

**FUNDING
PERFORMANCE**

ECOSYSTEMS THINKER

**A PROFILE OF ROSE LETWIN AND
WILBURFORCE FOUNDATION**





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A Massive Muse

When it comes to naming their foundations, even the most innovative donors tend to table their creativity. In this and many other ways, Wilburforce Foundation, one of the country's most admired conservation funders, is a rare bird.

Most people assume the foundation is named for William Wilberforce, the 18th century British abolitionist and philanthropist. The truth is more interesting—and humorous. It's named for a 300-pound “miniature” pig, the late house pet of founder **Rose Letwin**.

“When I came in for my interview with Rose, she pointed to a picture of a large pig in a small frame,” shared Wilburforce Executive Director **Paul Beaudet**, who previously served as the associate director of the [Pride Foundation](#) and brought strong expertise in program evaluation. “She said, ‘That’s our founder.’” The pig was female, but Letwin gave her the name Wilbur anyway, to honor the beloved pig from *Charlotte’s Web*. “I was kind of making fun of people who name their foundations after themselves,” the 60-something Letwin explained.

In addition to her desire to tweak funders who are on the self-important side, Letwin had two other reasons to make Wilbur the namesake of her foundation. First, the animating force of her philanthropy is her lifelong love of creatures great and small. Second, she learned a lot from Wilbur. “She was so smart, so willful,” Letwin said, with a joyous lift in her voice. “More than anything else, I learned from her not to take crap from anyone. My story is about doing what I want to do, not what other people want me to do.”



[Wilburforce Foundation](#)

Mission: Wilburforce Foundation empowers conservation leaders to protect the irreplaceable lands, waters, and wildlife of western North America.

Location: Seattle, WA

Year Established: 1991

Staff: 10

2019 Grants: \$14.9M

Average Grant Size: \$99,000

Literally Off the Charts

The reason we're profiling Letwin is that her story provides valuable lessons for all donors. Her journey is deeply relatable for any donor who has an issue of personal concern but doesn't know how to apply his or her time, treasure, and talent to making a difference. It's also a journey that illustrates how a passion for helping grantees strengthen their organizational muscles can lead to strong relationships, significant influence on a field, and a string of major philanthropic wins.

After nearly 30 years of continuous improvement, Wilburforce now earns the highest marks we've ever seen on the Center for Effective Philanthropy's Grantee Perception Report (GPR). “As in previous years, Wilburforce grantees rate the foundation's impact on and understanding of their fields exceptionally highly, with this year's ratings placing the foundation in the top one percent of funders for both of these measures,” according to the foundation's

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“Wilburforce’s secret sauce is its rigorous, through-thick-and-thin approach to helping its grantees build their organizational strength.”

[most recent GPR](#). “Grantees also continue to view the foundation as having an outstanding impact on their organizations. Ratings for this measure have improved significantly since 2015, now placing Wilburforce in the top one percent of funders.”

These ratings are backed by qualitative feedback that’s just as noteworthy. “If they continue to base decisions on having a thorough knowledge of the places, politics, and people of the regions they fund in, they will continue to be the most enlightened foundation in the philanthropic community,” in the words of one representative GPR respondent.

Wilburforce’s secret sauce is its rigorous, through-thick-and-thin approach to helping its grantees build their organizational strength and performance. From her earliest days as a volunteer with nonprofit organizations, Letwin saw the need to provide management assistance to grantees. “It’s not that these

organizations are doing things purposely wrong,” said **Tim Greyhavens**, who became Wilburforce’s first paid executive director and still serves as a board member. “It’s that they’ve gotten almost no support for the things that are necessary to sustain an organization,” such as how to diversify funding, bring on talent, grow a board, and do effective evaluation.

In the words of management consultant and environmental activist **Dyan Oldenburg**, who helped Wilburforce develop its approach to organization building, “Most foundations don’t understand why you need to invest in capacity building. Rose is different. She said, ‘These are not just complex issues. They’re *highly* complex, and they will be exacerbated by the coming climate chaos. These folks need long-term allies and [management] support. It’s not about quick interventions and program grants.’”

Impact on and Understanding of Grantees' Organizations

[Previous](#) [Next](#)

Overall, how would you rate Wilburforce's impact on your organization?

