

Understanding Christensen's Mission

In re-imagining what The Christensen Fund might do in the world in 2002 we settled upon an unusual mission and approach which we believed would enable a modestly sized foundation to add unusual value in the world. To reflect upon what we have done subsequently, and to evaluate its significance and meaning, we have first therefore to understand this mission, through reviewing it sentence by sentence to tease out its meaning and assumptions.

The Christensen Fund believes in the power of biological and cultural diversity to sustain and enrich a world faced with great change and uncertainty.

- We stress our “belief in the power of diversity” because for many in this field it is not diversity that will powerfully shape the future, but it is instead something passive to be saved.
- We believe it will “sustain and enrich” in that we think diversity will be crucial to surviving and overcoming unpredictable shifts in circumstances and that it will be beautiful and meaningful in that process. In the word “enrich” we seek to convey much more than simply material value.
- We refer to “great change and uncertainty” because while change has always necessarily been the norm, and seeking to stabilize it a human folly, it is clear that we are entering a particularly unstable time. Indeed the world as we know it will not endure (economically and ecologically) and is already crumbling. Unpredictability is as important as change: it is not knowable how it will change in future decades, let alone centuries, and therefore strategies must retain options and flexibilities rather than be linearly goal oriented. Biocultural diversity – the range of options and relationships between people and nature – can help us navigate this change.

We focus on the “bio-cultural” – the rich but neglected adaptive interweave of people and place, culture and ecology.

- Among all the different dimensions of diversity, we are prioritizing the connectedness between the biological, cultural and linguistic because we consider these crucial and much neglected.
- We are choosing to identify ourselves with the newly-coined label “bio-cultural” we hope to make it more visible, capture attention, and thus build a field of knowledge and praxis.
- We see the biocultural as an emergent phenomena and part of a wider whole not just a “link” between separate processes that are biophysical and cultural.
- Central here is that we believe this interaction is “adaptive”, in other words processes of co-evolution are occurring between cultures and landscapes, whereby each shapes (and is shaped by) the other. We argue that since this is the case socio-ecological systems can learn and change in an evolutionary way – and that we can facilitate these interactions away from breakdown and extinction – in other words that there can be a way out of this

chaos of the “anthropocene”.

- We use the term “interweave” alongside a scientific word like “adaptive” to indicate that we see indigenous and holistic understandings of this connectedness as also illuminative and eminently combinable with the western scientific approaches; in other words to show we value both ways of knowing.
- Although we refer to the biocultural as “neglected” by the powerful it is worth stressing that it has quietly served as a major raw material for the expansion of the dominant system, to which end it has too often been appropriated, suppressed, commodified, rendered invisible, romanticized and confined to the margins as exotic.

The Fund’s mission is to buttress the efforts of people and institutions who believe in a biodiverse world infused with artistic expression and work to secure ways of life and landscapes that are beautiful, bountiful and resilient.

- The Fund is choosing to “buttress” these efforts, not just fund them – that is, we will back them, bolster them, support them and, in a gentle solid way, engaged in co-creation at times, but not ourselves seeking to direct the process, just as the “buttress” on the wall of an ancient tower or rampart serves to secure and yet not dominate the crucial wall.
- “People AND institutions” are cited because we recognize how amazingly significant individual human beings are to success, and yet we also know that collective action, concentrations of talent and systems for driving change are also crucial, so institutions (including the informal and traditional) really matter too.
- We stress “infused with artistic expression” because we do not see the human-nature interactions as something only empirical but instead necessarily creatively imagined, constructed and valued.
- We need to “secure ways of life and landscapes” because these and the learning that they represent are actively threatened by the dominant system and are likely a valuable resource for the future given the degree to which change (even breakdown) in the dominant system will likely occur.
- “Landscapes that are beautiful, bountiful and resilient” is intended to stress through these three words that landscapes must work in at least these three dimensions. The phrase is also intended to convey that we do not accept the dominant paradigm of the late twentieth century that the ultimate and single measure of value is unidimensionally economic. Beauty matters equally too, covering here all the intangible value that is being forgotten and discounted in this developmental desert called progress; furthermore by inserting the word “resilient” (further reviewed below), we are indicating that there are trade-offs between productivity/value on different temporal and spatial scales so that we have to think on wider geographic landscape scales and in longer term ways.
- Why “Bountiful”? Instead of using the language of economics, or starting with the elastic “needs” of human beings, we stress the term “bounty”. We do this to refer to what systems give rather than what we extract, to conjure reference to the on-going yield from nature’s cycles on their own time frames, and to infer productivity that is sufficient for all living beings to have a slice and not just people. As such we honor the essential fact that people’s relationship with the earth has to include sustenance and livelihood, but is not limited to that end.
- The term “resilience” is central at Christensen. We are not preservationists seeking to maintain diversity just how it is, pickled behind real or conceptual fences. Instead we recognize that cultures, species and landscapes are inevitably and necessarily in motion,

