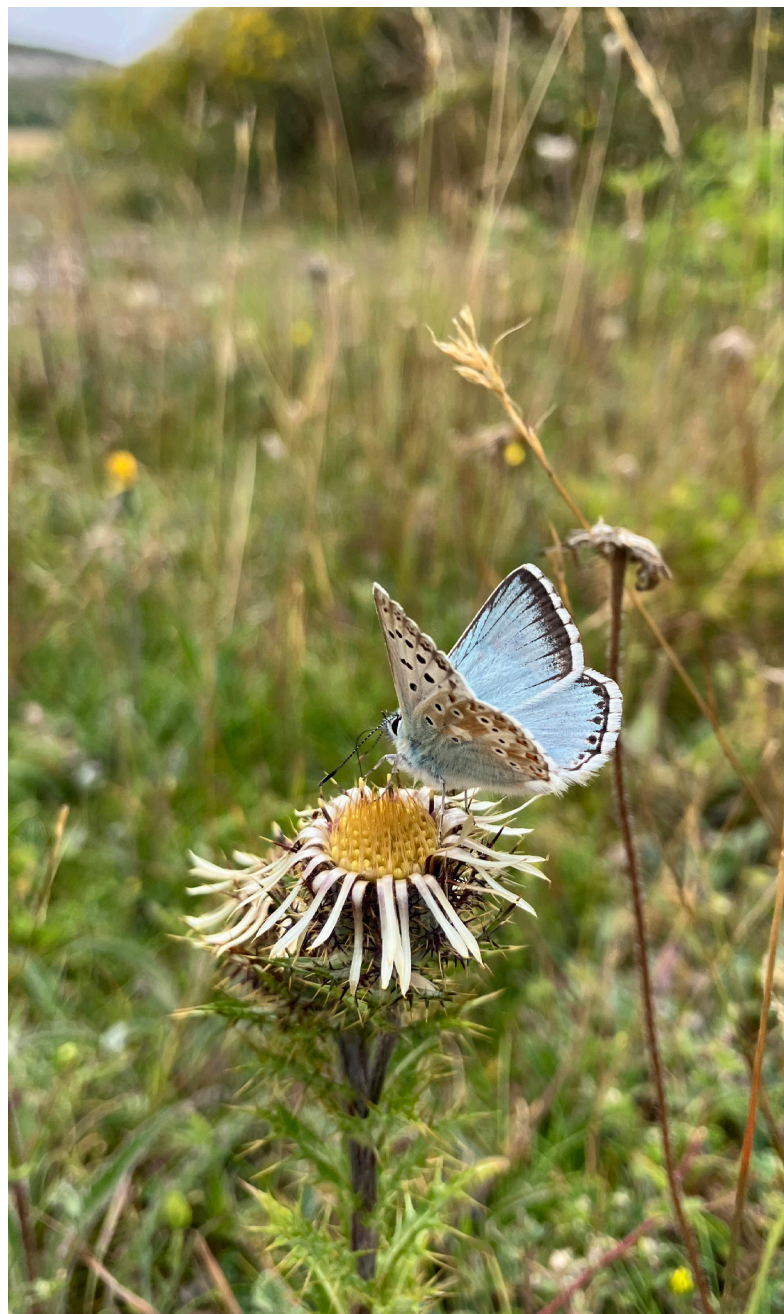




Research and
teaching for a
diverse world in
which nature and
society thrive



Executive summary

The crisis of global biodiversity loss is one of the greatest challenges of the 21st century. Biodiversity faces threats from land-use change, over-consumption, and unsustainable use of living resources. Changing these drivers requires better understanding of nature and its values to people, as well as practical steps to support economic, social and political transitions towards more equitable and effective stewardship of our planet.

The University of Cambridge Conservation Research Institute (CRI) exists to address these challenges. It is an inclusive community that brings together academic experts from the natural and social sciences, arts and humanities to conduct interdisciplinary research and teaching on complex conservation problems and their solutions. Our research explores how species, ecosystems and landscapes function and interact, how conservation and environmental outcomes are shaped by social and political forces, and how societies can make evidence-informed choices that benefit biodiversity and human wellbeing.

