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*In this issue:*

Flowing Forward: The Next Generation of Water Stewards	3
A New Chapter for MLC: East Weber Canyon & Remediation in Action	5
Expanding Our Scope of Stewardship: New Staff, New Restoration Opportunities	7

# A Letter from the Executive Director

This year marks the beginning of my ninth season at Montezuma Land Conservancy (MLC), and I often sit humbled and amazed at the work we've done in that time. This issue offers three articles that beautifully reflect our commitment to our mission—changing lives through land conservation by connecting people to place, forever—and the passion and responsibility to that work the MLC staff take so seriously. For me, it's knowing that great organizations are not just simply the sum of their parts and it's not just about the next big project or successful grant. Great organizations are built by people who believe in their work and who can envision a more beautiful future because of it.

MLC has been lucky to have always been made up of deeply passionate people who love these landscapes and our communities. As I've watched the staff grow from three to twelve over the past nine years, I feel lucky to have continued to play a role in writing MLC's story of conservation—one braided with community and deeply centered in the deserts, mountains, and waters of the Southwest. As we continue to face increasing challenges in the world of conservation, it's a story that I feel has never been so important.

I'm excited for what this year promises—for our growing team and projects that continue to lead the way. Thank you to all the landowners, donors, Tribal leaders and elders, businesses, and partners in conservation who make this work possible. We couldn't do it without you.

With dedication and gratitude,



Travis Custer, Executive Director



# Year in Review: 2025

Together, with your support and partnership, MLC accomplished so many milestones and successes in 2025. Here is a quick list of a few of the highlights:



Conserved **720 acres** of land



Accepted a donation of **560 acres of land** for expanding cultural access and education programs



Engaged with **400+ participants** through education programs



Provided workforce development for **24 youth conservation corps members**



Built & grew food in a **new high tunnel** at Fozzie's Farm



Employed **4 high-school apprentices** at Fozzie's Farm



Planted **300+ seedlings** and **seeded 2 acres** along the Mancos River



Established the **Community Land Partnership of the Southwest**, a new land-holding wing of MLC to advance land access



Broke ground on an **office yard beautification project** to add community space in Cortez



Engaged **80+ volunteers** in restoration and conservation projects



Grew our team by **2 new staff positions** to increase capacity and impact



## Flowing Forward: The Next Generation of Water Stewards

Southwest Colorado is a land shaped and governed by water. It carves our canyons, feeds our farms, and sustains communities that have depended on these landscapes for generations. Yet for many young people growing up here, water can feel distant — something that appears from a tap rather than a living system that requires care and understanding. At Montezuma Land Conservancy (MLC), we believe that building a resilient future for the West begins with helping the next generation form a meaningful relationship with the waters that make life all around us possible.

Thanks to support from the Colorado Water Conservation Board, we've been able to grow our hands-on water education programs for students throughout Montezuma County. These programs bring learning out of the textbook and into the field, where natural water systems become something students can observe, measure, and experience firsthand. Through classroom visits, field trips to Fozzie's Farm, and rafting trips on the San Juan River, students begin to see themselves not just as residents of a watershed, but as future stewards of it.

At Fozzie's Farm, water education starts with the land itself. Students discover how water moves through soil, crops, and ecosystems, learning how agriculture and conservation intersect in our arid region. They investigate irrigation systems, discuss the realities of farming with limited water, and observe how healthy soils retain moisture and support plant life. These lessons are grounded in landscapes—the rolling hills of farmland and the horizon lines of Sleeping Ute and other nearby mountains—that many students recognize from their own communities. By connecting science to familiar places, watersheds become tangible, and the concept of water as a shared resource becomes clear.



*Left: A rafting trip on the San Juan River is a highlight for many students.  
Above: Students engage with a watershed simulation model at Fozzie's Farm.*

Our classroom programs extend this learning into local schools through hands-on experiments, interactive watershed activities, and stewardship projects. Students explore the water cycle, watershed dynamics, and the impact of human decisions on water quality and availability. These conversations often transcend science, covering history, culture, and the deep ties between water and identity in the Southwest. We encourage students to ask questions, imagine solutions, and see themselves as active participants in the future of their communities.