replete with aspiration, indeed that it is the evolutionary interactions between innovation, selection and changing context that itself creates diversity. (Thus neither are we restorationists.) Resilience can be defined as a property of complex dynamic systems, namely their capacity to self-organize, learn and adapt and thus absorb shocks and change while maintaining structure and function and avoiding qualitative change. Resilience thinking becomes a way to protect systems from collapse, to help them recover from breakdown, to escape certain undesirable “traps”, and to embrace the possibilities of adapting to a new world (e.g., climate regime) by building upon and reworking heritage.

We pursue this mission through place-based work in regions chosen for their potential to withstand and recover from the global erosion of diversity.

- We emphasize “place-based work” because we believe this diversity and these processes are necessarily grounded in specific locations and cannot be effectively understood or influenced in abstract.
- The unit of our attention is the “region” and not the country, province or the particular landscape (or protected area) because biocultural diversity is necessarily present and adapts in a mosaic that traverses landscapes and political and administrative borders of all kinds. These regions are bio-geographic in nature and of the scale to embrace a great deal of cultural, agricultural, economic and biological diversity that historically shifts and interacts within and across them.
- We chose regions plural rather than a single region because we did not want to be a mega-donor in a single region (swamping local innovation and driving change), unable to grow or slow programs in line with conditions on the ground and unable because of narrow focus to support learning and flow of ideas between different places or contribute towards the development of global knowledge and practice.
- Priority regions were identified on the basis that their location, history and internal geography were likely to mean they would be less impacted by globalization’s erosion of diversity on the one hand, and to have been demonstrated in past periods of global change to be particularly generative of recovery, serving to repopulate neighboring regions with biocultural diversity.

We focus on backing the efforts of locally recognized community custodians of this heritage, and their alliances with scholars, artists, advocates and others.

- That “we focus on backing the efforts of locally recognized community custodians” is at the heart of the operationalization of our mission. It emphasizes our trust in the wisdom, strategies, creativity and stubborn passion of thousands of local people and community institutions that have responsibility for taking care of biocultural processes and the knowledge necessary for this, and that are typically rendered invisible and considered at best irrelevant in top down models of change. We focus on this dimension because, since local actors are neglected, we get a great return on such investment as a small foundation. It is not our assumption that such local actors can solve every problem and on their own and that external actors make no contribution.
- “Custodians” or “stewards” are a key concept for Christensen. These are the individuals and institutions whose role and passion it is to care for, embody, perform and explain knowledge, relationship, lands, species, art forms and indeed all manner of beautiful unusual biocultural things across the generations. Custodians come in a variety of forms

in different societies and cannot be neatly boxed. Typically being a custodian is a responsibility towards something of collective benefit rather than a right over it, whether that be a song, a sacred place, a way of harvesting stingless bees or system of timely landscape burning or rain-making. Custodians may not choose their roles, but instead be chosen. Custodians actively maintain what they care for alive in the world as well as in the human imagination. They have special knowledge which is necessarily of the heart, the head and the hand, such as does the grandmother who grows and stores many varieties of beans. These beans have unique genes that can be banked, but without the knowledge of how they are cooked or which diseases they are resistant to, something profound is lost. Yet even if all such knowledge is archived by diligent graduate students on files linked to the seeds we shall miss the skill of her hands, distinguishing viable from defunct seed or training a climbing variety upon the trellis. And were such manual skills inculcated through the training of technicians we would still miss the stories about the meaning of the different kinds of beans, and the place of their maintenance in the identity of a community and the implications of their eager chewing by grandchildren. What the stewards do is a kind of performance, perhaps practical, perhaps ritual, usually both, and they do this continually over many years steadily shaping their communities and landscapes. Custodians may appear ordinary and little recognized, or be famous and praised locally, be in conflict with other claimants, be nearly entirely marginalized by new ways, be themselves pioneering new beliefs, be charismatic saints, or be regularly drunk. We don't make them, and cannot make them. We find those who are making a difference to living diversity, and who want some help..

