



Building a Theory of Change and Strategic Plan to Propel the Global Conservation Corps into the Future

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The impact of COVID on community-based outreach and education organizations has been vast, and in many cases, we're only just beginning to understand the implications. As the Global Conservation Corps (GCC) looks to their future and long-term strategies to save critical wildlife species, they need to build a robust program that fosters resilience and sustainability in the communities with whom they partner to save critical wildlife species. Together, the MAP Fellowship team worked to build a programmatic theory of change and map a strategic plan for achieving the organization's mission.

CHALLENGE:

Just less than one year ago, when the Morgridge Family Foundation (MFF) sought to launch the inaugural Morgridge Acceleration Program (MAP) Fellowship, the Global Conservation Corps hoped to embark on a journey to expand their supporter base through the creation of a global chapter network. The idea was to engage more people, grow their supporter numbers, and create a new pipeline for program delivery and community engagement in places all over the world. The result would transform them from a grassroots locally-focused wildlife conservation group, to an organization with an international scope, impacting conservation in communities around the globe. During the first several months of the MAP Fellowship program, a scope of work was charted that would lead the fellowship team through an internal and external information gathering assessment, a work planning process, a pilot of the first chapter, and a final workshop to take in key lessons learned and equip the organization with a plan to take chapters to scale.

Then, the world changed. There is no aspect of our lives which have been left untouched by the global COVID-19 pandemic, and organizations like GCC working to aid wildlife conservation through community-based outreach and education programs, are no exception. With the reliance on in-person delivery of educational curriculum and nature-based experiences as a core component of their recipe for success, GCC found itself unable to access its communities and deliver their programming for months. This moment led the team to a reckoning, and a challenge even greater than that originally posed for the MAP Fellowship team: *How can we avoid this situation in the future?*

Ever a group of innovators, the staff and Board of GCC came up with a new idea to pivot their programming. They needed to diversify by creating something that will ensure the team never loses the ability to conduct their work on the ground again. As a new idea for delivering their education curriculum to communities began to take shape, numerous questions popped up alongside it, such as: *How will we make this idea work? What does it mean for our current programmatic work? How does it contribute to our goals?*

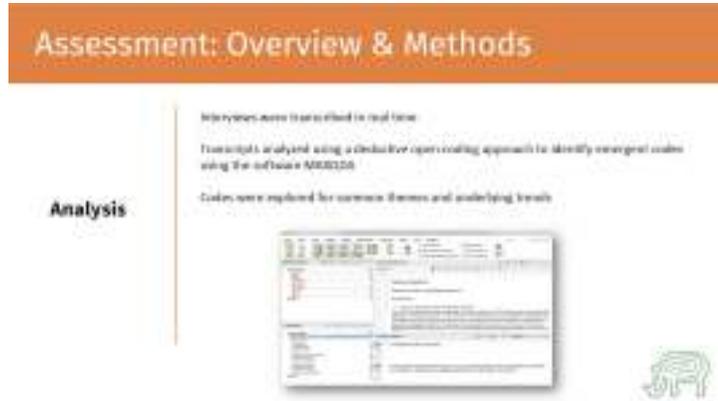
And so, the team realized that we needed to take a giant step back, away from chapters, and refocus the MAP challenge on the most pressing issue. We needed to answer all of these questions, clarify how to incorporate this new idea into GCC's current programming, build a set of robust, long-term strategies for service delivery, and ultimately create a roadmap for the

organization to achieve its mission of resilient and sustainable communities doing conservation to save critical wildlife species. In short, we needed a strategic plan.

APPROACH:

Strategic planning processes typically start with information gathering. Luckily, the initial MAP challenge had already involved an internal assessment that investigated several relevant questions including, *what would you like to see GCC achieve? What is GCC's unique value-add? What makes donors want to give to GCC?* Further, the organization had previously commissioned a small information gathering survey that provided information about what might and might not work best for the

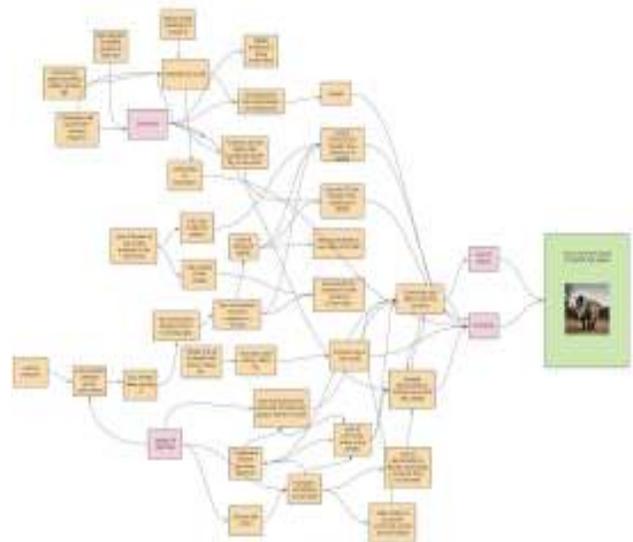
community. Drawing on this information, the MAP Fellowship team plotted out a whole new scope of work detailing the elements they wished to develop for the strategic plan, what new information needed to be collected, and which members of the GCC team would be involved in each stage of the process. The team then set out on a series of virtual, facilitated planning workshops to execute various pieces of the strategic plan.