A unique feature of CRI is its direct connection to conservation policy and practice. Through the Cambridge Conservation Initiative (CCI) – a partnership between the University and ten leading international conservation organisations – CRI staff and students work directly with practitioners and policymakers, ensuring that findings are relevant and directly applicable for real-world impact. CRI is co-located with CCI partners in the flagship David Attenborough Building, home to the world's largest concentration of conservation expertise.

As the case studies in this document demonstrate, CRI is already making a significant contribution to conservation and human wellbeing through research, education, policy and practice. However, in the face of escalating global challenges, there is a pressing need to increase the scale and ambition of our work. To make this a reality, we are seeking philanthropic partners who share our vision of a diverse world in which nature and society can thrive.



Forestry in Scotland. Credit: Peter Carruthers

Beyond disciplinary silos

Biodiversity conservation is concerned not only with protecting and restoring species and habitats but also with understanding ecosystem functions and how these underpin human wellbeing. Connected ecological and social systems shape, constrain and influence the ways in which humans interact with, and transform, nature.

Conservation research therefore necessitates insights that draw on scholarship from a wide range of methodological and disciplinary perspectives – from spatial and temporal data and models that document and predict ecosystem change, to the values, governance, political and behavioural contexts that inform the design of interventions and the likelihood that they will succeed. Enabling this kind of research depends on bringing people together across disciplinary boundaries, and ensuring that they have the knowledge and skills to work together effectively.

Conservation is an applied discipline, meaning that research is of minimal value if it does not influence real-world decision making. The best way to do this is by involving potential users of research throughout the process, from question formulation to uptake of results. This requires opportunities for deep collaboration, and researchers with the ability to work with policymakers, practitioners and other sectors of society.

CRI has been carefully designed to address these needs. We bring together, in one shared space in the David Attenborough Building, researchers from multiple different disciplines and career stages. This enables us to generate new insights that could not be achieved from traditional disciplinary silos.

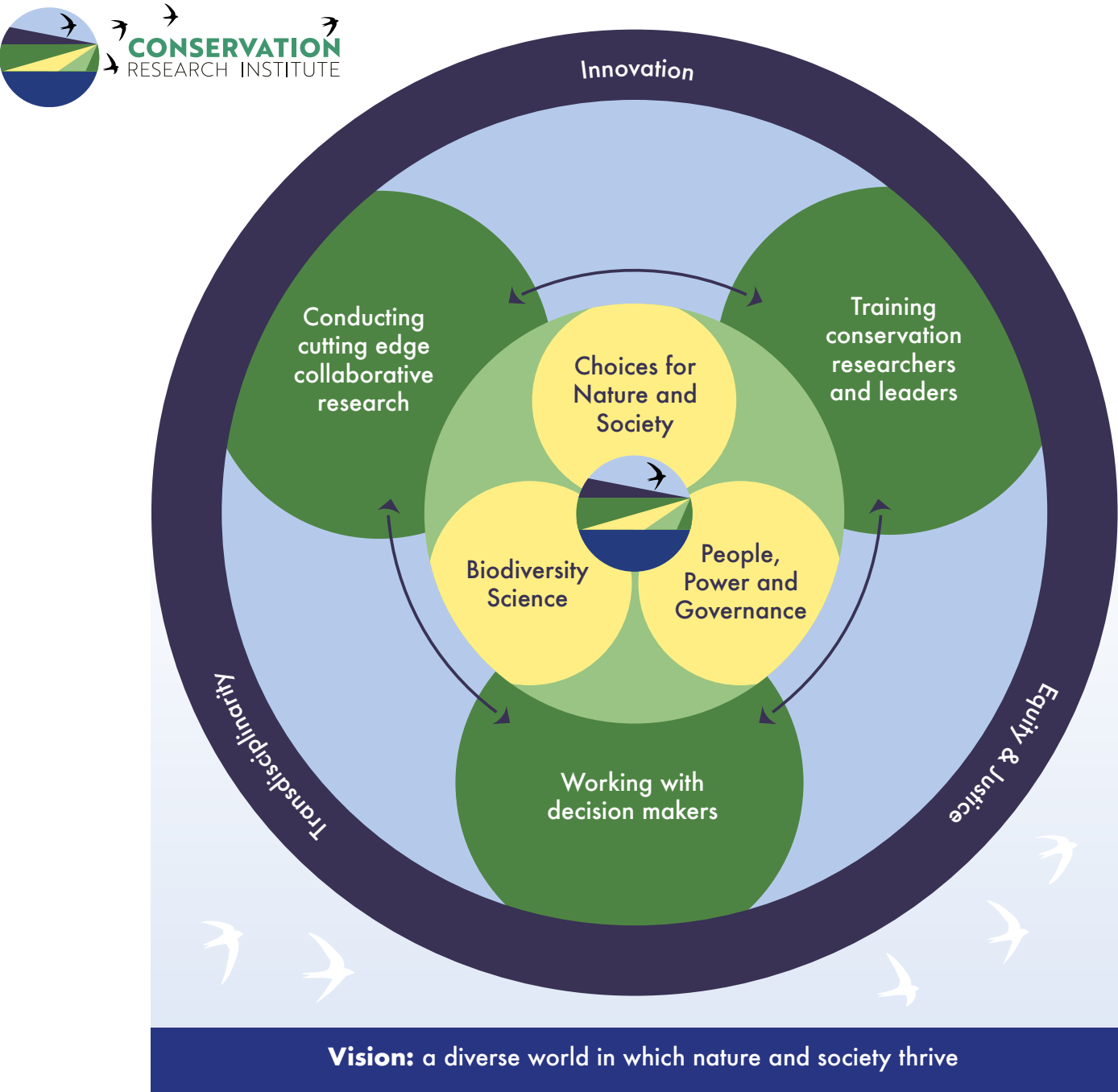
Our undergraduate and postgraduate teaching and professional skills programmes ensure that early-career practitioners, conservation researchers and leaders all have the skills they need to be effective. We also work directly with decision makers in policy and practice, particularly with the CCI conservation organisations we are co-located with and their networks. In turn, our non-academic partners bring experience, knowledge and information from real-world implementation that inform and enhance CRI's research and teaching.

