

Indigenous Conservation Council

Indigenous Guardians Fund Feasibility Study



Prepared By:



The Native World Alliance

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I. INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

The following report was commissioned by the Indigenous Conservation Council (ICC) to determine the feasibility, alignment, partnerships, opportunities, threats, and recommendations to inform an Indigenous Guardians Fund to support Tribal Nation members in healing ancestral lands and waters along the Chesapeake Bay. The methodology included gathering sector research and data, interviewing all seven ICC member leaders, the ICC Executive Director, and fifteen philanthropic leaders.

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Photos 1, 6-7 provided by Indigenous Conservation Council

III. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Chesapeake Bay is a 40-million-acre watershed with a diverse ecosystem directly affecting six states and our nation at large. As the nation's largest estuary, it is home to thousands of species, circulating trillions of gallons of water and home to 18 million people. Its history, much like its waters, is clouded with enduring severe impacts to its habitat and its inhabitants, including its original stewards— the Indigenous Peoples of the Chesapeake Bay. The Indigenous Peoples of this region orchestrated ecosystem-based management since time immemorial. The region is home to seven Tribes, recently federally recognized, all of which are connected and dedicated to Indigenous care of the Chesapeake Bay.

Indigenous-led practices are a growing movement around the world to rekindle these approaches in ecosystems reeling from the impacts of climate change, sea-level rise, and unsustainable development. Protecting and preserving the Chesapeake Bay region is now a shared goal of seven federally recognized Virginia Tribes based in the Chesapeake region as codified in resolution passed January 15, 2025 and signed by all Chiefs of the Tribes.¹ And, as of December 2, 2025, exploring a pathway to launch Indigenous Guardians programs to achieve the goals of the Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement² is also a formal interest of the Chesapeake Executive Council. In a new directive approved by all six Governors of the Chesapeake Bay watershed, the Mayor of DC, the federal agency families, and the Chesapeake Bay Commission, signatories directed the Partnership to develop recommendations for a formal enduring partnership with Tribal Nations to materially advance large landscape goals in the region.

The region can greatly benefit from revitalized Indigenous Knowledge, Tribal sovereignty, and Tribal law in ways that will result in heightened care for the Chesapeake Bay. There is a great opportunity for increased collaboration and partnership with Tribal governments and organizations dedicated to the Chesapeake Bay region. The Indigenous Guardians Fund could be a catalyst for Tribally-responsive approaches to connecting community, cultural practices, and Indigenous values to an ethic of care.

Endnotes

¹<https://www.indigenous-chesapeake.net/post/a-formal-declaration-for-the-chesapeake-bay-program>

²<https://www.chesapeakebay.net/what/publications/chesapeake-executive-council-charge-to-the-principals-staff-committee-tribes-as-a-formal-and-enduring-partner-in-the-chesapeake-bay-program>

IV. GUIDING QUESTIONS

This feasibility study explores key factors the Indigenous Conservation Council (ICC) will consider to determine the opportunities, alignment, and challenges to create an Indigenous Guardians Fund as the backbone for expanded Indigenous-led conservation in the region. Principally, the Indigenous Guardians Fund will support flexibility to reinforce Tribal sovereignty and revitalize Indigenous Knowledge in whatever ways are culturally relevant and appropriate for its Tribal Nation members. Additionally, the fund seeks to document and share resulting outcomes of expanded legal tenure and Indigenous connections to ancestral landscapes to demonstrate the effectiveness of Indigenous-led conservation and restoration efforts.

This feasibility study seeks to gain more understanding of the following:

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1. **Tribal leadership perspectives and needs to support Indigenous-led approaches that support revitalized health of ancestral lands, waters, and communities.**
 2. **Philanthropic interests and alignment in seeding an Indigenous Guardians Fund.**
 3. **Gaps in supporting Indigenous-led initiatives in the Chesapeake Bay to assess the need for such a fund.**
 4. **Guidance for the ICC leadership on a collective path forward to develop an Indigenous Guardians Fund.**
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V. RECOMMENDATIONS

Upon understanding the unique needs from each Tribal leader, interviewing philanthropic leaders, analyzing the data and trends in funding, and evaluating goals of other stakeholder organizations for the Chesapeake Bay in conservation, protection and restorative work—there is great alignment of shared goals with environmental leaders and the ICC leadership.

Interest in Indigenous Knowledge and supporting Tribal Nations is almost universal among the funding community. It is determined an Indigenous fund is both viable and a necessity.

Representative discussions with philanthropic leaders suggest that the Chesapeake Bay needs Indigenous Knowledge, practices, and can benefit from Tribal sovereignty to protect and preserve this vital ecosystem. **The formation of the ICC provides a unique and critical pathway for government agencies, stakeholders, and philanthropic funders to support Indigenous led environmental work in a way that honors Tribal sovereignty with capacity building** to support Indigenous-led approaches for the benefit of the Chesapeake Bay. However, the ICC as a growing organization with a relatively small donor base will need a concerted effort by the funding community to raise awareness and invest in this innovative Indigenous approach.

