

# Climate Action

An Interview with Leonardo Lacerda, Global Managing Director, Climate, The Nature Conservancy (TNC)

**EDITORS' NOTE** Leonardo Lacerda oversees TNC's work to advance climate change solutions in mitigation, adaptation, and energy transition. He brings nearly 30 years of global experience building diversity and inspiring teams to achieve high-level goals in the environment, human development and social justice sectors. He started his career in Brazil with a local NGO working on conservation and then spent 14 years with WWF as Latin America and Caribbean Program



Leonardo Lacerda

Coordinator, Mediterranean Program Director, Conservation Director for Brazil, and Manager of the Global Forest Conservation Program. He also served as Environment Program Director for the Oak Foundation in Switzerland where he managed a portfolio of grants worldwide in excess of \$550 million and built a team to address climate change, marine conservation, and illegal wildlife trade. Lacerda received his BA degree in international relations from the University of Brasilia in Brazil and his MA degree in international relations with a focus on international finance and Latin America from Johns Hopkins University, Paul Nitze School of Advanced International Studies.

**ORGANIZATION BRIEF** The Nature Conservancy ([nature.org](http://nature.org)) is a global environmental nonprofit working to create a world where people and nature can thrive. Founded in the United States in 1951, The Nature Conservancy has grown to become one of the most effective and wide-reaching environmental organizations in the world. Thanks to more than a million members and the dedicated efforts of its diverse staff and more than 400 scientists, it is able to impact conservation in 79 countries and territories across six continents.

**What excited you about the opportunity to join TNC and made you feel it was the right fit?**

My entire career has been spent in pursuit of high-level outcomes for people and nature via the environment, human development, and social justice sectors. What drives me is impact, and I'm proud of having supported the creation of forest and marine protected and sustainable use areas that, together, would cover an area the size of India and Mexico combined. I am

also a strong believer in the power of institution-building and partnerships. It has been wonderful to have pioneered and helped build philanthropic infrastructure in climate-critical geographies including Europe, India, China and Brazil. Prior to joining The Nature Conservancy as global lead for our climate change work, my most recent focus was in the philanthropic arena, helping address climate change, marine conservation and illegal wildlife trade. But, as inspiring as that work was, I felt a strong pull to get back to

delivering tangible action.

The decade ahead is critical for mitigating climate change and reversing biodiversity loss, and my new role gives me a chance to catalyze real-world solutions that have scalable potential for addressing these interconnected crises. TNC's breadth and depth are almost unrivaled among large international conservation organizations which, coupled with its science-based focus, strong history of bringing innovative funding mechanisms to market and direct engagement with Indigenous peoples, all spoke to my personal motivations.

The chance to return to my home country, while continuing to lead an international program, was also an important factor. Brazil's struggle to end deforestation is an issue of personal importance to me, and working collectively to deliver solutions with both Brazilian and international actors is very exciting.

**Will you discuss your role and areas of focus?**

In 1930, Brazilian composer Heitor Villa-Lobos returned from a career in Europe to teach music in Brazilian public schools through a technique known as the "Orpheonic Chant." He composed and directed choral pieces to be sung by thousands of people in soccer stadiums. As I return to Brazil after three decades in Europe, I think of my job as its own Orpheonic Chant – helping to inspire and orchestrate a 4,000-strong workforce across over 70 countries, while simultaneously working with a variety of partners to help deliver on our climate goals.

The Nature Conservancy is pursuing two key targets for climate action: First, we will help remove or sequester 3 billion metric tons of carbon dioxide emissions (CO<sub>2</sub>e) per year by 2030, which is the equivalent to taking 650 million cars off the road. We can reach that goal by using the power of nature to absorb carbon,

and the strength of policy to cut emissions equivalent to nearly a tenth of global emissions from fossil fuels. We are also committed to using all available resources to help deliver a clean energy transition that will further reduce greenhouse gas emissions; Second, to help 100 million people who are most likely to be affected by climate-related emergencies such as floods, fires and drought by investing in nature to improve the health of habitats such as mangroves and reefs that absorb wave energy and equitably protect people in coastal communities, enabling adaptation and building resilience to climate change.

To achieve these ambitious goals, our climate program focuses on three main pillars. First, we work to accelerate the deployment of renewable energy globally, ensuring we optimize the production of solar, wind and hydropower by siting infrastructure intelligently. In the U.S. alone, our scientists estimate that deployment of wind and solar energy and the associated improvement in transmission lines will require an area equivalent to that of Colorado and Wyoming combined. Siting is generating conflicts that can delay the deployment of renewable energy at the scale and pace that is required. When sited on lower-productivity farmland, reclaimed mines, and areas that avoid social and environmental impacts, renewables can be deployed faster and in a manner that maximizes biodiversity conservation and economic development, while also taking into account the need for a "just transition" to new employment opportunities. The recent approval of the funds associated with the Infrastructure Bill in the U.S. and the Green Deal in Europe create excellent opportunities for this work.

Our second pillar is what we call Natural Climate Solutions (NCS). Through protection, improvement management and restoration of habitats, science shows we can reduce greenhouse gas emissions as well as capture and store carbon. Our scientists and field staff are prototyping and implementing solutions on 20 different NCS pathways, ranging from reduced deforestation, to forest and mangrove restoration, to reduced impact logging. For example, here in Brazil, we have developed a partnership with over 200 national and local partners, the Union for Restoration, that aims to restore four million hectares of forest.