CRI was established in 2013 as a focal point for University research and teaching relating to biodiversity, conservation and the social context within which humans engage with nature. With members drawn from all six schools of the University of Cambridge — and around 100 staff and students co-located in the David Attenborough Building in central Cambridge — CRI is uniquely positioned to deliver genuine transdisciplinary research that helps to secure a diverse world in which nature and society can thrive.



Our activities and ambitions

CRI delivers impact for conservation through three core areas of activity that are supported by cross-cutting approaches.



- Activity areas
- Cross-cutting approaches
- Research clusters

1. Conducting cutting-edge collaborative research

CRI is recognised as a global leader in conservation research. We work hand-in-hand with CCI partners and others to deliver knowledge with real-world impact. Each year our staff and students produce over 300 publications, generating insights needed to understand and tackle the biodiversity crisis.

Our research is organised around three interconnected themes where Cambridge is uniquely positioned to drive change:

Biodiversity Science: How species, ecosystems and landscapes function and change, and the interactions between biological, physical and social systems that shape biodiversity futures

People, Power and Governance: How conservation and environmental outcomes are shaped by social dynamics, law, culture and political contestation, with a focus on justice and critical reflection on existing conservation practices

Choices for Nature and Society: How economics, behaviour, policy and legal systems influence decisions at every scale, and how societies can make evidence-informed choices for biodiversity and human wellbeing.



The Riparian Ecosystem Restoration in Tropical Agriculture (RERTA) Project from the air. Credit: Agung Aryawan

Case study: The Centre for Landscape Regeneration

The future of the British countryside depends on moving beyond fragmented approaches to land use and recognising landscapes as living, working systems.

The Centre for Landscape Regeneration (CLR), based in the Conservation Research Institute and funded by UK Research and Innovation Natural Environment Research Council (UKRI NERC), brings together Cambridge's scientific excellence with practical partnerships to generate the evidence and tools needed for nature-rich, climate-resilient and productive landscapes.

Working across the Fens, the Cairngorms and the Lake District, CLR investigates how different landscapes can respond to pressures on nature, climate, food production and communities. Its research connects data, disciplines and local knowledge to understand these challenges as part of a wider system, rather than in isolation.