In order to undertake the efforts to successfully develop and manage an Indigenous Guardians Fund, the following recommendations are made for the ICC's consideration:

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1. **Enhance awareness to the philanthropic community of the needs, gaps, Tribal leadership efforts, and opportunities that can result from Native-controlled and directed funding in the region.**
 2. **Engage philanthropic organizations to co-develop and help catalyze broader investment in the Indigenous Guardians Fund.**
 3. **Further develop Fund governance, capacity, and transparency practices for the Fund to ensure equity and impact.**
 4. **Leverage future recommendations of the Chesapeake Bay Partnership to formally engage Tribal Nations as a platform to launch an Indigenous Guardians Fund**
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VI. OVERVIEW

The Chesapeake Bay: This vast ecosystem impacts thousands of species, and tens of millions of people. As one of the largest estuaries in the world, the Bay is in need of Indigenous care, healing, and leadership—and precisely for this reason was selected as a new global Hope Spot by Mission Blue in June 2025.³

- Covering over 64,000 square miles, the Chesapeake Bay is the largest estuary in the United States and third largest in the world⁵.
- Borders six states; Delaware, Maryland, New York, Pennsylvania, Virginia, West Virginia, and the District of Columbia⁵.
- 18 million people are affected by the Chesapeake Bay⁶.
- Holds 18 trillion gallons of water⁵.
- Home to over 3600 species of plant, animal and sea life⁵.
- The regions over 83,000 farms generate more than \$10 billion annually⁵.
- Impacted by pollutants caused by agriculture, industrial discharges from manufacturing & mining, stormwater management contributing to runoff from oil, metal & plastics, wastewater treatment contributing to nutrient & sediment pollution⁷.
- 29.8% of the Chesapeake Bay is considered polluted due to significant nutrient pollution⁸.
- Species extinction, while there is no specific number, estimates range from a few dozen to nearly 200 species have gone extinct in the region⁹.



Lauded as one of the world’s most sophisticated restoration efforts, the Chesapeake Bay is struggling to achieve mandated water quality goals with its status quo approach—only (30%) of its targets for clean water have been met in the last decade.⁴ This delicate ecosystem has been battered by centuries of exploitation to the detriment of clean water, wildlife, forests, and wetlands. With sea levels rising, proliferating data centers challenging the future of clean drinking water, and political uncertainty, new approaches are needed. **Indigenous leadership is imperative to change the course.**

Indigenous Knowledge and Practices: Since time immemorial Indigenous Peoples of the Chesapeake Bay have been connected to the land and waterways. Their knowledge and time-tested practices resulted in a flourishing and vibrant ecosystem. A recent Harvard study concluded that, “Indigenous conservation is producing a diverse range of positive outcomes for

the environment.”¹⁰ This study concluded two key findings: “1. Indigenous conservation efforts are achieving sought after results, benefitting ecosystems, important species, biodiversity and more, and 2. Indigenous conservationists often out-perform their counterparts”.¹⁰ Globally, Indigenous practices are being recognized for their value in saving our planet. The Environmental Reports site stating, “The integration of Indigenous Knowledge and traditional practices into biodiversity conservation represents a promising pathway toward more effective and sustainable environmental stewardship. By recognizing the value of traditional ecological knowledge and fostering collaboration between Indigenous communities and conservation practitioners, we can enhance our understanding of ecosystems and improve conservation outcomes.”¹¹ As the Bay continues to face an onslaught of environmental challenges, Indigenous Knowledge and practices are needed now more than ever.

“Indigenous conservationists often out-perform their counterparts.”

The Indigenous Conservation Council (ICC): Incorporated by the leadership of the federally recognized tribes in Virginia in 2023, the Indigenous Conservation Council (ICC) is a formal intertribal consortia dedicated to building Tribal capacity to care, connect, and heal ancestral lands and waters in the Chesapeake Bay region. The Council supports its Tribal Nation members to develop landscape-scale partnerships, provide training and expertise to develop sovereignty-rich approaches to land protection, and pool resources to support long-term care and connection to ancestral lands and waters. As a growing organization, the ICC has already helped collectively catalyze a regional conversation among states, federal agencies, and the conservation community that resulted in inclusion of Indigenous Knowledge, respect for Tribal sovereignty, and a new Tribal lands metric within the Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement, approved in December 2025. By supporting its members, the ICC is also uniquely supporting conversations of access to funding sources and conservation planning collaboratives, connections to national-level Indigenous-led organizations, and supporting best practices in government-to-government consultation.