Perhaps the most transformative experiences happen on the water itself. Our San Juan River trips give students the opportunity to step directly into the watershed. Floating through canyon country, they observe riparian habitats, wildlife, and the forces that shape desert rivers. They examine water quality, learn about native and invasive species, and discuss the challenges facing Western rivers in an era of drought and climate uncertainty. For many participants, it is their first time on a river — an experience that often sparks wonder, confidence, and a lasting sense of connection.

These programs arrive at a critical moment for the American West. Communities across the region are grappling with prolonged drought, shrinking snowpack, and increasing pressure on limited water supplies. Climate change is amplifying long-standing challenges, forcing difficult conversations about conservation, allocation, and sustainability. While these realities can feel daunting, they also highlight the importance of education and local action. The solutions to Western water issues will emerge not from a single policy or technology, but from a culture of stewardship rooted in knowledge, collaboration, and respect for place.



*Snow science and snowshoeing on Lizard Head Pass.*

Education is one of the most powerful tools we have to build that culture. When young people understand how watersheds function, they are more likely to support conservation practices, advocate for responsible policies, and adopt water-wise habits in their own lives. Just as importantly, they begin to see water as a shared responsibility. Our programs nurture curiosity, confidence, and belonging — qualities that foster lifelong engagement with environmental stewardship.

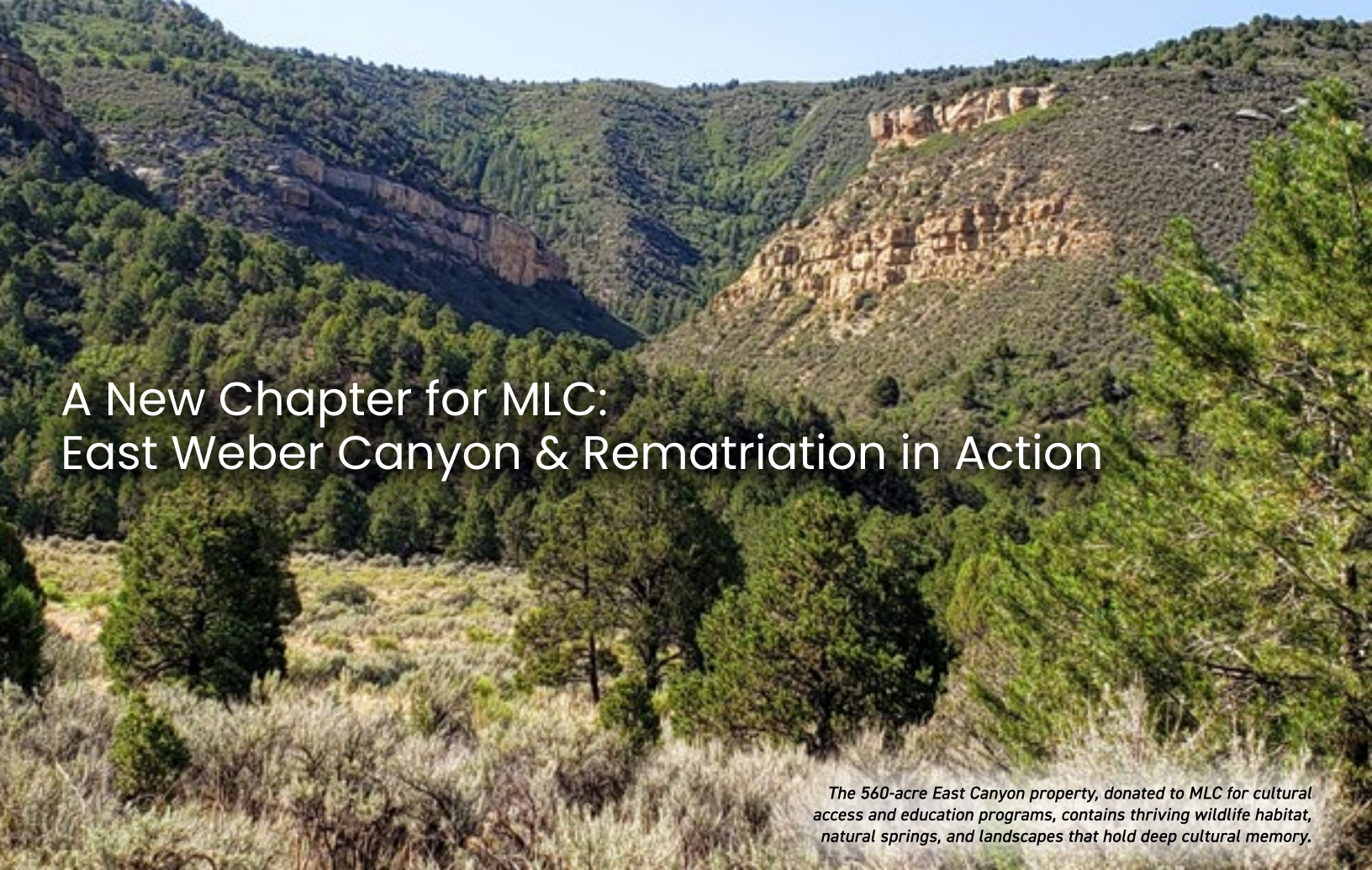
We see hope in the enthusiasm of the students we serve. Whether kneeling in the soil at Fozzie's Farm, launching boats on the San Juan, or experimenting with watershed models in the classroom, they approach water with creativity and big questions about fairness, sustainability, and the future of their communities. They remind us that the next generation is ready to lead — if we invest in their education and opportunities today.