- We emphasize the “alliances” between custodians and others because we are living in connected and changing worlds where local actors often need and value the resources that allies can bring from outside, because local people cannot know everything and tackle every global dysfunction on their own. We focus on “THEIR alliances” because we want partnerships anchored in the vision of indigenous communities and stewards rather than the needs and agenda of the outsiders, and we seek those relationships that are based on transparency, freedom and rights. We value allies because we find that there are an amazing variety of weird and wonderful outsiders out there on the ground making a big difference. And we value allies because they are often the only way to get resources – financial and other – into the lives of the stewards themselves. Meanwhile stewards also have vision and know-how that the wider world needs to hear also, and again, where appropriate, allies can assist this also.
- “Alliances with scholars, artists, advocates and others”: we find that there are a remarkable variety of people who can serve as effective allies of local stewards and indeed want to make clear that we are actively open to all who rationally or obsessively play this role because of their inexplicable passion for basket making, epic oral poetry or terraced irrigation systems. Alliances and collaborations between different communities and stewards across regions and around the world can also be a powerful approach.

We also fund international efforts to build global understanding of these issues.

- We do not believe local people can solve everything on their own; in fact it is crucial that deep changes occur in dominant understanding of the value of diversity and relationship between people and landscapes, and are reflected in policies, institutions, knowledge systems and collaborations across peoples and places around the globe.
- We see these as “international efforts” in that they will bring together different kinds of science and experience across and beyond the particularities of different communities and places. Some may be specific funded projects with grantees; others may be more

open-ended efforts by Christensen staff, grantees and other stakeholders to advance particular causes.

These are challenging goals, so we seek out imaginative, thoughtful and occasionally odd partners to learn with.

- Our partners will be “imaginative” because only with grounded vision and creativity will mighty forces of erosion and change be countered – a linear engagement of the marginalized with the powerful is not transformative.
- They will be “thoughtful” because vision alone will not be sufficient, we also need to value strategy; furthermore a strong mix of humility and cunning, and above all the ability to learn, are crucial to success.
- And they will be “occasionally odd” (especially in the eyes of the dominant paradigm) because there is no formula for transformation: partners will arise from the strangest places, and it is the particularities and eccentricities of this world that provide the alchemical touch.

The Fund works primarily through grant making, as well as through capacity and network building, knowledge generation, collaboration and mission-related investments.

- “Primarily through grantmaking” – recognizes the need for Christensen to pass resources and power to grantees and partners by making grants rather than implementing everything ourselves through our own operational programs; and to this end we keep down our overheads and internal ambitions.
- “Capacity and network building” – recognizes how much change results when the historically marginalized connect with each other and build their own institutions, and find new sympathetic partners in powerful institutions (i.e. through horizontal, vertical and diagonal connecting).
- “Knowledge generation” – since we are working on a new/old/different way of understanding the world it is crucial that we consciously join with our grantees and others in gathering experience, deepening insight and advancing wisdom, including through critical reflection on our own experience. We seek not only to co-create knowledge but to get it out from our organization into wider society, deploying media and engaging in the professional associations and networks of philanthropy, and of the indigenous, environmental and arts communities.
- “Collaboration” – success requires the connected efforts of numerous institutions, including other funders far beyond Christensen, so we should avoid the pitfall of delighting in boutique projects and advancing alone. Indeed Christensen is so small that we are sure to fail unless we can influence the wider field of philanthropy and other resource-rich institutions.
- “Mission-related investments” – the Fund will impact the world and advance its goals through how it deploys its investment assets as well as its grant funds, including potentially through program-related investments as well as shareholder activism, and positive and negative investment screens.