1 = No impact 7 = Significant positive impact



When you look specifically at “Tier 1” nonprofits, those that Wilburforce provides with the highest level of capacity-building support, the foundation’s GPR results somehow go beyond the 100th percentile (see below).

Neither Letwin nor her staff of ten are resting on these laurels. “It’s partly a problem, but we’re all type A here,” Beaudet quipped. “We’ll see we’re in the 99th percentile on a particular measure, but that means there are two or three foundations better than us. That means there’s room for improvement.”

Nurture and Nature

Letwin’s story begins in the 1950s, in the small town of Washington, Indiana. Her father, **Charlie Wadsworth**, was a crane operator in the town’s railroad repair yard. Her mother, **Doris Wadsworth**, had bipolar disorder at a time when people didn’t understand much about mental illness. To cope with the chaos, Letwin started working at age 13, cleaning shelves at the local grocery store.

When she wasn’t at work or school, she was camped out in her town’s public library. “My childhood forced me to spend a lot of time at the library. I read and read and read. It got me out of my situation.” Those thousands of hours in the library allowed her to escape to exotic lands filled with exotic animals. “I read adventure books, like *Man-Eaters of Kamaon*.... I was fascinated by the animals. I wanted to see all of them up close. I wanted to help them.”

After graduating from high school, Letwin married **James Gordon Letwin**, a computer coder. (They were divorced in 2008.) A few years later, James became the eleventh employee of a tiny startup in Albuquerque called Micro-Soft. Rose soon joined as well. Her primary job was technical writing, but she also answered phones and did secretarial work. “We were young, 20 years old. It was really a blast. We were in the office at all hours. People would sleep on the floor. The landlord ... thought we were weird hippies.”

Despite the extreme demands and hours, Letwin found time to volunteer with a local nonprofit that rehabilitated orphaned and injured animals, from birds to foxes to bears. “I went in twice a week, and I usually worked with birds. I’d feed them, water them, and handle them as little as possible.”

After three years at Microsoft, she went to work for an aerospace company as a technical writer and enrolled at the University of Washington. She earned her bachelor’s degree in forestry management and wildlife conservation.

Meanwhile, Microsoft was going gangbusters, and the Letwins were getting Croesus rich. “It sort of happened in slow motion,” Letwin said. “Our net worth would triple, but it meant nothing to me. I was ... a firm believer in living below our means. I knew [even then] that money doesn’t buy happiness.”

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But the money did change one thing: It gave her the ability to start a foundation that would honor her childhood desire to be an ally to animals—at a scale far beyond her childhood dreams.

Learning on the Ground

When Letwin started her foundation, she wasn't used to being the decisionmaker. "I had always been the helper," she said, in her wildly pet-friendly office in the hip Ballard neighborhood of Seattle. Letwin was also one of the very few women leaders in the field of wilderness conservation. She often got "mansplained" by the alpha males who dominated the field.

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firsthand experience."**

"All the discussions in the field were led by men," the soft-spoken Greyhavens said, raccoon-patterned socks peeking out below his jeans. "The 'Silverbacks,' as we called them, would say to her, 'Here's what you need to do.'" Despite her intelligence, near-photographic memory, and advanced degree in forest science—not to mention her significant wealth and philanthropic capacity—Letwin didn't get her back up. "She might smirk sometimes, but that's about it," Greyhavens said.

Consistent with her quiet, self-effacing style, Letwin designed her foundation to keep her out of the limelight. "Wilburforce started out as a zero on the transparency scale," said Beaudet, sporting tasteful tattoos on his arms. "She was known to some of our grantees, but

our staff knew not to utter her name. She simply didn't want it to be about her—to a fault."

Letwin's identity was such a closely guarded secret, and she was so unpretentious, that she had an easy time getting beyond "dog and pony shows" and learning deeply from experts. Some prospective grantees had no idea who she was. Others thought she was a foundation staff member rather than a donor, which she loved.

Eight or more times a year she would visit remote backcountry locations, roughing it with scientists and activists who felt as much connection to the wildlands of the Western US and Canada as she did. "She absorbed so much information," Greyhavens said. "She always wants to learn more. She always wants firsthand experience. She just loves it. You can see her light up when she sees wildlife not in captivity."