That investment is where our community plays a vital role. Support from donors, partners, and volunteers make it possible for us to expand access to these programs, remove barriers for local schools, and ensure that every student has the chance to experience their watershed firsthand. Supporting MLC is not just support for a field trip or lesson plan — it is an investment in informed citizens, resilient landscapes, and a future where water is valued and protected. Together, we can equip the next generation with the knowledge, confidence, and connection they need to care for the places, and the water, we all depend upon.



*Hands-on water quality sampling excursion*

To learn more about ways to get involved, contact Community Programs Director, Nicholas LaPalm, at [nick@montezumaland.org](mailto:nick@montezumaland.org).



## A New Chapter for MLC: East Weber Canyon & Rematriation in Action

*The 560-acre East Canyon property, donated to MLC for cultural access and education programs, contains thriving wildlife habitat, natural springs, and landscapes that hold deep cultural memory.*

**F**or Montezuma Land Conservancy (MLC) and many of the landowners we work alongside, conservation is about more than acres on a map. It is about stewardship and the responsibility that comes with caring for a place. The land becomes an opening, an invitation, and a commitment to that work.

Last winter, MLC accepted the donation of 560 acres in East Weber Canyon, outside of Mancos, Colorado. Generously gifted by Linda Miles, the donation was inspired by her involvement in MLC's Traditional Harvest Project and her desire to support Indigenous land access. The land contains thriving wildlife habitat, natural springs, and landscapes that hold deep cultural memory. It also opens new possibilities for partnership, learning, and expanding MLC's Cross-Cultural Programs as we continue reimagining what conservation can look like in this region.

Through the Traditional Harvest Project and at our County Road 39 restoration site along the Mancos River, MLC has partnered with Tribal leaders, elders, and landowners to restore access to ancestral lands beyond present-day reservation boundaries. Together, we have planted willows and other native species, worked alongside Indigenous youth crews, and strived to build relationships grounded in reciprocity. East Canyon, as we've come to

call the newly donated property, allows us to further root that work in a place that grows its long-term impact.