Endnotes

³<https://missionblue.org/2025/06/chesapeake-bay-recognized-as-a-hope-spot-for-nature-history-and-community/>

⁴<https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/IF11402>

⁵<https://oceanservice.noaa.gov/facts/chesapeake.html>

⁶www.usgs.gov/centers/chesapeake-bay-activities/news/population-growth

⁷<https://mde.maryland.gov/programs/Water/TMDL/TMDLImplementation/Pages/pollution-in-the-chesapeake.aspx>

⁸<https://www.chesapeakebay.net/news/pressrelease/chesapeake-bay-sees-slight-improvement-in-water-quality>

⁹<https://www.chesapeakebay.net/news/blog/tag/endangered-species>

¹⁰<https://ash.harvard.edu/resources/experts-not-obstacles-indigenous-conservation-excellence-and-the-trap-of-conservation-at-any-cost/>

¹¹<https://er.researchfloor.org/integrating-indigenous-knowledge-and-traditional-practices-for-biodiversity-conservation-in-a-modern-world/>

VII. INDIGENOUS PATHWAYS, A DISCUSSION WITH TRIBAL LEADERS



Top Row Left to Right: Tribal Council Reggie Stewart (Chickahominy), Former Chief Robert Gray (Pamunkey), Chief Frank Adams (Upper Mattaponi), Former Assistant Chief David Hennaman (Nansemond).
Bottom Row Left to Right: Chief Joanne Howard (Eastern Chickahominy), Chief Anne Richardson (Rappahannock), Chief Dianne Shields (Monacan).
ICC Board Members not pictured: Chief Kevin Brown (Pamunkey), Tribal Council Barbara Orf (Nansemond)

Photo provided by the Chesapeake Conservancy

The following section explores the collective vision of Tribal leadership, their views about the

environment, what is harming the land and water, and how Indigenous Knowledge and ways can revitalize healing for all. It explores their current challenges, gaps and how their people are impacted by industry and an ever-increasing population. Equally important, the Tribal leaders share their views on partnership, support, and what increased funding could mean for their communities. The interviews were conducted with each of the Indigenous Conservation Council Tribal leaders and the ICC's Executive Director. Each of the board members represent their Tribe; Chickahominy Indian Tribe (Eastern Division), Chickahominy Indian Tribe, Rappahannock Tribe, Pamunkey Indian Tribe, Nansemond Indian Nation, Monacan Indian Nation, and the Upper Mattaponi Indian Tribe. The following four categories were discussed at length.

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- **Vision**
 - **Impacts**
 - **Needs, Gaps**
 - **Partnership and Support**
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Vision

The first question asked the ICC leadership what are Indigenous-led approaches to the environmental challenges facing the Bay, and what is their vision for the Indigenous Guardians Fund to address these challenges?

The majority of the Tribal leaders discussed how time-honored knowledge and time-tested practices have shown that Indigenous-led approaches provide many of the solutions for today's environmental challenges. Tribal Nations conduct environmental work in conservation, preservation, and restoration that benefits their communities and the surrounding communities. They have been entrusted to keep the land however, they are not always included in strategies that impact the Bay and their Tribal communities. One of the Chiefs noted

that Indigenous-led environmental work acknowledges that Indigenous People should not be an afterthought, but should lead the way.

In the interviews, three themes emerged as the highest priorities; **Connection to Land, Self-Sufficiency and Flexible Funding.**

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- **Connection to Land**
 - **Self-Sufficiency**
 - **Flexible Funding**
 - **Community**
 - **Conservation**
 - **Water**
-

Connection to Land: The Tribal leaders discussed how Indigenous Peoples have been stewards of the land and water since time immemorial—and even more than stewards, they are a part of the land and the land is a part of them. They continue to carry the sacred duty entrusted to them to nourish and cherish the land, waters and critters they share on this earth. The Tribal leaders discussed the importance of land restoration, protection of sacred sites and community cultural education.



Photo provided by the Chesapeake Conservancy

Indigenous-led environmental work is not just a theory of change, or an environmental program, for Indigenous People, it is a way of life.

Self-Sufficiency: Many of the Tribal leaders discussed the importance of self-sufficiency and becoming less reliant on ever changing federal dollars and programs. Several needs were shared about protecting, preserving and restoring the land and waterways, but few funding solutions are being offered outside of competitive federal grant funds. Many barriers still exist that inhibit their ability to implement their solutions, for example, legislation enabling federal recognition limited economic development opportunities for six of the ICC Tribal Nation members, that are located in rural areas with significant challenges to support economic

development. These Tribes want to develop new partnerships to support their ability to provide resources for their communities.