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“Letwin is so down to earth that grantees in remote locations sometimes find her on hands and knees cleaning her cabin, toilet and all. She never thinks, ‘I’m the funder. Take care of me.’”

One of her earliest trips was to Kodiak Island, off the southern coast of Alaska, to observe the world’s largest brown (grizzly) bears and visit with leaders working to protect the bears’ habitat. Letwin said the experience was magical. “I had never before seen bears in the wild,” she said. “I’ll never forget hiking up to an overlook over the mouth of a river and seeing a mama and her babies. I cried when I saw them.”

Letwin didn’t give a whit about the spartan accommodations or rough weather. In fact, when the weather prevented a float plane from coming to pick her up on schedule, she was delighted. “Great! That just means I get more time with the bears.” She was also tickled when her guide told her, “We don’t get many foundation people here. As a matter of fact, we never have.” Letwin is so down to earth that grantees in remote locations sometimes find her on hands and knees cleaning her cabin, toilet and all. “She never thinks, ‘I’m the funder. Take care of me,’” Greyhavens said.

Wildlife biologist and filmmaker **Chris Morgan**, a close friend, described a learning trip to Alaska with Letwin and her husband, **Jim Orr**, a former school teacher who was raised in a National Park Service family and now serves on Wilburforce’s board. While on assignment in the Grand Tetons, Morgan wrote, “After some travel delays and a lot of wet weather, we were finally in place. I remember Rose smiling nonstop throughout the whole trip, even when bears would approach within a few feet. She’d wade hip deep through the water, sit on plastic buckets for stools, and sleep on the rusty Alaskan fishing vessel like it was all just the best and only way to travel!”

In the late summer of 2008, Wilburforce grantee **Shannon McPhail** led Letwin on a trip to British Columbia’s Sacred Headwaters, the birthplace of three of Canada’s greatest wild salmon watersheds. It was the first time McPhail met Letwin. “I was incredibly nervous,” McPhail admitted. “I’m just a local yokel from northern BC who had previously worked as a welder in the oil industry and as a big-game hunting guide. Rose

Rose Letwin on Alaska’s Katmai Peninsula with wildlife biologist Chris Morgan. Photo by Brenda Phillips.



burst all my preconceived notions of what a [philanthropist] would look and act like.”

The trip turned into a comedy of errors, insult, and injury—but Letwin was unfazed. “I vomited partially digested carrots on her and her staff while trapped in a small airplane; insulted her source of income; and injured her while on a trail ride. And that was all in a single day,” McPhail explained.

Here’s the longer version of the story: McPhail threw up when the plane banked to give Letwin a good look at a large bull moose and his harem. Instead of being annoyed, Letwin immediately checked in to make sure McPhail was okay. The (mild) insult came in the form of telling Letwin how much she and her colleagues loved their Mac computers (“Once you go to Mac, you never go back!”). And the trail-ride injury was the result of McPhail’s dog bolting out of the forest and spooking the horses. Letwin was thrown sideways, landed on her ribs, and needed to be flown out to the nearest medical clinic. “My son, Grant, was a toddler at the time and throwing an almighty tantrum as I was trying to help Rose.... But she handled it all in stride and kept wishing me well, thanking me for the hospitality while not really being able to take a full breath. I realized that despite her small frame, she’s a formidable person with a strength and kindness that I had only previously associated with [the region’s] Gitxsan Elders.”

Grounded in Science

While it’s the heart connection to wildlife and wildlands that drives Letwin, she approaches her philanthropy with the rigor she learned in

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her academic work, first in engineering and then in forestry management and wildlife management. “If I hadn’t gotten rich, I would have become a field scientist,” she said.

Letwin has read about 4,000 books and countless scientific papers about conservation and animal behavior over the past three decades. “She loves science,” Beaudet said. “She is a nerd. She loves data. It comes not only from her engineering and forestry background. She’s also an amateur paleontologist. There are even two important species named for her.” The first is a dinosaur named *Mapusaurus roseae*, one of the largest carnivores ever discovered. The second is an ancient amphibian called *Tiktaalik roseae*, which is also known as the “fishapod” and considered the missing link between fish and land animals.