### **From Framework to Practice**

We often use the word *rematriation* in this work, and it is important to explain what we mean. At its core, rematriation is the slow, intentional work of healing the relationship between people and place, between Indigenous communities and their ancestral lands. It recognizes that land is not simply property or open space, but a living relative connected to culture, language, ceremony, and identity. Too often, conversations about rematriation remain theoretical.

In contrast, East Canyon will serve as a living classroom where Indigenous land access can unfold in real and practical ways. Guided by both Western science and Traditional Ecological Knowledge, future restoration efforts will strengthen native plant communities, protect springs, and enhance wildlife habitat. We envision youth programs that bring Indigenous and non-Indigenous students onto the land to engage in hands-on learning experiences conveying how ecological restoration and cultural revitalization strengthen one another.

East Canyon offers something tangible: *a place to move from framework to practice.*



### Why Land Trusts? Why Now?

Colorado's conservation community is at a pivotal moment. Environmental stewardship and social justice are not separate conversations; they are deeply connected. Indigenous communities have long understood that land, culture, and identity are inseparable, and we believe conservation efforts must reflect that reality if they are to remain relevant and just.

Land trusts are uniquely positioned to help lead this shift. Much of the land removed from Indigenous peoples now exists as private property, and land trusts operate at the intersection of private ownership and public benefit. We work with legal tools that secure conservation in perpetuity—tools that can also allow for creative partnerships that restore access and bring more voices to the conversation. This long-term approach to our stewardship commitments make land trusts especially suited for multi-generational work centered on land-based relationships.

Reversing and healing centuries of colonialism cannot be accomplished in a single project. It requires durable institutions willing to invest in partnerships over decades. As a land trust working adjacent to the two federally recognized Ute Tribes in Colorado, and within landscapes that have long been home to many Tribal

Nations, MLC carries both an opportunity and an obligation. East Canyon allows us to act on that responsibility in ways that embed Indigenous leadership and community priorities into how the land is stewarded.

At East Canyon, Tribal leadership, elders, and community members will help guide restoration strategies, access agreements, and future programming, deepening opportunities for harvesting, cultural education, and intergenerational knowledge sharing. The expansiveness of this gift lies in what it makes possible: a conserved landscape that protects habitat while also restoring access and strengthening cultural lifeways. Five hundred and sixty acres cannot undo generations of dispossession, but it can help create space for a different future. East Canyon represents an opportunity to define conservation not only by what is set aside, but more importantly by what is restored. With sustained partnership and long-term commitment, this land can become a place where relationships to land and to one another continue to grow for generations to come.

# Expanding Our Scope of Stewardship: New Staff, New Restoration Opportunities



*Landowner Ron Osborn (left), Conservation Director Austin Easter (center), and Stewardship Coordinator Camryn Uetz (right) pause to have a little fun during a re-seeding project near the Mancos River.*

For Montezuma Land Conservancy (MLC), 2025 was a time of building, dreaming, and action. The year brought us four new passionate and creative team members. We welcomed Wyatt Wilson as our Cross-Cultural Programs Coordinator, Nicholas LaPalm as our Community Programs Director, and added two brand-new positions, with Tanner Besse joining as our first Fozzie's Farm Operations Manager and Camryn Uetz as our first seasonal Stewardship Coordinator. All of these positions represent unique opportunities to expand MLC's mission and services to our community.

Starting this year, we are thrilled to be able to make Camryn's position full-time, and we are grateful to our community supporters and funders for enabling us to grow our team with this important addition. So, what does this increased capacity mean for our ability to support the community, and for the future of conservation and stewardship?

With two team members now in our Conservation and Stewardship department, MLC will be able to offer our landowner partners greater consistency in the personnel that monitor their conserved properties year after year, allowing us to deepen relationships with families and learn how to better support their conservation goals

through stewardship visits and additional resources. This added capacity will also support our Conservation Director, Austin Easter, in his tireless efforts to conserve more land and drive increased collaborations between MLC's other programs and among community partners.