Flexible Funding: The third category centered around their vision for the Indigenous Guardians Fund. They discussed the need for flexible funding, planning, and programs, but stressed the importance of building capacity. Each Tribe has distinct needs and various levels of development of their environmental programs. Flexible funding would enable each of them to address the needs of their communities. Understanding their infrastructure and Indigenous practices is vital to understanding how to partner with these Tribes, and providing flexible funding is the best way to honor their Tribal sovereignty.

The next three areas identified by the Tribal leaders with significance was the connection of their **communities**, the importance of **conservation** work, and how the impacts to the **water** are affecting their people. The health and well-being of their communities are directly impacted by what happens to their environment. Ongoing conservation efforts to manage and sustain a healthy thriving ecosystem is essential for the health of the environment and for the health of their people.

Impacts

The Chesapeake Bay area has seen significant impacts from an increasing population and from growing industries. Several of the Tribal leaders discussed the challenges their communities are facing from industries such as technology/data centers, industrial sites, farming, and recreational activities. This has aided in habitat destruction, pollutants, and compromised many species with several species now extinct. Some of the Tribal leaders noting specific examples of the reduction of their sturgeon, shad and oysters.

Other impacts discussed included climate change, shoreline degradation, and rising water levels. This had aided in habitat destruction and loss of land. The Pamunkey Indian Reservation, one of the nations oldest Indian reservations was listed in 2025 as one of the most endangered sites in America due to climate-change and sea-level rise.¹² Lastly, the importance of understanding and honoring Tribal sovereignty was discussed. The Tribal leaders felt more policy work is needed to protect and identify resources to support their work, not as a program, but based on federal trust responsibilities and to uphold treaty obligations. The federal Indian trust responsibility is a legally enforceable fiduciary obligation on the part of the United States to protect Tribal treaty rights, lands, assets, and resources.¹³ And the Tribal leaders felt at decision making committees, they are not fully acknowledged as Tribal governments, and are treated more like a “stake holder”, and at times not consulted with decisions that affect their communities.

The Tribal leaders collectively discussed eight areas that have impacted their lands and waterways:

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- **Habitat Destruction**
 - **Water Pollution**
 - **Loss of Land or Access to Sacred Sites**
 - **Species Reduction**
 - **Industry, Pollution, Data Centers**
 - **Climate Change**
 - **Stronger Policy Measures**
 - **Tribal Sovereignty Enforced**
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Tribal Needs

The next question focused on the needs and gaps of the ICC member Tribes. Each of the leadership members could discuss more than one priority area. In total ten areas were discussed as high needs for their Tribes.

The following Graph 1.1 illustrates how **Capacity** was discussed as the number one priority. It received the most inputs for several reasons including the need for increased staffing, planning and for programs. The Tribal leaders stressed the need for flexible funding as a critical pathway because each Tribe has distinct needs and challenges they face.

The next priority was **Programs**. This category was closely linked to capacity, as many of the Tribal leaders gave examples of programs they could develop or increase with additional funding. These programs included water quality standards, youth programs, species revitalization, job training and community enrichment.

The next priority discussed was **Land**. Integral to their identity, culture and community is the land they belong to. Some of the Tribal leaders discussed the desire to reclaim and/or buy back their ancestral lands for preservation and protection of cultural sites. Across all of the ICC's Tribal Nation members, the Tribes currently hold title to approximately 10,000 acres. This relatively landless footprint exists as the rule not the exception across the region.



A few of the Tribal leaders noted land easements and co-management as a solution for shared access with other communities. To wit, the ability for Tribal governments to hold easements on their lands is currently being legislatively proposed in the Virginia General Assembly.

The next priority area identified was **Culture**. A few of the Tribal leaders discussed the importance of access to lands with cultural significance and the practice of their cultural traditions. According to the Commonwealth of Virginia's own data, only .2% of protected lands are currently classified as Tribal lands and cultural access to waterways for ceremony have been almost entirely severed. Additionally, the importance of cultural education and community outreach was discussed of high importance.

The last six areas they needed support were; Conservation, Preservation, Education, Advocacy and Legal Support. See Graph 1.1.

-
- **Capacity**
 - **Programs**
 - **Land**
-

Graph 1.1 Categories Tribes Need Funding

Category	Sub Category	Input
Capacity	Flexible Funding	7
Programs	Water Quality, Youth, Species	6
Land		4
Culture		2
Restoration		2
Conservation		1
Preservation		1
Education		1
Advocacy		1
Legal Support		1

Partnership and Support

The final question centered around how partnership and investment could support their work. The Tribal leaders discussed their collective goals and their distinct community needs. The following points were given as examples of what investment in Tribally-led environmental work could look like, what kind of positive impacts could be realized, and how this benefits the Chesapeake Bay communities. The ICC Tribal leaders discuss the importance of **partnership**. They feel they are not in this alone and they need partnership, allies and investment. The Tribal leaders shared fifteen examples of how extra resources could support Tribally-led work.