In addition to having the data orientation of a field scientist, she also demonstrates the big-picture orientation of a systems thinker. When we asked Letwin what her superpower is, she said, “I’m a systems person. It’s why I first went into engineering. I can look at a system that’s not quite working and see why.”



After a few years at Wilburforce, she came to see that typical approaches to land conservation weren't factoring in a systems perspective. Often, advocates and the philanthropists who supported them would declare victory once they achieved some form of protected status for a tract of land and then add the area to their running tally of "acres saved." Letwin the scientist saw "acres saved" as wildly misleading. First, not all protection is created equal. Contrary to conventional wisdom, some lands that have National Monument designation or other protected status may allow oil and gas extraction, mining, grazing, or other activities that may adversely impact the landscape. More important, many protected areas are simply "islands"—too small and disconnected from one another to preserve biodiversity.

Letwin's systems thinking led the foundation to concentrate its efforts on 13 priority regions in Western North America, which

the Wilburforce team has labeled, partially tongue-in-cheek, the "green blobs." (See image above.) Perhaps even more important, Wilburforce is working to connect these regions to create a coherent, healthy whole—one that preserves habitat and has the largest net impact on biodiversity. "Rose was one of early pioneers of this kind of connectivity," Beaudet said.

Firsthand Stretch

Shortly before **Warren Buffett** gave his historic gift to **Bill and Melinda Gates**, the Gates Foundation commissioned research to learn how it could encourage new donors to give not just generously but also effectively. The research showed that donors who leap from average to effective almost always have a "firsthand stretch experience"—that is, a positive experience with a project of personal significance, involvement that engages their professional skills, firsthand observation of how they're contributing to progress, and

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a gift that's far larger than any they've made before.

The "firsthand-stretch" model applies perfectly to Letwin. Hers came about eight years after she founded Wilburforce. It came courtesy of a series of grants to save the Great Bear Rainforest, which sits along the spectacularly wild coast of British Columbia and whose fjords and inlets make the coastline almost as long as the circumference of the Earth. It's home to the [spirit bear](#), a rare species that's often as pale as a polar bear; the world's only [marine wolves](#); a unique species of [goshawk](#); and 20 percent of the world's [wild salmon](#) stocks.

In 1998, Canadian scientist **David Suzuki** and his foundation approached Letwin about an ambitious, untested project they eventually

called Turning Point. He wanted to use his reputation as a respected scientist and television host to help First Nations groups in coastal British Columbia work together to save the Great Bear. The head of his foundation was the colorful environmental champion **Jim Fulton**, who had built strong relationships with First Nations when he served as a Member of Parliament and his party's spokesman on aboriginal affairs.

In addition to their strong reputations, Suzuki and Fulton had another advantage: Unlike many Native American tribes in the US, none of the coastal First Nations had signed treaties ceding rights or titles to the lands their ancestors had lived on for thousands of years. That's not to say they had complete control over how these



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lands were used. But they had the right to be consulted on any proposed logging or other economic activity on these lands. As a result, they could be power players, if they could work in concert.

To be successful, Suzuki and his team would have to overcome deep conflict on many levels. Some of the First Nations were historical adversaries. And *within* First Nations groups, there were tensions as well. Most had hereditary chiefs who didn’t always see eye to eye with their elected councils.

Even more significant, the First Nations had good reason to distrust the (largely white) environmental community. According to Letwin, “One prominent conservation group had come in earlier and pissed off all the First Nations groups.” Environmental activists parachuted in and treated First Nations as “advocacy targets” rather than leaders who had been stewards of the land for thousands of years. Their arrogance fit a longstanding pattern of cultural disrespect. “First Nations have been shattered by meanspirited policies and practices for a long time,” Beaudet said.

Suzuki’s “ask” (\$750,000 over three years) was far larger than any grant Wilburforce had yet made, and the Wilburforce team had little cultural competency with First Nations. The proposal fell way outside Letwin’s comfort zone. “I knew it would be incredible if it worked out, but I was scared. At that time, it was a huge amount [of money] for us,” she said.

The grant turned out better than anyone expected. Within two years, the leaders of nine coastal First Nations came together in Vancouver to sign an historic declaration

specifying their common preservation goals and the principles that would allow them to reach these goals. The declaration became far more than a nice wall hanging. With additional financial and strategic support from Wilburforce, these groups and others aligned with them began a formal campaign to save the Great Bear Rainforest. They worked together for a decade to create what became an epic deal, which they signed in December 2008.

