



Eastern Baffin Island Fjord, Nunavut, Canada, Photo by Dave Secord

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MARINE CONSERVATION INITIATIVE EVALUATION EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The Marine Conservation Initiative

This report summarizes external evaluation findings for the Marine Conservation Initiative at the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation. The overall objectives of this evaluation were to:

- 1) Assess progress of the initiative in relation to its stated theories of change, outcomes, goals, intermediate results, specific objectives, and outputs.
- 2) Identify insights and lessons over the life of the initiative, especially its current strategy.

The audiences for this evaluation were the initiative staff, for the primary purpose of learning, foundation senior management for management purposes, and the Moore Foundation Board of Trustees, to understand progress and inform decision-making. Although the initiative had existed since 2005, this evaluation emphasized the strategies under a \$152 million budget [authorization approved by the foundation board in 2017](#) and extending through 2024. This evaluation process, including the three core components described below, began in mid-2022 and concluded at the end of 2023.

Since 2017, the initiative-level vision (aspirational outcome) for the initiative has been: *Healthy and resilient marine ecosystems in North America that support sustainable use.*

The initiative outcome at the time of authorization in 2017 was: *Protection and sustainable management of high-priority North American geographies are significantly advanced, and key conditions are put in place to cement and scale up gains across North America.*

This phase of the initiative was designed to address the initiative outcome through three strategic goals focused on advancing habitat protection, science-based fisheries management, and enabling conditions. There were two geographic foci – coastal British Columbia and the North American Arctic. Each initiative-level goal and geography had explicit, measurable, time-bound desired results, with milestones and indicators of intermediate results. One geography, the U.S. West Coast, was deprioritized in 2020, with budget redeployed toward other areas deemed to yield a greater return on investment. Built around a theory of change and opportunity analysis aimed at ocean health and resilience and associated interventions, the Marine Conservation Initiative's strategic design was also consistent with the foundation's [Four Filters](#).

Evaluation

The evaluation included three lines of inquiry – the initiative's approach, deployment, and results to date. These lines were informed by three distinct processes with accompanying products:

- 1) Monitoring system assessment. This independent analysis was a process audit that investigated the utility and rigor of the measurement, evaluation, and learning system, validating a tool used for evaluation and for adaptive management by staff.
- 2) Expert panel report. A nine-member independent panel conducted a high-level examination of the initiative's design, execution, results, and options for the future.
- 3) External independent evaluation. Other evaluation methods augmented the above including extensive review of internal and external documents, approximately 60 interviews with foundation staff and diverse external key informants, and evidence drawn from the measurement, evaluation and learning system. This summary of the overall external evaluation folds in the monitoring system assessment and expert panel findings.

Initiative Approach

The initiative outcome is driven by three main goals:

1. Protect essential ocean habitat.
2. Achieve science-based fisheries management.
3. Establish key enabling conditions.

The two focal regions, Coastal British Columbia and the North American Arctic, feature significant large-scale marine ecosystems. These geographies are ecologically notable due to sheer size, high biological productivity, functional and taxonomic diversity, and cultural and political salience to the human communities nearby. Both areas are locally and globally important for ocean conservation.

Each region of initiative focus is relatively remote and sparsely populated with people who are mostly Indigenous. This implies crucial, complex relationships with oceans and fisheries relating to livelihoods, cultures, influence, and authority. This blend of human and biological opportunity is why these seascapes have remained relatively intact.

Because these regions, selected from a global scan for biological and conservation values, are distinct within their respective countries, deploying conservation philanthropy must be viewed in the context of three themes that set the stage for this evaluation of the foundation's investments:

1. Governance arrangements and demographics, particularly Indigenous rights, identities, populations and their needs, authorities, area-based knowledge, and policy leverage.
2. The character of philanthropic partnerships particular to these places and communities.
3. Exceptional climate change in Northern oceans, including [marine heat waves](#) affecting protected areas and fisheries [range shifts](#), that affect many initiative goals and strategies.

Given the context and history of the places, chosen geographies presented potential for durable change with philanthropic support.

In these geographies, Indigenous governments are discovering common cause and pioneering large-scale partnerships with conservationists and resource management agencies. The substantial legal and historical differences between Canada and the U.S. (Alaska) mean approaches must be tailored to jurisdictions. The strategies of science-based fisheries management, habitat protection, and enabling conditions encompass the essential components of healthy, resilient, well-managed oceans described in the initiative vision and outcome. They include biodiversity at species and ecosystem levels, in the form of sustainable, shared management of high-biomass fisheries, and spatially explicit protected areas, including seascape-wide protections of ecological and evolutionary processes – all linked by Indigenous societies fully integrated with the ocean.

Sustainable human use and benefits are embedded in the habitat protection and fisheries management goals. There was strong agreement among external informants and the expert panel that the three initiative goals are mutually reinforcing. This is due to synergy among species targeted by fisheries, the habitats that they and non-commercial biodiversity share, and human dimensions of the oceans that interact strongly with both species and habitats. Without habitats, there are no fisheries. Without diverse, abundant, and harvestable seafood, ecological – including human – systems suffer. As the expert panel observed, “by developing important relationships and expertise, MCI and partners have established credibility together, strategically filling gaps and reinforcing important work.”