- Buy back land that was lost.
 - Restore and protect land that has been destroyed.
 - Revitalize cultural practices.
 - Bring back species such as fish, sturgeon, shad and oysters.
 - Develop water monitoring program and reduce water pollutants.
 - Support forest programs
 - Added capacity for our environmental department.
 - Develop an agriculture program.
 - Cleanup polluted areas.
 - Develop environmental standards and provide accountability.
 - Advocate for policy and stronger protection measures.
 - Fight for the rivers and water, and rights of nature.
 - Provide training for Tribal citizens.
 - Provide education and community outreach on cultural sites.
 - Leverage Tribal sovereignty to protect the environment.
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Conclusion

The power of the ICC vision is significant, meaningful, and stresses the value of Indigenous-led approaches for the health of ancestral lands, waters, and all relations in whatever ways the Tribes deem appropriate. Indigenous-led approaches greatly benefit each Tribe and society at large. Input from the ICC Tribal leaders sought funding partners that would support their environmental work with flexible funding to meet their unique needs. While some have an immediate need for land acquisition, others identified, species restoration, habitat restoration, clean water programs, protection of sacred sites, addressing impacts from industries such as data centers, as a few examples.

The ICC provides a unique model that currently represents the seven Virginia federally recognized Tribes and provides a central pathway for coordination, collaboration and partnerships. The vision, scope, and alignment of work make the Indigenous Guardians Fund one of the best investments for the Chesapeake Bay.

The ICC is best positioned to be the central organization with a fund to support Indigenous-led approaches for the Chesapeake Bay.

Endnotes

¹²<https://savingplaces.org/places/pamunkey>

¹³<https://www.bia.gov/faqs/what-federal-indian-trust-responsibility>

VIII. FUNDING COMMUNITY

The following input was collected by conducting interviews from a group of fifteen funders and partners representing varying organization with in the philanthropic sector. These organizations represent nine foundations, two connectors to philanthropy, one Tribal giving foundation, one corporate giving foundation, one strategy development organization, and one “Big Green” organization. Each organization was sent in advance a two-page document describing the Indigenous Guardians Fund. Each interview was conducted in a 30-minute session. At the start of the interview each participant was read the following statement:

“The Indigenous Conservation Council (ICC) is dedicated to building the capacity of Tribal Nations to protect, care, and connect to their lands in ways that reinforce sovereignty and self-determination. The ICC is conducting a feasibility study to inform an Indigenous Guardians Fund. The purpose of the Indigenous Guardians Fund is to provide resources for capacity to support utilizing Indigenous Knowledge, making cultural connections, and partnerships to revitalize protection and restoration of land, water, and all relations.”

The interviews sought to better understand how each of these organizations determine what and how they will support programs and initiatives. It also sought to better understand their philosophy of supporting Tribal projects (if any), if there is alignment with their giving goals and the Indigenous Guardians Fund, and ultimately, if the Indigenous Guardians Fund is a project they could support. These questions sought to better understand the following:

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- What programs and/or initiatives do they fund?
 - Why do they fund certain projects?
 - How do they fund projects?
 - What is their philosophy of funding Tribal work?
 - Is there alignment with their funding goals and the Indigenous Guardians Fund?
 - What justifications do they see to fund the Indigenous Guardians Fund?
 - Would they fund the Indigenous Guardians Fund, and if so at what level?
 - How else could they support the ICC?
-

Funding Categories

This group of partners center around five major categories; environmental work, community, advocacy, power building, and systems change. Their approach to funding projects identified six categories of funding; Tribal programs, capacity, advocacy & legal, protection (land, water, species), programs, and collaborations. All of them (100%), support environmental work in some capacity and identified ten sub sections they support including; conservation, preservation, habitat restoration, land acquisition, species protection, water issues, agriculture, food systems, climate, and environmental justice.

As illustrated in Graph 1.2, the majority of these partners (87%), have funded or partnered with a Tribal program or project. The majority of them, (73%) identified Indigenous knowledge as a direct alignment with their funding goals and a basis to partner with Tribes [Graph 1.4]. Of the fifteen, all but two said they could support the Indigenous Guardians Fund in one capacity or another. And the two that could not support it was due to circumstance not interest, one foundation focuses on a different region but would be willing to talk to other funders, and the other is a strategy organization, not a funder but was supportive of the Indigenous Guardians Fund.

The following graph illustrates the categories these organizations discussed they support.