While some all-or-nothing environmental groups weren’t happy, Letwin and the Wilburforce team were overjoyed. First Nations and Canadian government authorities set aside five million acres of land under strict protection and another 16 million acres under a set of sustainable-management rules that created a new public/private financing mechanism that enabled indigenous people to develop ecotourism and other ways to earn a living.

Letwin’s contribution wasn’t limited to Wilburforce’s own resources, more than \$10 million in all. She also helped lay the groundwork that brought in a dozen other major foundations—most of which didn’t have the flexibility to provide early, risky dollars—to cement the deal. In total, the foundations pooled \$58.5 million, which was augmented by more than \$30 million from British Columbia’s provincial government as well as another \$30+ million from the federal government. “The deal was not just a huge win for the First Nations and for the Canadian people. It produced a worldwide impact, creating a template for indigenous people in New Zealand, South America, and elsewhere,” Greyhavens said.

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Letwin and her team gave no speeches and put out no press releases. They were happy to remain in the background and consolidate the key lessons they had learned.

Lesson One: Invest in Organizational Muscle

Letwin’s Great Bear Rainforest stretch experience proved to her how important it is to help grantees build their organizational capacity—that is, strong roots and healthy shoots. “If you know you’re in it until you win, you take a different approach than those who are going for short-term interventions,” Beaudet said.

In its early years, Wilburforce offered capacity-building support in the form of small, \$5,000 grants to help organizations with specific challenges such as board development. Letwin learned that \$5,000 doesn’t go very far—especially when it comes to small, place-based organizations that have never had the opportunity to think about, much less invest in, anything beyond their programs and fundraising. Letwin and Greyhavens also discovered that giving numerous \$5,000 grants was beyond their capacity. “Tim and I were the only ones at that time. We couldn’t handle all the paperwork,” Letwin said.

So Letwin asked Greyhavens to look around for consulting entities that could provide deeper, ongoing management assistance to Wilburforce grantees who sought it. He found one consulting group in Portland that almost fit the bill, but it had no experience with the type of grassroots environmental grantees Wilburforce supported. So Greyhavens convinced that firm to hire Oldenburg, who had earned the respect of several Wilburforce

grantees. “Rose knew that grantees could be brilliant about doing aspects of their work but might not be as gifted at building strong, healthy, resilient organizations,” Oldenburg recalled.

Three years later, Oldenburg outgrew the consulting firm and started a new nonprofit called [Training Resources for the Environmental Community](#) (TREC). She and her growing team had the luxury of working with select Wilburforce grantees on the full arc of leadership and management disciplines—in depth, over time. “One of the things Rose got early on was that you can’t do drive-by trainings,” Oldenburg said. “Leaders feel worse after those trainings. They learn just enough to know they should be doing things differently, but they don’t learn enough to make a change. Rose and her team knew that grantees would need long-term work, with great coaches, using multiple methodologies.” As Beaudet put it, “Before TREC, there were groups that provided two-day trainings on fundraising and other things, but there was no customization, no follow up, no coaching. All of the research I was reading said that this was the wrong model for translating individual learning into change at the organizational level.”

Some other funders saw the value in TREC’s in-depth, over-time approach and would send their grantees to TREC to attend programs, but these funders didn’t step up to share TREC’s operating costs. “Funders generally prefer to give grants rather than create [a backbone organization like TREC],” Letwin said. “But it’s as important, if not more important, in my view.”

Beaudet, the foundation's evaluation director at the time, was asked to manage the relationship with TREC. He knew TREC had to make a shift in its financial model. "We were subsidizing other foundations' grantees, who were not working on the issues we cared about. That was not sustainable for us." So Beaudet made a big ask of Letwin and the Wilburforce board. "I asked them to fund TREC so that it could focus exclusively on our grantees. To the board's credit, they were there. They agreed to double support to fully fund TREC's \$1 million budget and committed to growing the budget over time."