Alternative approaches or entry points suggested by informants and the expert panel were not wholly different strategies from the three selected for the initiative, so much as variations on the premises, actors, or overlays that might have added salience or reach to similar broad goals. They included food security and sovereignty, Indigenous economics, the ocean-climate nexus, and integration of land- and seascapes via watersheds and estuaries. Some proposed that an enabling conditions portfolio, discussed below, be a means or precondition to desired endpoints of habitat protection and science-based fisheries management, rather than a singular stand-alone strategy.

Initiative Deployment

More specifically, the initiative goals for achievement by the end of 2024 were:

Habitat protection: Marine waters in 20% of the U.S. and Canadian Arctic¹ and 30% of British Columbia will have effective protections addressing serious harms to the most important

¹ The U.S. and Canadian Arctic geography included the U.S. Bering and Chukchi Seas and all bioregions of the Canadian Arctic, except the Western Arctic, including the waters off Nunatsiavut.

habitats and ecosystems.

Science-based fisheries management: Improvements in science-based fisheries management will be achieved in the initiative's key geographies. For the Canadian Arctic and British Columbia, this was defined as fishing within science-based sustainable catch limits for 80% of fisheries. For the U.S. Arctic, where most federally managed fisheries are deemed within sustainable catch limits, this was defined as fisheries science, management, and decision-making fully incorporating climate science and ecosystem considerations.

Enabling conditions: Effective enabling conditions will be in place to ensure durable habitat protection and sustainable fisheries in the U.S. and Canada.

Evidence from the measurement, evaluation and learning system, external key informants, the expert panel, and staff interviews indicated that the deployment of initiative resources has been thoughtful, creative, and adaptable to new circumstances, which have shifted substantially over the course of the initiative. General deployment observations include:

- Grants were selected so their outcomes served at least one strategy and geography, and often supported multiple initiative-level intermediate results in more than one strategy.
- There was a portfolio effect whereby grants added up to more than the sum of their parts.
- Intermediaries functioning as re-grantors, knowledge aggregators, regional scaling mechanisms, or decision influencers were widely deployed to extend staff and grantee capacity. These were platforms to build capacity and add durability to results.
- The initiative team was effective at catalyzing coalitions and collaboratives of marine funders and grantees who added resources, tactical breadth, and longevity to portfolios.
- Staff contributions to achieving goals and intermediate results were frequent and varied, including sensitivity to cross-cultural interactions and priorities of place-based grantees.
- Investments were uneven across strategies, with a lower budget for the fisheries portfolio, reflecting opportunities deemed important in other areas, and a higher budget for Arctic place-based grants reflecting the size, variability, and operating costs of that region.
- The enabling conditions portfolio could have been better integrated across the initiative.

In general, the initiative was structured for systematic learning and adaptive management. Its measurement, evaluation and learning system was deemed by the monitoring systems assessment to be effective, rigorous, nuanced, and nimble. It is rich with detail, exceeding norms in the field, and was used for adaptive management by staff. The initiative's measurement, evaluation and learning plan was logically integrated with its management plan and theory of change.

Program deployment benefited from the sound management of relevant data and information. Staff created mechanisms for measurement and to support adaptive management, including:

- Government data (secondary or existing information) and when those were not available, commissioning additional analysis, metrics, or primary data from grantees or contractors.
- “Triple-layer protections,” wherein single-sector protections layered spatially are tracked to indicate areas protected from fishing or bottom-trawling, offshore development and shipping..
- Considerations of race, equity, diversity, and inclusion to inform deployment strategies.

Staff added value beyond grants to strategies depicted in the theory of change, including:

- Advising grantees and peer funders about developments in the field or geographies.
- Introducing grantees and funders personally and through various collectives.
- Commissioning studies and strategic syntheses useful to grantees, funders, and allies.
- Participating in coalitions and collaborative networks of funders and campaigners.
- Representing the foundation and its strategies in government relations contexts.
- Maintaining trust, cultural acuity, and social capital to inform strategy and decisions.

The enabling conditions strategy was designed to (1) facilitate conservation gains in priority geographies and (2) allow impact to scale beyond the foundation’s specific geographic interventions. Objectives were to build constituencies for conservation and strengthen policies across levels of governance – Indigenous, provincial, territorial, state, federal, and international – as well as private or corporate governance standards and levers.

The enabling conditions strategy, which was designed to reinforce the legal and regulatory frameworks that support fisheries and habitat protection in the place-based strategies, presented a larger deployment challenge than the latter. Because the chosen regions are atypical within each country, national enabling conditions deployment would have ideally been tailored to maximize results specific to those places, rather than generally across each country – this is not simple in practice.