Graph 1.2: Funding Categories

Name	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	%
Tribal Programs	X		x	X	x	x	x	X	X	X		x	x	x	X	87%
Conservation	X	X	X	X					X	X	X	X	x			60%
Preservation		X	X	X		X				X				x		40%
Habitat Restoration			x	X						X	X	X				33%
Land Back	x					x	X						X			27%
Capacity Building	x			X		x			X				X	x	x	47%
Species Protection				X		x					X					20%
Water Protection	X		x	X		X					X	X				40%
Threats; Data Centers		X									X					13%
Advocacy	X		X		x	X		X	X	X						47%
Policy	X															7%
Litigation	x															7%
Community					x					X	X	X	X	x	x	47%
Education								X	X			X				20%
Cultural Preservation				X		X			X				X			27%
Public Access		X					X									13%
Tribal Sovereignty				X	x		X		X	X				x	x	47%
Leadership	x								X	X					x	27%
Workforce Development	X															7%
Food Systems		X												x		13%
Youth Initiatives									X							7%
Climate								x				X			x	20%

Agriculture		x			x							X				20%
Movement Building					x			X		x				x		27%
Environmental Justice					x				X		X				x	27%
Collaborations	x		x				x		X	X	x					40%

Other strong correlations indicate support for conservation at (60%), advocacy (47%), Tribal sovereignty (47%), capacity building (47%), community (47%), water protection (40%), and collaborations (40%). All of these illustrate alignment with their funding goals and strong justifications for why they could or should fund Tribally-led environmental work to support the capacity to develop and administer Tribal programs to conserve, preserve, restore, and protect land, waterways and species.

Funding Justifications

The following Graph 1.3 illustrates these organizations funding areas. Sharing their views on why these organizations fund certain projects, there were eleven general categories that emerged. Respondents could name more than one reason to fund a particular project. The following illustrates at the top of the list, **Community** was identified by five of the respondents wherein, involving community, benefitting community, and showing community impacts were important areas for these partners. Second was **Alignment** and **Leadership**, with their goals and values with three inputs. These respondents discussed the importance in detail about strong alignment with their goals, and evaluating the strength of leadership to determine the viability, longevity and successful implementation of projects they fund.

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- **Community**
 - **Alignment**
 - **Leadership**
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Next were five equally important reasons with two inputs each; **Inspiring and Transformative**, **Fund Early as a Catalyst**, **Relationship**, and a **Sustainable Plan**. Each of the categories pointed to supporting projects that were inspiring, have effective leadership, were able to develop a relationship with the grantee, had a plan to maintain and grow the project, and two of the respondents preferred to fund early in the development of a project. The remaining categories each received one comment as a reason they fund projects in these areas.

Graph 1.3 Funding Targets

Category	Inputs
Community	5

Alignment	3
Leadership	3
Inspiring, Transformative	2
Fund Early, Catalyst	2
Relationship	2
Sustainable Plan	2
BIPOC Equity	1
Financial Stability	1
Coalition	1
Grassroots	1

Funding Processes

When discussing how they fund projects, many discussed their procedures and processes often beginning with developing a relationship with the grantee and learning more about the community. The follow up processes included reviewing an organizations leadership and board, website, social media, financial statements, 990's, audits, Candid and Guide Star pages. Another common theme discussed was that they typically fund at a smaller amount with new partners and gradually increase their funding amount based on how the organization manages and demonstrates outcomes and impacts.

Philosophy of Funding Tribal Projects

When asked about their philosophy of working with or supporting Tribal projects, most of the respondents did not have an identified Tribal strategy. However, all of them saw value in working with or partnering with Tribal projects. Most of them at (87%) had funded one or more Tribal projects, (73%) valued incorporating and/or supporting Indigenous Knowledge in projects, (47%) specifically cited the desire to support Tribal sovereignty, and (27%) supported cultural preservation. This combined with the overwhelming support of environmental work demonstrates several intersections of alignment with this group of partners and strong justification to support Indigenous-led pathways.

*Indigenous
Knowledge is the
strongest
justification to
fund Indigenous-
led pathways.*

Justifications to Fund Tribally Led Projects

The following categories in Graph 1.4 were identified as the justifications for supporting Tribally led environmental work.

Respondents could name more than one reason to support Tribally-led work. The strongest justification centered around **Indigenous Knowledge** with eleven inputs (73%) of the respondents discussing the value and importance of Indigenous Knowledge in

alignment with their funding goals. The next category identified with six inputs was **Land**, land stewardship, and land acquisition. Closely connected to the second strongest justification with five inputs was partnering and/or leveraging **Tribal sovereignty** to protect lands and waterways. The next two justifications were also closely connected, seeing **Alignment** with their existing funding goals, and by supporting Tribal environmental work contributed to the larger **environmental movement**. The next compelling justification named effective **Leadership** as an essential element to fund a Tribal project. The next justification identified **Equity** as a compelling reason, one large foundation suggesting, “it’s just the right thing to do”. The remaining categories each received one comment and are not necessarily less important.