Strategic Plan Roadmap:

- *Context: Vision, mission, scope, scale & timeframe*
- *Long-term programmatic and operational goals*
- *Problem analysis and strengths assessment*
- *Strategies to achieve long-term goals*
- *Key outcomes and short-term objectives*
- *Programmatic theory of change*
- *Resources needed to execute strategic plan*

The GCC team gathered on several occasions across three different time zones to brainstorm, prioritize, make decisions, and detail out the elements of their strategic plan. Using dynamic online brainstorming software, the team drew upon each other's expertise to ask and answer questions about what the organization is trying to achieve and how it can most effectively position itself to get there. Utilizing the planning session outputs as well as GCC's past documentation and the help of several team members, a theory of change was developed for the organization detailing the logic behind GCC's various strategies and their unique approach to community-based wildlife conservation. The diagram tells a story about how the

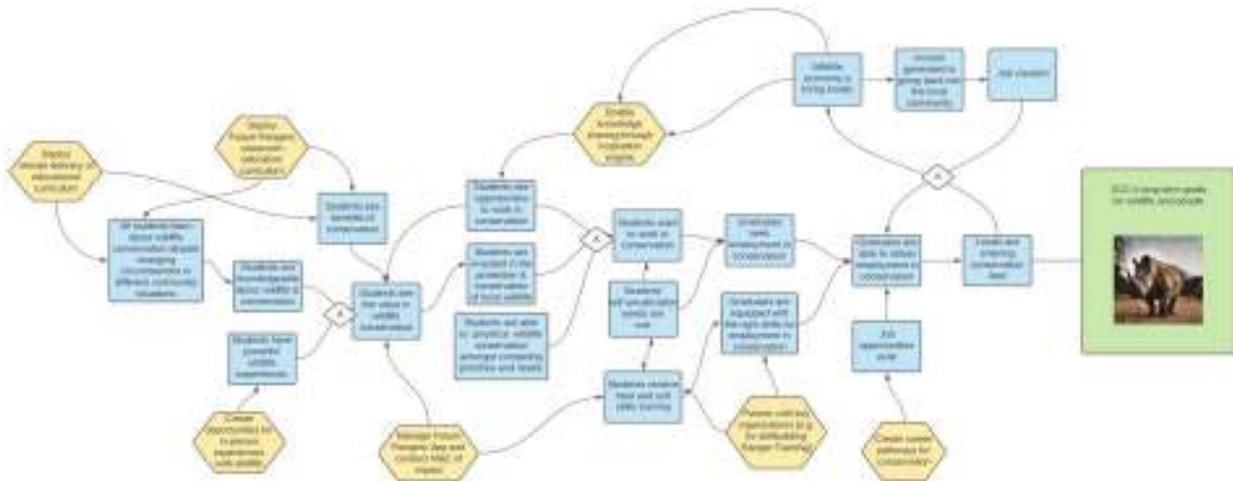


implementation of its core strategies will lead to short-term changes in the community, and ultimately long-term goals for wildlife and people.

OPPORTUNITY:

Beyond drafting the organization's first ever strategic plan and laying out a blueprint for how the organization will achieve its goals for wildlife and people, the team needed to take a step back and more deeply define their visionary new strategy. This meant articulating its role within the organization's theory of change and clarifying where it fits within the scaffolding of the organization's current programming. The idea is summed up as the digitizing and gamification of GCC's educational curriculum, to engage students both remotely and in-person through rewards-based learning content focused on conservation. In practice, building out this idea, fitting it into GCC's vision for the future, and understanding how the team would execute the idea was a much more complex challenge.

Adaptive management is a key component to the best planning process. As the team moved further along the strategic planning roadmap, the group continuously stumbled on big questions surrounding the digital curriculum strategy. New planning workshops were added to clarify big picture questions and parse out the new strategy's fit within GCC's theory of change. These workshops included an investigation of the risks and opportunities associated with the new strategy and categorization of all the research questions the team needed to answer before moving forward. Ultimately, the team was able to reach consensus around a clear picture of the new strategy by conducting a needs assessment and building a budget plan that accounts for successful implementation of their theory of change. These final steps allowed each member of the team to get on the same page, removing any final roadblocks that were formerly preventing forward momentum.



While GCC's strategic plan itself is not yet finalized, the final document will be used in myriad ways, from creating programmatic and operational guidance to move the organization into the future, to providing a glossy external report for articulating GCC's clear pathway to success to potential donors. The process also helped the GCC team to create and improve upon existing elements of their internal culture and processes, such as how they approach problem solving, brainstorming, and group decision making.



MAP FELLOWSHIP

RESULTS & FUTURE PLAN:

To build a strategic plan that does more than gather dust on a shelf, leadership at organizations need two critical elements: staff buy-in, and a really good implementation plan. This process did just that for GCC. To achieve staff buy-in, each stage involved drawing on the knowledge and expertise of not only staff, but also the Board, educators on the ground, and the community itself. The result is a team-led plan that incorporated staff ideas, concerns, and visions for success. Articulating how this plan connects to implementation of their programs was also an integral piece of the entire process and remains ongoing. Next steps include finalizing the strategic plan, as well as making those distinct connections to project implementation.

The process led to many moments of revelation, many tiny and large ah-ha moments for every person involved. Perhaps one of the most critical was the team realizing that GCC's theory of change tells a holistic story of change, where every single aspect of their work is necessary to achieve their higher vision and mission. Where many organizations swoop in to conduct some education here, or some awareness-raising there and hope that leads to impacts on their target species or habitats, GCC is investing in no less than seven unique strategies that all cohesively work together to build sustainable, resilient communities. Every single aspect of the work that GCC is doing, including the new strategy of digitized curriculum, upholds a distinct and integral piece of how they are changing the world, one student at a time.

Learn more about the Global Conservation Corps at globalconservationcorps.org.