This approach is made possible by a uniquely transdisciplinary team, spanning archaeology to zoology, computer science to public health. It reflects a core mission of CRI: working across disciplines to turn complex environmental challenges into scalable, evidence-based solutions.

CLR bridges the gap between academia and action through close collaboration with farmers, landowners, conservation organisations, policymakers and local communities. These partnerships ensure its work is grounded in real-world priorities and able to deliver practical, lasting impact.

Its **Future Leaders Programme** also supports a more inclusive environmental sector, offering paid project assistant roles to graduates from under-represented backgrounds and helping to build the next generation of interdisciplinary researchers.

By integrating cutting-edge research with real-world partnerships, the Centre for Landscape Regeneration is driving a more sustainable, resilient future for UK landscapes.



Installing low-cost sensors in Cumbria

“The challenges facing the British countryside cannot be solved through single-issue thinking. CLR's strength lies in bringing together science, technology, policy and practice to respond to the interlinked challenges of biodiversity loss, climate resilience, food security and rural livelihoods. This is the kind of whole-systems approach the UK urgently needs.”

Dame Fiona Reynolds, Chair of the Programme Board for the Centre for Landscape Regeneration

2. Training the next generation of conservation researchers and leaders

Early Career Researchers (master's and PhD students and postdocs) thrive in our interdisciplinary community, benefiting from our shared space and close links with practitioners. Many have gone on to high-impact careers in academic research and conservation practice. Our bespoke Early Career Researcher Programme builds transferable skills in areas such as fundraising, policy impact, and interdisciplinary collaboration.

Our training is not just academic – we also train future conservation leaders from around the world in the applied skills they need to become effective change makers for conservation. We are committed to building on our strong foundation to train more of the conservation scientists and leaders needed to solve the biodiversity crisis, particularly by embedding transdisciplinary training at the undergraduate and doctoral student level.

Our ambition is to build a pipeline of future leaders by: establishing a permanent collaborative doctoral training programme with CCI partners; creating a new interdisciplinary programme for fourth-year Cambridge undergraduates; and securing the long-term future of the Student Conference on Conservation Science.



Student Conference on Conservation Science

Case studies

The annual **Student Conference on Conservation Science (SCCS)**, co-hosted by CRI and the Department of Zoology, celebrated its 25th anniversary in 2026. SCCS has connected thousands of early-career conservation researchers from around the world who are committed to tackling the global biodiversity crisis. Unlike traditional academic conferences, students deliver the majority of talks, while workshops, exhibits and field trips focus on building practical and professional skills that participants take back to their home institutions and workplaces.

SCCS has welcomed more than 4,000 researchers to Cambridge from 142 countries. Travel and accommodation grants are a core part of the programme, ensuring that financial barriers do not prevent talented students, particularly those from biodiversity-rich but under-resourced regions, from participating.

“We focus our entire event on students because they're the ones who have new ideas about how to approach biodiversity conservation. They already have solutions, they can learn from each other, and as a community they can tackle our greatest biodiversity challenges.”

Professor Andrew Balmford FRS, CRI academic and SCCS organiser

CRI also hosts the prestigious **Masters in Conservation Leadership**, which provides students with the applied leadership and management skills needed to create positive change in conservation.

A unique feature of the course is its delivery by staff from within the CCI, including CRI academics and practitioners from our partner NGOs. Each year, the course trains around 20 graduates with at least three years of relevant professional experience and clear leadership potential. Since being established in 2010, the Masters has trained over 300 students from 90+ countries, creating an active network of alumni who work together to achieve impact.

3. Working with decision makers

CRI research is grounded in real-world application and decision-making. We co-develop our research with partners across the Cambridge Conservation Initiative and beyond, ensuring its relevance to implementation in policy and practice.

Our work supports and shapes decisions in the public, private, and third sectors. We are a major pathway to impact for the University of Cambridge, demonstrated by CRI contributing numerous Research Excellence Framework (REF) Impact Case Studies each cycle. We collaborate with partners at every scale — from local implementing agencies to national organisations and intergovernmental processes such as IPBES, IPCC, and the UN Conventions on Biological Diversity and Climate Change. Building on this momentum, a newly-established annual programme will welcome a distinguished global leader to Cambridge for a week of dialogue, culminating in a landmark public lecture designed to spark fresh ideas and inspire bold thinking across our community.