One example of these collaborations has been the County Road 39 restoration projects, part of MLC's Traditional Harvest Project that restores habitat on private lands for the expansion of cultural access for the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe. The project includes wetland and riparian restoration of 1.3 miles of the Mancos River and has resulted in over 600 native trees and shrubs planted across three properties and 52 in-stream structures installed through the hard work of the Southwest Conservation Corps, Ancestral Lands Conservation Corps, and volunteers from the community. This project is the perfect example of the new ways MLC is supporting interested landowners in habitat enhancement, deepening the integration between MLC's conservation and community-based programs, and broadening the regional benefits of conservation.

Due to the successes of the County Road 39 project, and thanks to our increased staff size and capacity, MLC is excited to pursue more large-scale restoration projects



*MLC Board Member Karella Ver Eecke (left) and Stewardship Coordinator Camryn Uetz (right) go over transplanting plans at the Road 39 restoration project in the Mancos Valley.*

that center both the work of the Traditional Harvest Project and expanded habitat improvements for landowners.

MLC knows land stewardship is a complex responsibility. As new and evolving challenges related to climate change and drought face our region, it is crucial for us to adapt and to expand the scope of our stewardship efforts in new and responsive ways to further support the land and the greater community. We believe this includes partnering with landowners in restoration and adaptive management of natural resources such as wetlands and wildlife habitat, and in practicing wildfire mitigation. Many landowners are passionate about preserving the natural spaces and health of their properties, but some may not know where to start or may not have the time, resources, or ability to complete the work on their own. Camryn's new position will help ensure that MLC can be responsive to these needs and increase support for landowners across the region.

There is a lot of excitement from our staff and board about where MLC is heading and about our goals to broaden the work we do on local, statewide, and national levels. On behalf of all of us, thank you for your continued support which allows us to grow our team and our impact.

If you have land that you would like to conserve, please contact our Conservation Director, Austin Easter, at [austin@montezumaland.org](mailto:austin@montezumaland.org) to see if it is a fit for permanent protection through MLC. Or, if you have conserved land that you are interested in restoring or improving, reach out to Stewardship Coordinator Camryn Uetz at [camryn@montezumaland.org](mailto:camryn@montezumaland.org).



*Staff and volunteers seed and secure matting on an eroded slope near the Mancos River.*

# Six Quick Facts About Conservation Easements

Conserving your land is a big decision, yet there is one thing that all landowners who have done so have in common: they love their land, they know it is part of their legacy, and they have a commitment to the future of our community. Here are a few key points to consider if you or someone you know is interested in land conservation.

## 1. Ownership Retained

You retain your private property rights and can sell, lease, or pass your land on to your family.

## 2. Voluntary

Farm, ranch, or wildlife conservation easements are voluntary and do not require public access.

## 3. Tax Benefit

Landowners in Colorado can receive federal and state tax benefits for conservation.

## 4. Tailored to You

Each conservation easement is unique to the land it protects and to your vision for it.

## 5. Flexible

Farming, ranching, hunting, recreational uses, and a limited number of house sites and/or property divisions may be permitted.

## 6. Estate Planning Benefit

Conserving your land can help with your estate planning, reduce your estate taxes, and allow for a transition to the next generation.

For further information, please visit our website [montezumaland.org](http://montezumaland.org) or call us at 970-565-1664.



## Community Land Partnership of the Southwest

In 2025, after a multi-year research and community listening process alongside local partners, Montezuma Land Conservancy (MLC) established the Community Land Partnership of the Southwest (CLPS), a new land-holding wing of our organization. CLPS will be dedicated to creating land access opportunities for young, aspiring, and existing farmers and ranchers who lack opportunities to affordably access land on which to run viable local food businesses.

CLPS creates a platform through which our organization can acquire farmland properties through purchase or donation and manage those lands through equitable leasing arrangements, opportunities for equity building, and shared resources including land, equipment, infrastructure, access to funding, and mentorship.