Graph 1.4 Justification to Fund Tribally-led Work

Category	Input
Indigenous Knowledge	11
Land Stewardship and Acquisition	6
Leverage Tribal Sovereignty	5
Alignment	4
Supports Larger Environmental Movement	3
Leadership	3
Equity	2
Purpose, Mission	1
Structure of Organization	1
Planning and Development	1
Transparency	1
Tribal Buy In	1
Build Trust	1
Preserve Culture	1
Protection, From Data Centers Impacts	1

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- Indigenous Knowledge
 - Land
 - Tribal Sovereignty
-

Questions and Clarifications

When asked if there were any reasons why these partners would not fund Tribally-led environmental work, none with the exception of the non-funding organization, had any reasons not to support this fund. When asked if they had any questions or would like to learn more about certain aspects of this fund, they expressed a desire be educated more in the following areas:

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- **The Indigenous Conservation Council (ICC) and Its Role.**
 - **Tribal Sovereignty and Its Implications on Land Protection.**
 - **Tribal Governance Structures and Operational Procedures.**
 - **More Examples of How This Fund Could Meet Tribal Needs.**
 - **This Funds Target Goals.**
-

There was particular interest on learning more about Tribal sovereignty and how it could be leveraged to provide additional protections on land, waterways and species. This could be a strong area to position increased collaborations and partnerships with Tribes and environmental organizations.

Support For the Indigenous Guardians Fund

Of the 15, the majority said they could support the Indigenous Guardians Fund in one capacity or another. In testing for support levels, some discussed a specific funding commitment, but many said it would depend on the target goal of the fund. **Based on the interviews and their giving history, the range and potential from this group is estimated to be up to \$10M.** A few of these organizations have the capacity to do a larger donation of \$5M, and with more engagement and interaction they could give more. Many of them also noted they would be willing to participate in a funder briefing and help rally more funders. This could catalyze significantly more support, possibly in the \$10 to \$20M range to launch this fund.

IX. BARRIERS, THREATS & OPPORTUNITIES

Upon reviewing the data and trends, and conducting interviews with philanthropic leaders, there are some barriers, threats, and gaps providing an opportunity for increased partnership. Currently, there isn't an Indigenous-led fund representing Tribes exclusively dedicated to the Chesapeake Bay. However, there is precedent of Indigenous-led funds based on Indigenous values and systems such as the Wabanaki Self Determination Fund based in Maine.¹⁴ This fund supports repairing, rebuilding and sustaining Wabanaki relationships, kinship, and access to place. The Coast Funds is a Canadian based fund that provides funding for First Nations in economic development and conservation initiatives.¹⁵ **These demonstrate the validity of an Indigenous-led fund and provide a roadmap for an Indigenous-led fund for the Chesapeake Bay.**

Barriers: A MAJOR barrier was the lack of understanding and acknowledgement of Tribal Nations as governments. As sovereign Tribal governments, representation at decision makers committees should include Tribal Nations. One example of this, the Chesapeake Executive Council is tasked to establish the vision and strategic direction for the restoration and

protection of the Chesapeake Bay.²² While this committee consists of governors, a city mayor and federal employees, it does not include Tribal leaders from any of the Tribal Nations in the Chesapeake Bay region. This is not consistent with federal policy, directives and Tribal consultation processes to work directly with Tribal Nations in efforts that affect Tribal lands, sacred sites, natural resources, co-management and co-stewardship projects.²⁴ No justifiable reason could be found for this lack of Tribal inclusion. Failure to include Tribal Nations in all decisions and efforts that impact their ancestral lands and waterways borders on gross negligence, systemic incompetence or worse.

Another barrier that surfaced in the interviews is the need for more education of Tribal Nations and their processes. This lack of knowledge was not expressed with a negative connotation, but was from a genuine interest to learn how to partner better. In the interviews with the funders, there was high interest in understanding more about how Tribe's work, how to partner with them and how to leverage Tribal sovereignty to provide additional protections on the environment.

Threats: As a baseline, understanding current funding informs opportunities for the Indigenous Guardians Fund. While government funding for the Chesapeake Bay continues to trend downward, philanthropic environmental funding continues to trend upward.

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- **It is estimated that nearly \$2 Billion in funding was designated to support the Chesapeake Bay¹⁶. The following are some examples of federal funding.**
 - **\$93 million for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) Chesapeake Bay Program.**
 - **\$57.684 million for habitat conservation & restoration at NOAA, with \$3.25 million specifically for oyster restoration in the Bay.**
 - **There likely will be federal budgets cuts to support the Chesapeake Bay¹⁷. One proposed budget cut could reduce the EPA's budget by 54.5%¹⁸. In addition, several other agencies face budget cuts¹⁹.**
 - **For the environmental sector, philanthropic giving for environmental work grew by 7.7% in 2024 to \$21.57 billion²⁰. Other relatable philanthropic giving categories for public society benefit increased by 19.5% to 66.84 billion²⁰.**
 - **Search results did not find any Indigenous-led organizations specifically dedicated to the Chesapeake Bay, except for the Indigenous Conservation Council. One search found the Indigenous East organization, which indicates the Chesapeake Bay in their service area but no references could be found on their website about a Chesapeake Bay fund.**
 - **MAJOR GAP: No specific data point could be found to determine what percentage of the Chesapeake Bay funding is allocated to support Indigenous-led work. Current philanthropic trends in general show less than 1%²¹ of all philanthropic funding supports Indigenous-led work.**
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Opportunities: There is strong alignment with key funding categories and the work the Indigenous Guardians Fund could do through utilizing Indigenous pathways. Current funding allocations for the Chesapeake Bay, identified that **restoration and conservation** efforts received the most funding. The following are the two broad categories and four sub categories of funding allocations.