We asked Beaudet why Wilburforce decided to build this sophisticated organization-building capacity in an external consulting firm rather than on staff. He said that it was important for TREC to be independent of Wilburforce, to give grantees the ability to open up fully about their challenges. "Grantees know that their secrets will be held in confidence," he said. As Oldenburg put it, "Putting up a firewall between Wilburforce and TREC was essential for us to build the trust that's necessary for behavior change."

Oldenburg left the organization in 2015 and handed the leadership baton to **Megan Seibel**, an environmental activist turned management consultant who previously led TREC's organizational effectiveness programs, internal operations, and finances. Under Seibel's leadership, TREC now has a team of 10 consultants, based in Denver, Santa Fe, and Portland, OR. Wilburforce gives TREC \$1.7 million each year to deliver a full



suite of leadership training, coaching, and organizational-effectiveness services.

All of Wilburforce's 150 grantees get support from TREC in some fashion. Approximately 40 get the "full firehose" of TREC's resources, in Beaudet's words. Those are the "Tier 1" grantees who rate Wilburforce above the 100th percentile in impact on their organizations. "Building TREC is one of the best investments we ever made," Beaudet said. Letwin added, "I really believe conservation has been moved forward thanks to TREC. I don't think we'd be where we are today without it."

Grantee McPhail agreed. One of Letwin's two greatest contributions to conservation is "her investment in TREC." (The other is her "great staff.") "TREC must cost an awful lot of money, but what we have learned from TREC has been invaluable. I'm not sure I could ever put a price tag on the value of what TREC has provided for our crew and our work."

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Letwin is not in favor of perpetuity for her foundation. “I think about the time value of money... If we don’t move now to save these lands, they’re gone forever.”

Lesson Two: Invest for the Long Term

Letwin also learned from her Great Bear investments that patience is essential. Wilburforce’s niche is getting in early and sticking with it for the long term, because quick wins don’t exist in nature. In most of the “green blob” regions, “we’ve been setting the stage for decades,” Letwin said.

“Rose’s greatest legacy is that she’s in it for the long haul,” Greyhavens said. “Thanks to her, we take the first steps while other funders watch. When they think it can actually work, they come in and help close the deals. I’m not trying to take anything away from those other funders. They just don’t have the donor we have, with her long-term thinking and nimbleness.”

One big win came in 2009, when 10 years of Wilburforce grants helped the Dehcho First Nations of northern Canada achieve permanent protection of [Nahanni National Park Reserve](#). The park’s hot springs, alpine tundra, mountain ranges, and forests are home to numerous threatened and endangered animals, including the brown bear, [wood bison](#), [woodland caribou](#), and wolverine.

Starting in 1999, Wilburforce supported researchers from the [Wildlife Conservation Society](#) (WCS) to conduct scientific surveys that helped refine the park’s boundaries. In 2003, [Parks Canada](#) reached an agreement with the Dehcho First Nations to protect on a temporary basis 5.6 million acres of their traditional lands. Wilburforce then supported WCS and the [Canadian Parks and Wilderness](#)

[Society](#) to advise the Dehcho First Nations and Parks Canada as additional lands were designated for conservation. In June 2009, Canada approved legislation that permanently protected more than 7.3 million acres as a reserve. Wilburforce continues funding in the region, increasingly investing directly in First Nation conservation efforts that will knit together more of the wild landscapes of the Far North.

Another big win attributable to long-term thinking was in the [Peel Watershed](#), home to large populations of brown bears, wolverines, and caribou. Wilburforce supported the [Yukon Conservation Society](#) and the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society for a decade before those organizations and their First Nation partners won an historic Canadian Supreme Court decision that allows three First Nations, the Yukon provincial government, and conservation partners to [protect 80 percent of the Peel Watershed](#), an intact region seven times as large as Yellowstone National Park and a huge building block in Wilburforce’s “green blobs” map.

There’s one major exception to Letwin’s long-term thinking: She’s not in favor of perpetuity for her foundation. “I think about the time value of money,” Letwin said. “If we don’t move now to save these lands, they’re gone forever.” Her current plan is to have Wilburforce work its way out of business 20 years after she dies. “But I might change my mind and spend it down sooner than that.”

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“Rose told me early on, I understand that it’s not just about giving money...I need to invest in people who love the work they do and love the places they’re dedicating their lives to protect.”