Deployment and scaling of enabling conditions grants was nuanced. In both countries, the causal relationships between national reforms and area-based conservation and fisheries can be subtle, indirect, or emergent over time. Federal legislation on fisheries and oceans in both the U.S. and Canada is regionalized in its type and mode of implementation, audiences, impacts, and capacity for enforcement. Protected areas are inherently place-based, requiring local design, support, and management. Canadian minimum standards for marine protected areas can have immediate area-based benefits, while Alaska fisheries management cannot ignore new U.S. fisheries regulations. There remains an inherent structural tension within the initiative design between region-specific grants whose influence also flows upward to affect

national policy processes, and national enabling conditions grants that flow down into regional impacts. It is this combination of top-down and bottom-up forces that requires careful coordination and management.

Enabling conditions are conceptually and strategically powerful, including not just government policies, but institutional rules or actions that motivate or sustain conservation at various scales. Unlike Canada where much of its marine territory was an initiative focus, in the U.S. only one part of one state was the aim of place-based granting. Due to the distinctiveness of that U.S. region, it was harder in the U.S. than Canada to tailor enabling conditions grants to nuances of goals in Arctic Alaska.

Initiative Results

In the theory of change, the three initiative goals culminate in two integrated targets:

- Resilient U.S. and Canadian ocean ecosystems.
- Healthy populations of commercially fished species.

Desired strategic goals toward the initiative outcome were not fully reached as of mid-2023, but substantial overall contributions and progress toward each of them had been made. In summary:

- The **habitat protection** goal will likely be surpassed in 2024 or at the latest by the end of 2025.
- The **science-based fisheries management** goal will be partially achieved by the end of 2024.
- The **enabling conditions** goal will be largely achieved in 2024.

Conclusions and summary of evaluation findings

The initiative's approach to marine conservation was informed by science and Indigenous knowledge, a commitment to partnerships, an understanding of climate and other environmental changes, and the unique political and cultural conditions in the highly biologically productive places it chose to work. In the priority regions in both Canada and Alaska, the initiative supported Indigenous partners along with nonprofit organizations and policy and science experts. The initiative team embraced adaptive management and data, informed along the way by a specialized measurement, evaluation, and learning system and a range of other inputs, to make large and small course corrections.

The initiative **approach**:

- Was informed by science, political considerations, and Indigenous knowledge.

- Chose very productive, biodiverse geographies with opportunities for conservation gains.
- Established goals at suitable ecological and policy scales for the initiative vision and outcome.
- Was informed by understanding of governance, demographics, partnerships, and climate.
- Supported Indigenous partners whose capacity is essential to conservation and durability.
- Was built on important goals that are vulnerable to political shifts in the U.S. and Canada, despite essential work that transcends politics and builds alliances.
- Aspired to long-term systems changes that cannot be completed in one initiative cycle yet is fundamental to healthy ocean ecosystems

The **deployment** of resources:

- Used data, measurement, evaluation, and learning often and effectively in decisions.
- Provided data and analysis to others to improve their decision-making.
- Used staff expertise and relationships effectively to catalyze progress toward identified goals.
- Grew the field of marine conservation philanthropy and expanded its ideas and reach.
- Was distributed unevenly but thoughtfully across issue areas and geographies.
- Adapted strategies to negative external changes including a pandemic, war, and policy whiplash, and to positive changes including political and philanthropic opportunity.

The collective work contributed to **results**:

- Created pathways toward large-scale conservation designations in the Canadian Arctic.
- Solidified pathways to large-scale conservation designations in British Columbia.
- Solidified and grew capacity for conservation in British Columbia and the North American Arctic.
- Innovated a novel way to account for layered sector-based spatial marine habitat protections.
- Contributed to buffering conservation against threats across international boundaries.
- Contributed to federal reforms of Canadian fisheries management.
- Contributed to improving climate and ecosystem considerations in fisheries in Alaska.
- Defended fisheries standards in the U.S. against threatened erosion.
- Identified and expanded the constituencies for marine conservation in both geographies.

The initiative laid **future groundwork** for:

- Deepening strategic partnerships for Indigenous-led conservation in Canada and Alaska.
- Regional or national systems change in U.S. and Canadian ocean and fishery governance.

- Extending its influence to include new entry points for durable marine conservation.

Overall, the initiative has helped build the field of marine conservation by influencing funders to learn and contribute resources, creating philanthropic mechanisms, and curating and connecting partners across issues and geographies. It chose mutually reinforcing goals, while sometimes adding unnecessary complexity in deployment by making enabling conditions its own silo instead of integrating the concept at all relevant scales into fisheries and habitat strategies. The Marine Conservation Initiative has not yet completely achieved its desired results, but it has created pathways to a long-term, scalable habitat protection and sustainable fisheries legacy in British Columbia and the Canadian Arctic. It is well positioned to lock in incipient gains, build on strong Indigenous and other conservation partnerships, and extend what it has learned to adjacent geographies, to intertwined issues, and to alternative salient entry points for marine conservation.