Finally, our third pillar focuses on embracing the power of nature to help people adapt and become more resilient to the impacts of climate change, both in terms of their safety and also sustainable food/water access.



*Virginia's Cumberland Forest, an area in which TNC is working for both forest protection and climate action*

**You have said that the world is at a tipping point and needs to act quickly to address climate change and the biodiversity crisis. What are the keys to driving lasting, sustainable change in this effort?**

We find ourselves living through an energy revolution of a magnitude that has perhaps only been seen twice before in human history: first, with the discovery nearly 2 million years ago of how to master fire; and then the 18th century discovery of electricity that accelerated the Industrial Revolution. This current energy revolution, fundamental to constraining global warming within the necessary 1.5-2° Celsius range, can only be achieved if signals to the major economic actors that fossil fuels have no place in the future economy are strong, urgent and unequivocal.

Pricing carbon in the economy remains perhaps our best opportunity. Although there are limited examples of where carbon pricing is already in place and driving change, such as Europe, California and Ontario, it has been politically difficult to take these models global. Financial flows are critical. The fact is that more funds still currently flow to fossil fuels than clean energy infrastructure. We thus need to push for climate finance pledges to be accelerated immediately. Government action is fundamental in providing such signals; similarly critical is setting clear deadlines for peaking and then rapidly phasing-down coal consumption.

But emissions reductions from the land use, energy and transportation sectors alone will not suffice – we also need to sequester the excess carbon already circulating in the atmosphere. In this transitional phase, the role of natural carbon sinks like forests, wetlands, and well-managed farming soils will be fundamental.

The transformation we need must further take place across four areas of our livelihood: how we produce and consume energy, what and

how we eat, how we travel across the planet, and how we build. I have already mentioned the changes required for energy production. Agriculture and food production need to be similarly transformed. First and foremost, we need to stop trading and consuming products that result from deforestation. But it is not just about ensuring agriculture reduces its carbon footprint – “regenerative food systems” that don’t just avoid harmful practices, but actively restore nature, are also central. For transportation, we need major advances in the adoption of electric vehicles, mass-adoption of public transport, and low-emission fuels for airplanes and shipping. And for manufacturing, it is critical that we invest in new building materials and a forest-based economy that, where appropriate, utilizes wood rather than emissions-intensive steel and concrete as a building material.

**Will you highlight TNC’s focus on building partnerships that will deliver on its high impact climate mitigation and adaptation efforts?**

One of TNC’s primary strengths as one of the world’s largest conservation organizations is our ability to deliver impactful partnerships for climate action. Whether it is our direct work with the governments of nations such as Colombia or Gabon, where we are helping to accelerate the implementation of NCS to help meet national Paris Agreement targets; or our collaborations with businesses, such as Amazon where we’re helping small landowners access a more sustainable source of income while also restoring native rainforests and naturally trapping and storing carbon; or working with First Nations peoples in the Pacific Northwest of the U.S. and Canada to manage old-growth forests – we have a long history of using radical collaboration to deliver solutions that can be replicated and scaled across multiple geographies and with a variety of actors.

It is this creativity and openness to unlocking the full toolkit of climate strategies that makes TNC such a sought-after partner for engagement. The only way to reach the low carbon future we seek is through pursuing all available opportunities and engaging all actors who have potential to contribute.

**How critical is it for TNC to have a diverse workforce in order to bring diverse perspectives and experiences to the table when addressing the issue of climate change?**

Conservation is best advanced when diverse teams, partners and local communities are working together to better understand and protect our planet. We cannot address climate change without bringing all actors to the forefront of the conversation, and ensuring Indigenous peoples, vulnerable frontline communities and developing nations have just as loud a voice and presence as those from the Global North. TNC works hard to have a team that represents as many regions, languages and experiences as possible to help foster diverse knowledge and collective strength in delivering the strongest possible outcomes. A personal goal of mine is to elevate the role of key actors that have historically stewarded lands, forests and sustainable livelihoods, such as Indigenous peoples, who often have the best track record on climate and biodiversity too. At the recent UN Climate Change Conference COP26, as part of the Glasgow Declaration on Deforestation and Land Degradation, a budget of \$1.7 billion was earmarked for Indigenous peoples. If this is delivered as pledged, the mechanism of granting directly to Indigenous peoples, and not through intermediaries, could be transformational in changing the power relations between these groups. We look forward to continuing our partnerships with Indigenous peoples across the globe, under their own terms and priorities.

**How do you measure success for TNC’s efforts around climate change and how important are metrics to measure the impact of TNC’s initiatives?**

Climate cuts across about every program area at TNC. Our work on agriculture, forests, freshwater, grassland, marine conservation, alongside innovative finance and corporate engagement – to name just a few areas – includes specific targets that contribute to our climate mitigation and adaptation efforts. Measuring impact is not only important for ensuring accountability with donors, but is also fundamental in helping us to better understand where our strategies are delivering versus where we need to course-correct in order to meet targets. We do however need to be honest and acknowledge that the issue of metrics it is not always straightforward – some of the most significant achievements, for example, are a result of major policy-level changes. In such a complex arena, it is rarely possible to attribute policy changes to just one organization, but this issue of attribution should not prevent us from moving forward. The key is to be authentic with our donors, stakeholders, and ourselves about the nature of our contribution to the many collaborative endeavors of which TNC is a part. ●