Lesson Three: Invest in Leaders

As much importance as Letwin and her team place on building strong, resilient organizations, they are equally passionate about the leaders behind those organizations. “Rose told me early on, I understand that it’s not just about giving money,” Oldenburg said. “It’s all about the people.... I need to invest in people who love the work they do and love the places they’re dedicating their lives to protect.”

Dave Willis, chair of Oregon’s Soda Mountain Wilderness Council, is a good example. Willis, a gruff but deeply spiritual mountaineer who lost large portions of his hands and feet to frostbite in a climb up Alaska’s Denali, has been credited with driving the Presidential decisions to create (Clinton) and expand (Obama) the [Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument](#), protecting an ecological corridor with spectacular biodiversity.

From the moment he met Letwin, when he took her and Program Officer **Denise Joines** on a horseback ride in his area, he could tell how different Letwin was from the typical donor and how different Wilburforce was from the typical foundation. “I look at

Wilburforce through Rose-colored glasses. I see a story of respect. It’s been outstanding how they treat me. There’s no other foundation chair who has been as warm and friendly to me as Rose has. Others have certainly been very kind and generous, but Rose is the top.”

Willis said that while he wasn’t a big fan of the TREC experience (“I’m allergic to flip charts”), his work has definitely benefitted from TREC consulting, and he’s always appreciated the way Wilburforce staff respect his expertise and approach. “With Wilburforce, they ask how they can help us do what we’re doing. Some funders can be heavy-handed and meddlesome. With one, it seems to be grant reviewers with preconceived notions and no long history of working in the grassroots trenches. That’s not the way Wilburforce operates.”

Instead, Wilburforce hires experienced staff who have worked at the ground level and understand what it takes to make progress there. “They’re just fantastic. Rose, Tim, Paul, Denise, and **Yolanda [Morris]**, a Wilburforce program associate] ... have been our budgetary bedrock. I don’t want to be presumptive, but we’ve pretty much always known that regardless of what might happen with other funding sources, Wilburforce would be there for us. That’s made all the difference,” Willis said.

Letwin appears to have built deep relationships with many of those she supports. “Rose is the real deal and treats people well,” the biologist Morgan wrote. “She invests not just in ideas but in PEOPLE....

Improvement Insight

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She has great instincts [about people] and just as important, isn't afraid to follow them." Beaudet commented that Letwin's primary filter for people is authenticity. "She builds trust based on authenticity. If someone puts on airs, she's much less likely to warm up to that person."

Letwin's approach to supporting grantees ("find the right people, trust them to do what's right") applies just as much to supporting her team. "I want to find smart people. I provide direction, but they figure out how to get there. I don't micromanage."

Conclusion

Letwin and Wilburforce have enormous challenges ahead, such as National Monument rollbacks, attacks on bedrock environmental laws, and the impacts of a changing climate. But addressing them—in a way that combines heart and head, science and passion—has given Letwin her life calling. "The work is very stressful, and I lose sleep over it," Letwin said.

"But it never feels like a burden. It's all opportunity. As a child, I never believed I'd ever be doing these things.... It just seems impossible for a poor kid from southern Indiana."

Morgan said that Letwin's gratitude is infectious. "She appreciates every little thing, from the birds on her feeder to the vegetables in her garden. Rose just loves the world. She loves her husband, Jim. She loves the people she works with and supports. And she lives with drive and passion, with her heart on her sleeve."

The stunning Pulitzer Prize-winning novel [The Overstory](#) features a Midwestern scientist named Patricia Westerford, who gets bullied by alpha males but later learns to trust her own observations and instincts. As a result, Patricia "blooms like something southern-facing", in the words of author **Richard Powers**. Rose Letwin, too, has found her southern sun. Our planet is the beneficiary.



Rose Letwin visiting the Nahanni National Park, Northwest Territories, Canada. Photo courtesy of Rose Letwin.

We're trying to walk the talk on feedback to make our resources for funders more relevant and useful, and we don't want to put words in your mouth! Please take a minute to share your thoughts on this Funding Performance profile by taking our short survey:

<http://sgiz.mobi/s3/Feedback-on-Ecosystems-Thinker-A-Profile-of-Rose-Letwin-and-Wilburforce-Foundation>