A beaver in Devon. Credit: Cavan Images

Case study: Conservation Evidence

Conservation has achieved remarkable successes, yet many resources continue to be wasted on actions without clear evidence of impact. In response, the Conservation Evidence group, based within the Conservation Research Institute, has pioneered a cost-effective, industrial-scale approach to synthesising scientific evidence on what works in conservation. By 2026, the project had assessed almost 4,000 conservation actions, creating the world's largest freely-accessible database: the [Conservation Evidence Database](#). The project has collaborated with more than 600 practitioners, policymakers, funders and researchers, and in excess of 250 partner organisations globally.

Used by 1.8 million people worldwide and cited in over 1,000 international policy documents, Conservation Evidence is helping transform conservation into a more effective, evidence-driven field where resources achieve the greatest impact for nature. In 2026, the team convened a major conference in Cambridge with national conservation leaders, funders and scientists. It was attended by more than 500 participants, strengthening collaboration and accelerating the adoption of evidence-based practice across the sector.

“Natural England views Conservation Evidence as an important go-to source of evidence to guide action by ourselves and others for the management and recovery of nature. Looking forward, our evidence synthesis team will use Conservation Evidence in evidence reviews to access evidence on outcomes of conservation interventions.”

Sallie Bailey, Chief Scientist, Natural England

Cross-cutting approaches

These core areas of activity are supported by three cross-cutting approaches:

Transdisciplinarity – Working across disciplines and sectors to co-create knowledge with direct conservation application

Equity & Justice – Ensuring conservation research and practice are fair, inclusive, and attentive to diverse voices and rights

Innovation – Harnessing cutting-edge methods, from ethnography to AI, to advance research and practical solutions.



Dr Simlai with local communities in India

Case study: Implications of technology

The conservation sector is rapidly adopting new digital technologies for monitoring, analysis and direct intervention. These have great potential, but can also generate unintended social and environmental consequences, at different scales.

At a local level, Dr Trishant Simlai investigated this problem in park-adjacent communities in north India. He found that camera traps for monitoring wildlife had negative effects on local women who were legally harvesting wood and water from the forest. They changed the way they dressed and behaved after cameras were introduced, exposing them to greater risk from tiger attacks and reducing their opportunity to socialise.

At a global level, Professor Chris Sandbrook has been studying the implications of Artificial Intelligence (AI) for conservation. He helped to develop an International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Congress resolution calling for the creation of a global policy on how AI can be used to benefit conservation while minimising associated risks. This was supported by over 95% of members at the IUCN World Conservation Congress in 2025. He is now working with the IUCN to implement the resolution.

Together, these projects demonstrate the importance of CRI's cross-cutting approaches. They involve transdisciplinary collaboration with partners in CCI and beyond; they investigate the role and impacts of innovative technology in conservation; and they embed equity and justice, particularly for vulnerable people.

About the Conservation Research Institute

CRI leadership

CRI is governed by a Committee of Management drawn from all six schools of the University of Cambridge and including early career representation. A core group of sixteen faculty members based in the David Attenborough Building meets more frequently and shares leadership on specific initiatives.

Chris Sandbrook, Director of CRI and Professor of Conservation and Society in the Department of Geography, is a conservation social scientist with a range of research interests. Chris has a deep understanding of the value of transdisciplinarity, having trained in both the zoology and geography departments in Cambridge and having worked for seven years with United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) World Conservation Monitoring Centre, a CCI partner. He is also the Director of the Masters in Conservation Leadership, CRI's flagship training programme.

The core CRI team also includes Research and Communications Manager Diane Lister and CRI Coordinator Lucy Bigam. They work together to support the wide range of activities and initiatives undertaken by CRI each year.



“The strength of Cambridge lies not only in its academic excellence, but in the long-standing relationships between the University and organisations working on the front lines of conservation worldwide. That ecosystem makes it possible to integrate theory with practice, and to do conservation research that is both critical and consequential.”

Professor Chris Sandbrook, Director of CRI



Alumni and friends at the David Attenborough Building



Student Conference on Conservation Science 2026



Join us in creating a diverse
world in which nature and
society can thrive.

**For more information on how you
can contribute please contact:**

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