning ecosystem,” Summer said. “By bringing together universities, practitioners, Indigenous leaders, communities and conservation organizations, we are preparing a workforce capable of meeting the challenges of conservation in the 21st century.”

Cultivating relationships and looking ahead

As Conservation Futures at ASU celebrates its first anniversary, other relationships continue to develop as well.

At last year’s Climate Week NYC, a conversation between ASU and [Nia Tero](#), an international nonprofit that supports Indigenous peoples’ guardianship, has since grown into a course on Indigenous peoples’ rights and the care of Mother Earth in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Nia Tero has shaped the substance of the course, which will be offered in English and Spanish, with its first cohort beginning in January 2027.

Nia Tero brings years of experience supporting Indigenous peoples and their chosen allies in international policy spaces. ASU brings expertise in learning design and the ability to make that learning accessible to people across geographies.

The relationship is one example of what becomes possible as ASU builds connections with organizations whose knowledge and experience can bring important learning to a wider conservation community.

Also in 2027, the Conservation Futures Academy has plans for 20 new courses, all informed by what partners and practitioners have said are the greatest needs.

"We are working through partnerships in vital regions around the world," Kittinger said, "bringing the world-class capacities of ASU to support conservation organizations and thought leaders on the front lines."

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

Main image



Researchers at the Taita Taveta Wildlife Conservancies Association conduct camera-trap work in southern Kenya. The motion-triggered cameras record which routes wildlife use across community land. This year, the association hosted some of the first interns from ASU's Rob Walton School of Conservation Futures. Photo courtesy of ASU Learning Enterprise