While CLPS is a part of MLC, it is important to us that it is a community-driven sub-organization. CLPS currently has a founding board of managers made up of local community members passionate about supporting farmers and ranchers, and our local food system. We will soon be looking for additional board members to join CLPS and help shape the future of land access in Southwest Colorado.

We are excited to see how this project will grow in the months and years to come. Stay tuned for more news about CLPS!



What do the next five years of outdoor opportunity look like for Montezuma County youth? For the Montezuma Inspire Coalition (MIC), it means more young people getting outside on field trips, exploring career pathways tied to our local landscapes, and accessing outdoor experiences without barriers.

With new support from Great Outdoors Colorado awarded, MIC's nine partner organizations came together to reflect on our accomplishments and craft a strategic plan to guide our work for the coming several years. This process has reaffirmed what has sustained MIC since its founding: collaboration works. When we align around youth and the landscapes that shape our community, we are stronger together.

You can view the full strategic plan and learn all about the amazing programs we have coming up at [montezumainspire.org/about/](https://montezumainspire.org/about/). See you outside!

*Montezuma Land Conservancy is a proud member, and the fiscal sponsor, of the Montezuma Inspire Coalition.*



## With Gratitude

Montezuma Land Conservancy's community-centered conservation work is only possible because of the generosity of our community of supporters. It is your passion plus action that makes our community a special place to live, work and play for today, tomorrow and generations to come. THANK YOU for your belief in MLC and our mission. Together, we are changing lives through land conservation by connecting people to place, forever.

*Please notify our office of any errors or omissions.*

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Virga Foundation  
Western Conservation Society / Trees, Water & People



Photo: David Partida

# Conserving our land and water. Caring for so much more.

With your support, together we are caring for our past, our future, our culture, and our community.

Your contributions to MLC make a lasting impact on the lands and communities of Southwest Colorado. Whether through annual membership, monthly Sage Support, planned giving, or one of the other many ways to give, you help us make a difference. If you or your family desire to leave a lasting investment, please call or email us to start the conversation.

## WAYS TO GIVE

- ▶ **Sage Support**  
Through ongoing monthly contributions, Sage Supporters help sustain our work all year through. To get started, visit our website at [montezumaland.org/donate](http://montezumaland.org/donate) to set up an automatic, recurring monthly gift, or make a one-time gift.
- ▶ **IRA Qualified Charitable Distribution**  
Donors over the age 70½ can make donations directly from their IRA accounts without having to pay income taxes on the money. Speak with your IRA account administrator about making a transfer to earn tax benefits and support MLC.
- ▶ **Sandstone Circle – A Legacy Giving Circle**  
When you leave a gift via your estate planning to MLC, you leave a lasting impact on our community that will live on for generations. If you choose to leave a planned legacy gift of any kind to MLC, please let us know so that we may thank you in your lifetime.
- ▶ **In-Kind Gifts**  
We are often in need of large items like working vehicles, trucks, and farm tools and equipment. If you have items related to our work that you no longer need, please contact us to discuss if our wish list matches your old, unneeded items.
- ▶ **Donations of Real Estate**  
A donation of property may be an opportunity to further support conservation, land access, or community-centered programs. Landowners considering a gift of real estate are encouraged to reach out to us to discuss their visions for the land and ways in which it may support MLC’s work.
- ▶ **Support MLC While You Shop**  
MLC participates in the City Market Cares Program. You can help MLC while you shop for groceries simply by setting your City Market shopper account to donate to MLC. Your purchases automatically result in quarterly donations to us.
- ▶ **Gifts of Stock**  
Gifts of stock, bonds, or mutual funds are a great way to support MLC and can help a donor avoid capital gains taxes or receive an income tax deduction. Simply contact us for our account info and authorize your broker to transfer shares to Montezuma Land Conservancy.
- ▶ **Conservation Partner Business Membership**  
Would your business like to join our amazing group of Conservation Partner Businesses? Annual sponsorships to MLC come with promotional perks that get your name in front of conservation-minded individuals and show them that your business values our work, just like they do.





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