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- **Environmental funding for the Chesapeake Bay favors restoration and conservation²² with key funding areas targeting;**
 - **Habitat Restoration**
 - **Pollution Reduction**
 - **Land Conservation**
 - **Community Impacts**
 - **Funding supports programs that improve water quality, protect habitat, provide education, advocacy, restoration of sea life such as oysters²³.**
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These key funding areas are directly aligned and support the current work of the ICC Tribal Nations members. As discussed with the ICC Tribal leaders in section VII, there are many examples of co-aligned environmental goals and how increased support could benefit Tribal communities and the greater Bay at large. Once again affirming, **there is a critical need and opportunity for an Indigenous-led fund for the Chesapeake Bay.**

Endnotes

¹⁴<https://dawnlandreturn.org/first-light/resources/wolankeyutomone-kisi-apaciyewik-let-us-take-good-care-what-returned-fund>

¹⁵<https://donner.ca/story/coast-funds/>

¹⁶<https://elfreth.house.gov/media/press-releases/chesapeake-bay-watershed-task-force-co-chairs-applaud-93-million-epa-bay>

¹⁷<https://www.cbf.org/news/house-passes-funding-bill-that-defends-environment-from-harmful-trump-cuts/#:~:text=House%20Passes%20Funding%20Bill%20That,were%20under%20greater%20threat%2C%20including>

¹⁸<https://www.chesapeakeprogress.com/funding>

¹⁹<https://paenvironmentdaily.blogspot.com/2025/05/chesapeake-bay-foundation-proposed-fy.html>

²⁰<https://blog.stelter.com/2025/06/24/giving-usa-2025-inside-the-numbers-plus-a-look-back-and-a-look-ahead/>

²¹<https://www.bridgespan.org/insights/the-impact-and-opportunity-of-investing-in-native-communities#:~:text=Currently%2C%20less%20than%20one%20percent,continued%20to%20overlook%20Native%20communities.>

²²<https://www.chesapeakebay.net/who/group/chesapeake-executive-council>

²³<https://www.nfwf.org/media-center/press-releases/chesapeake-bay-watershed-benefit-35-million-watershed-restoration->

²⁴<https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R48093>

CONCLUSION

There is an incredible opportunity for the Chesapeake Bay organizations, federal agencies, foundations and Tribal Nations to partner and work together with innovative Indigenous pathways, to preserve and protect the Chesapeake Bay area. There is great alignment with many of the organizations that work in the Chesapeake Bay, and several funding justifications



for foundations to support the Indigenous Guardians Fund. The ICC is growing organization and the Tribes it represents have a long history as stewards of the land predating the United States government. The Indigenous Guardians Funds can help shape and revitalize sovereign-led ecosystem outcomes. Indigenous Guardians are the centerpiece of this approach because they both implement Tribal law to protect and heal the lands, and they heal communities through revitalized Indigenous Knowledge.

The case is clear, Indigenous-led pathways in not just a “good idea”, or the “right thing to do”, **it is crucial for the health of the land and water.**

Indigenous Knowledge can benefit all, and Tribal sovereignty can be further explored and reinforced to provide additional protections of land, water and species.

What is needed now more than ever is **partnership**. The ICC could greatly benefit from philanthropic partners willing to heighten Indigenous pathways, help co-create this fund, advocate for the fund, and engage in this meaningful work. By supporting this fund, they will find great partners, Indigenous People have always been stewards of the land, they have weathered the storms of injustice, endured ever-changing administrations and societal shifts, and the Indigenous Peoples are connected to the land—in short they are guardians of the land. Through education, collaboration and support of this fund, all of the partners can come together in solidarity and be guardians of the Chesapeake Bay.

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- **Indigenous Knowledge should be at the core of Chesapeake Bay environmental strategies.**
 - **Partnership is the essential for lasting and sustaining stewardship of the Chesapeake Bay area.**
 - **The Indigenous Guardians Fund is key for coordination, collaboration and marshalling resources for Tribally led environmental work on the Chesapeake Bay.**
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